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Is Committed to the Standard of Grace

Acts Chapter 15

Acts Chapter Fifteen is a crucial Chapter to help us comprehend this book as well as to comprehend what the church is about. As you read the books of the Bible, you realize that thousands of other things could have been recorded. These specific things were recorded by virtue of the power of the Holy Spirit, and He picked out what was important. That is one of the reasons why you do not want to be flippant or cavalier about reading through Scripture. Realize that this is actually the word of God. Every word is tried and true, and there is a reason for each one.

As we begin Acts Chapter Fifteen, we come to a time of decision by the church in Jerusalem. It is a prioritization of what is important. More than that, I think it shows the emphasis of the church, the standard that it elevates, and the banner that it lives by--that is to say, the standard is

grace. It is one thing that makes us very different from, say, a synagogue. “Synagogue” is the Jewish word for gathering. We are a church, which is the word *ekklesia* which means the called-out ones. We have been called out for a particular purpose. We have been called out to be unique and very different from all other religions. That is to say that we are called out to proclaim grace, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Peace, Paul will often write in his epistles, grace and peace to you. That will ultimately be the message of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, because it is the favor of God. It is the favor of God, His mercy, His kindness, and His love for us that is proclaimed as well as the peace that comes because of them. The word peace is often described both in the Hebrew which is *shalom* and the Greek which is *eirene*. It makes reference to being complete, full, and lacking nothing. We realize that, when God's favor is upon us, we do not need anything else. As Paul says in Romans, (Romans 8:31) “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us?”

What a wonderful thing to know! It is God's favor. This is why, in the Old Testament, you see the psalmist crying out,

(Psalm 119:135) “Make Your face shine upon Your servant, and teach me Your statutes.”

Because we know that if God is good with us, then we are good. Everything is under His control. As we come into Acts Chapter Fifteen, there is a situation that is caused by the Judaizers within the church. They keep going back to the Law. The problem comes before the church to see what the church at Jerusalem will do about it. It is the first time that they have to deal with this issue. According to the passage, we know that James the Just, who was the half-brother of Christ, was the pastor of the church in Jerusalem. He will ultimately write to his church members after they have been scattered abroad. We know that Saul was responsible for their dispersion abroad. As James wrote in his letter

(James 1:1) “James, a bond servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad: Greetings.”

As he writes to them,

(James 1:2) “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials,”

James is a pastor writing to his flock, so to speak, who have left. In Acts Chapter 15, James comes to the forefront. He will ultimately make the decision for the church at large. Beforehand, he listens to Paul and Barnabas. He listens to Peter. But James makes the decision for the church. It will seem good to the elders. You will see a sense of unity as they make the decision, and then it comes to a closure. Interestingly enough, this chapter not only ends with the closure of this issue dealing with what do about the whole Jewish/Gentile thing; but in contrast, Paul and Barnabas go different ways because of John Mark. There is a debate and argument about that. The question you have to ask yourself is, “Why is that in the book?” Specifically, why is the argument in

Chapter 15, and how does it relate to the theme of Chapter 15? If you look with me on your sheet, we put the theme of Chapter 15 as “Committed to the Standard of Grace.”

We are emphasizing and reemphasizing that the Book of Acts is defined as the acts of the apostles or the business of the apostles. The word Acts more accurately is probably the business or the work of the apostles. What is their business? What is the work of the apostles? Well, the business and the work of the apostles is to lay the foundation for the church. It is very clearly established not only in the Book of Acts but in Ephesians as well as other epistles. We know that there is a work that they are doing. What does the church look like? We have been able to walk through the past 14 chapters and have these wonderful snapshots about what the church is about and what is really important. What is clear and what continues to jump off the pages is that our whole fundamental faith circles around Jesus Christ. It is all about Christ. He is the cornerstone. He is the foundation upon which we lay. It is

the confession of faith in Him that we proclaim. This is what the church is about. The Spirit of Jesus Christ is the life of the church. With that in mind, what should the church look like? Simply put, it/we should look like Jesus. That is what a church looks like. The things that you do and the way that you respond should be like Christ. If we do not look like Christ, then we are not functioning as His church. That is the reason why we are called the body of Christ.

As we come to Chapter 15, it is not presented to us as simply another incident; but it is displaying a very important standard. What makes us different from a Jewish synagogue then is that we are committed to the standard of grace. The Jews are committed to the standard of the Law. We, the church, are committed to the standard of grace. This is a very different focus. One of the things that James says is, “Look, the Jews have the Law of Moses proclaimed every Sabbath. We do not need to go there.” It is notable that even James the Just separates himself from the Jewish synagogue at that

point. What he is saying is that they have the Law as their pursuit. But our pursuit is Christ. Our pursuit is the proclamation of the grace of Christ. We see that interwoven throughout this passage. What I would like to do is read through the chapter with you. Then I want to talk about why this is so important. The church of Jerusalem, when it begins to deal with the Gentile churches, wrestles with the question, “What should we expect of the Gentile churches?” They recognized that there were Gentile churches, not just the church in Jerusalem. There is a church in Antioch, which is a Gentile church. What do we expect them to do? Should they be doing the things that Jews do every Sabbath or something different? The Jerusalem church elders will give the Gentiles a list of things to which they need to pay attention. Often that list is misunderstood, so we will talk about why that particular list as it is mentioned at least twice within the passage. Let's just begin by reading the passage.

(Acts 15:1) “Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the customs of Moses, you cannot be saved.’”

(Acts 15:2) “And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the Apostles and elders concerning this issue.”

Obviously, the church is the place where the decision is, will be made.

(Acts 15:3) “Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren.”

You recall that they were in the church of Antioch at the end of chapter 14.

(Acts 15:4) “When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.”

(Acts 15:5) “But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.’”

(Acts 15:6) “The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter.”

(Acts 15:7) “After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, ‘Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe.’”

(Acts 15:8) “And God, who knows the heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us;”

(Acts 15:9) “and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith.”

(Acts 15:10) “Now therefore, why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?”

It is interesting that Peter actually refers to the Law as a yoke, which is a tool of burden. What an interesting statement. We have not been able to do this. We have obviously not been able to fulfill the Law. I think one of the misnomers about the Law is that its purpose is to make us righteous; and that is simply not true. The purpose of the Law is to point out how sinful we are. That is the purpose of Law. In fact, Paul will write in First Timothy,

(I Timothy 1:9) “realizing the fact that Law is not made for a righteous person, but for those who are Lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers...”

The Law was made for wicked people, sinners. And, as Galatians will say, the reason for the Law was because people were disobeying God. What was the purpose of

the Law? Well, the purpose of Law was condemnation as well as pointing out where a person was going wrong; also, it was to build up the barriers to keep you from continuing to sin. But it could never, as Paul says in Romans chapter 7, make you perfect. In fact, one of the problems of the Law is that it actually makes you want to sin. Romans chapter 7 says that the Law tells me not to do something. As soon as someone tells me not to do something, I go, “Wow. I really want to do that.” That is a big problem with the Law. That is just one of those big problems. As Peter explains in the passage, you realize that the Jewish fathers were never able to obey the Law. (Acts 15:11) “But we believe that we are saved through the grace of our Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.”

It does not matter if you are Jew or Gentile. We are all saved in the same way. I know that there are some people who think that they are righteous, but I do not think they are saved. Once saved, you reach the point of believing that you are not righteous.

(Acts 15: 12) “All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them and among the Gentiles.”

Here again, God was attesting that He had come to the Gentiles as well as the Jews.

(Acts 15:13) “After they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, ‘Brethren, listen to me.’”

(Acts 15:14) “Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among Gentiles a people for His name.”

(Acts 15:15) “With this, the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written,”

(Acts 15:16) “After these things, I will return, and I will rebuild the Tabernacle of David, which has fallen, and I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it.”

(Acts 15:17) “So that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by My Name,”

(Acts 15:18) “says the Lord, who makes these things known from long ago.”

This is a key point, the Gentiles who are called by My Name.

(Acts 15:19) “Therefore, it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles,”

(Acts 15:20) “but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood.”

(Acts 15:21) “For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.”

In other words, they did not have to send this to the Jews because they knew this stuff. They did have to send it to the Gentiles because they were not aware of these things. I want to mark this as we will come back to those points. What seems to be clear is that this is not Mosaic Law in the sense that he is not quoting the Law of Moses. What

he is doing is summarizing what Moses' Law emphasized.
We will come back to this.

(Acts 15:22) “Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas-- Judas called Barsabbas and Silas, leading men from among the brethren.”

(Acts 15:23) “And they sent this letter by them, ‘The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings.’”

(Acts 15:24) “Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words, unsettling souls,”

(Acts 15:25) “it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabus and Paul,”

Let me just emphasize that this is the way every decision needs to be made in a church. There is no two-thirds majority. I want to clarify that.

(Acts 15:26) “men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

(Acts 15:27) “Therefore, we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth.”

(Acts 15:28) “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials.”

This is interesting. They decided, but it seemed good to the Holy Spirit. Who is making the decision? The Holy Spirit. I wonder if that is not the reason why they are in unity. And once again, it repeats them.

(Acts 15:29) “that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols, from blood and from the things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourself free from such things, you will do well. Farewell.”

(Acts 15:30) “So when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter.”

(Acts 15:31) “When they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.”

(Acts 15:32) “Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message.”

(Acts 15:33) “And after they had spent time there, they were sent away from the brethren in peace to those who had sent them out.”

(Acts 15:34) “(But it seemed good to Silas to remain there.)”

(Acts 15:35) “But Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching with many others also, the word of the Lord.”

Again, the emphasis of the church is to preach and teach the Gospel.

(Acts 15:36) “After some days, Paul said to Barnabas, ‘Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.’”

(Acts 15:37) “Barnabas wanted to take John, called Mark, along with them also.”

(Acts 15:38) “But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.”

(Acts 15:39) “And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus.”

(Acts 15:40) “But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord.”

“Being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord” is a key phrase.

(Acts 15:41) “And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.”

It did not take us that long to read. You actually can read a full chapter. No problem. Do so every evening. But as we

look at this, we understand that there is a situation that comes up. I think to us, it seems far removed because some of us might be dealing with Judaism in a way. But on the whole, we feel far removed from it. The fundamental premise is that there are principles in the passage that you and I need to grasp. This is teaching us something extremely important. I want to go to the list that James gives the Gentile churches. They said, “We want to make sure that you are doing this.” Up to this point, what is clear is that the whole church is united around one thing. We are saved by Jesus Christ alone. It is the grace of God. This is also in

(Ephesians 2:8) “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God;”

(Ephesians 2:9) “not as a result of works, so that no man can boast.”

That is our mantra. That is what we believe. That is what we know to be true. This is what the church is about. In fact, it is what unites us. This is the key point because our

church, if it is a real church, will be united in the grace of Christ. That is what brings us together. Greg and I were visiting this morning, and he was sharing. I do not know why he was sharing this with me because it is a confession. I hope he does not get angry with me for sharing it. He shared that he does not like people. I was commiserating with him. I do not like people either. We were almost having a love fest. We do not really like people. The bottom line is that our statements were not really true. It is not that we do not like people. What we do not like is superficiality. That really is the point. What we understand is that we are not united by superficial stuff. We come together because of the grace of God. There is a camaraderie that we have. I do not know how to play golf, but there is a camaraderie that we have based on the grace of God, the favor of God. Paul will say in Romans,

(Romans 12:1) “Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy

sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.”

What is it that he says that calls them together? The mercies of God. What is the one thing that we all have in common? We have received mercy. Right?

(Titus 3:4) “But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared,”

(Titus 3:5) “He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit.”

Mercy is the one thing that we all have in common. I was talking to a young man whom I had not seen for thirty years. He lived at our house about thirty years ago, and it was good seeing him. It was good to hear that he was turning back to the Lord. In fact, I hope he comes back to church. His brother had received the Lord, and we were rejoicing over that. He made an interesting statement. He had started to work in the bars and doing things that he

knew were wrong. He said, “During those years when I was there, one thing kept going through my head over and over and over again.” I said, “What is that, Brad?” He replied, “I knew that I did not belong there. I never felt at home. It was not where I belonged. I got fed up with everybody being drunk; the world is so mean and so hostile. I know I do not belong there. I know where I belong.” It is the sense that we belong with those who fellowship in the grace of God. That draws us together, and we cannot stop talking about God. When talking about God, I have much to talk about. If you want to talk to me about the Lord, I will gladly converse with people. It is a miracle, but I can talk with you that way. How wonderful it is to talk about something valuable. If you think about all of the hostile, acrimonious things that the world is talking about, you get into depressing and stressful discussions. Many people are miserable when they think about the government. They are miserable when they listen to the news. They are miserable about their lives. They are talking slanderously. I do not want to

go there. I do not want to be there. You know? Do you want to sit around and gossip with people? I do not. I do not even want to be there. You start feeling dirty and want to go home, take a bath, and be by yourself. What is it that draws us together? It is the grace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. He is our reason for communicating. What James will prove by these warnings is that the church should establish a fellowship which is unique. It is their mantra to represent grace, and grace is the center point of their fellowship. Think about this: the Law is there to curtail the flesh. It threatens the flesh. As it says in Galatians,

(Galatians 2:16) “nevertheless, knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified.”

Every time I think of this verse, I think of a teacher with a stick. She is like a tutor, and she is saying, “You had better

not.” You go, “Okay.” That is what the Law does. It chases me into the arms of Jesus rather than the tutor. I will not run into the arms of tutor. What I will do is to run into the arms of Jesus. I will go, “Help!” He will say, “I got you.” Then He will turn to the Law and say, “I have already paid the price. Leave him alone.” His grace is how we come together. With His grace, we begin to realize that the world has a different way to fellowship. The church is to be separated from those things.

As we look at the passage, look at the list that James gives us. The first things to stay away from are things “contaminated by idols.” What is he talking about? Here again, the Law’s main purpose was to keep you out of trouble, to keep you away from the things you should not do. What he is explaining is something that will keep this flesh safe because this flesh is prone to sin. What will keep this flesh from sin? This is a key point. If you forget everything else, do not forget this. The key point is that your flesh becomes vulnerable where you fellowship. Therefore, wherever you fellowship, your flesh will go

with the flow. That is how powerful fellowship is. Those with whom you fellowship, what you fellowship about, where you socialize are all vitally important. This is why Paul writes

(I Corinthians 15:33) “Do not be deceived: Bad company corrupts good morals.”

That is why he will state

(II Corinthians 6:14) “Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate, says the Lord. And do not touch what is unclean; and I will welcome you.”

(II Corinthians 7:14) “Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and Lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?”

Light and darkness do not have any fellowship. Why does Paul say that? What he is talking about in the list is that things of the flesh might persuade you to walk away from the faith. He also knows that the church members who come together and embrace one another in the realm of grace is what will solidify our strength. It will make you

strong. You will come together as you talk. That is one of the things that Brad was telling me today. He goes, “I just felt like I need to be back in church.” I said, “You are fundamentally an amputee.” You are part of the body, but you went away. You are an arm, and you wonder why you cannot function. It is because you are not plugged into the body. There is no blood flowing. God has ordained that we come together and strengthen one another. If you go into the realm of the world, you begin to associate with the things that the world does. Your flesh is now drawn elsewhere. Here is the key point: By virtue of your fellowship, your flesh will sin. We see it reiterated in verse 29. We see it at least twice in the passage. If you look at the list, it reads something like this. I want you to stay away or abstain from, which would be the word here, things that are contaminated by idols. Underline the word contaminated because that is the key word. Idols are things that we worship. “Contaminated” refers to ceremonial defilement. When he uses the word contaminated, he could have said, “I want you to abstain

from idols,” but he does not. Why? Because it is the contamination that will draw your flesh away.

Understanding what he means by this word contamination will help you understand what he is talking about. What he is talking about with the word contamination is a ceremonial defilement. In other words, people would gather together in the worship of certain idols in a form of fellowship with that idol. That fellowship is called contamination. You are being contaminated.

Why? By virtue of the fellowship. They would perform idolatrous rites, and you begin to participate. This is what fellowship is. The word fellowship is *koinonia*, which means to have things in common. You begin to have certain things in common with an idol. You go into this realm and start doing the things that they are doing.

Would you agree that this is a form of fellowship? You are partaking with them. You are becoming contaminated by virtue of your performance and by the fellowship that is being created. Camaraderie is being built just by virtue of you doing it together. Things are happening here. A

certain dynamic is working. The flesh is involved in a contaminated work. They have you working in that realm. The word idolatry or idol is almost always defined as something fundamental. We associate this with something more fundamental and more basic than an idol, and that is the word greed. It is greed. Why do people have idols? Why do they make things? Greed. There is no other reason. There is no other reason to have false gods. Greed. Why do people devise their own kinds of gods? Because it allows them to get whatever they want. Plus, they can control those gods. Fundamentally, it is greed. Let me give you some passages in Scripture that might help you regarding this.

(1 John 5:21) “Little children, guard yourselves from idols.”

(Colossians 3:5) “Therefore, consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry.”

“The members of your earthly body” is the flesh. There you go.

(Ephesians 4:19) “and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every impurity with greediness.”

See the passage? It goes on

(Ephesians 4:20) “But you did not learn Christ in this way,”

Idolatry is a form of greed. It is easy for us to say, “I do not have any idols in my house.” But really? The passage is telling them not to associate with idols, another key point. Do not associate, do not fellowship, do not work together with, do not be involved in practices where people are celebrating greed. You are getting into the wrong fellowship. Stay away from that fellowship because you will be identified with them. What we are supposed to be is unique. And what makes us unique? Our fellowship is in grace. We have the favor of God, and we seek to please Him. What do we not want to be known for? We do not want to be known as those who love the world.

(1 First John 2:16) “For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.”

The lust of the eyes is greed. You see something and want it. In this particular passage, it is the physical presence and involvement in the camaraderie over greed. Believe me, our society is built on that. There are a lot of places where they celebrate money. Where is the idol? There it is. It is money. Stay away from that fellowship. I do not want to be too specific, but I know of a large company that made and sold soap. Their whole genre and gathering was a celebration of more, of money, of riches. They were not gathered around integrity. They were not gathered around love. They were not gathered around Christ. They were gathered around making money. They would stick God into the mix sometimes, but it had nothing to do with God. It had everything to do with making more money. In a smaller way, can that be in my everyday life? Yes. You might be in a conversation with somebody, and that person is talking about how their investments make them

feel more secure. My response is usually to say, “Look, our security is in Christ.” I do not want to walk away being out of the favor of God.

(I Timothy 6:17) “Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy.”

(I Timothy 6:18) “Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share,”

When Connie and I sit in a restaurant, I am hard pressed not to hear people all around me. I do not care who is talking. Their subject is often about money. Almost all the conversations that are circling me are about money. Why are you talking about that? That is their fellowship. That is the world's fellowship. But the church is to be different. Unfortunately, often the church talks about money inside the church. It seems as if money is their God. I received an email this past week that said, “Please send us money so that we can go out to minister.” You do not need money to minister. Go lead somebody to the Lord. You do not need

money to do that. Trust in God. If God believes that you need money, He will send it to you. Talk to Him about it. We talk about money so much that we have no time to talk about God. It is no wonder that there is no sincere fellowship. Our fellowship is in Christ.

(I John 1:3) “what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us, and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.”

If our fellowship is in Christ, why are we not talking about Him? Scripture says

(Ephesians 4:28) “He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need.”

Here again, your trust is not in money; nor is your love given for the money. I think the key point that the leaders are trying to convey is that you fellowship around that which you love. Where are you on any given day? With

whom will you be found? To whom are you talking? With whom are you gathered? The answers to those questions define who you are. The church is defined by our talk about Jesus. We talk about grace, we talk about the love of God, we talk about the word of God. Ephesians chapter 5 instructs us on good and bad talk, concluding that we are trying to learn what is pleasing to God. That is what we are seeking. If you look at the world, how are they fellowshiping? What are they fellowshiping around? We have churches offering bingo. What are they fellowshiping around? What the passage is conveying to us is that our physical presence in the midst of these activities is what begins to allure your flesh into sin.

The reason that they named these three things is because it summarizes the Law. Why was the Law given? It was to detour the flesh from going the way of the world. The church fathers are saying, "Look, these are the things that the world is talking about. This is what you want to stay away from." First, he talks about things contaminated by idols. Second, he talks about fornication. Do not tell me

that this is not a topic of discussion. It is. It is a very large part of many conversations. He is talking about a fellowship that comes about during sexual intercourse. The flesh is partaking of and getting involved in something that it should not. More specifically, it is something that will draw them away from Christ, a relationship built on the dynamic of the flesh. Paul's argument as to why you and I should not be sexually promiscuous is that our bodies will be resurrected.

(I Corinthians 6:15) "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? May it never be!"

(I Corinthians 6:16) "Or do you not know that the one who joins himself to a prostitute is one body with her? For He says, 'The two shall become one flesh.'"

That is an act of the flesh. It is an act that is done by virtue of fellowship. Once again, I go back to Second Corinthians chapter 6. What fellowship has light with darkness? What do you mean by fellowship, Pastor Gary? Involving your

body physically while partaking of something that you know is wrong, whether it be greed or sexual promiscuity. When you begin to act in this way, when your fellowship in the flesh is in this manner, then your body is joined with the other person. Do not be deceived. Such company will corrupt you. It will contaminate you.

(I Corinthians 6:17) “But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one Spirit with Him.”

(I Corinthians 6:18) “Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body.”

The immoral man sins against his own body, brings his body into a sinful realm in this world. Why does Paul say to stay away? The person is dealing with a fellowship other than with Christ. Where is our fellowship? Our fellowship is around grace. If you start into a fellowship of lustful intimacy, and it will carry you away. James is protecting the Gentile church, and it is a protection by virtue of fellowship. That is why people say, “I do not need to go to church. I don’t need to have fellowship.” I think you do. It is this fellowship that strengthens your flesh.

How does the song go? *“Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love.”* Why is that true?

(Isaiah 53:6) “All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.”

Why is that true? The answer is that we are in this flesh, and it is prone to gravitate towards more flesh. When you are together with this body of flesh, how is the church moving you? To grace and to the Spirit. But the flesh has a very powerful internal force which is why the fellowship of the body is so important. That is why James is emphasizing this. You have the ceremonial defilement that comes during that fellowship because of greed. You have fellowship through relationships and even in conversations about intimacy and lust.

Have you read the story of Balaam and Balak in the Book of Numbers chapter 25? Balak persistently tried to get Balaam to curse God's people. Balaam tried, but he could not do it. At the same time, he repeatedly tells Balak, “God wants to bless them.” He could not win. You know

how the Moabites ultimately get the people to yield to sin? They entice them to have sexual relations with their people.

(Numbers 25:1) “While Israel remained at Shittim, the people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab.”

(Numbers 25:2) “For they invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods.”

(Numbers 25:3) “So Israel joined themselves to Baal of Peor, and the Lord was angry against Israel.”

Then you read about Solomon. He is supposed to be the wisest man in the world. Yet, he is led astray by his many foreign wives. Who says that sex has no influence? Who says fellowship has no influence? You say, “Oh, I am strong enough.” I do not think you are without God’s help. You will join yourself to whatever you fellowship with. So why is it that you should come out from among them and be separate? Because wherever you fellowship, you will join. Your flesh will be drawn to do that. You see people

building superficial relationships. Even though they are superficial, the flesh is drawn to it. If that fellowship is rooted in greed, then it comes to a point where you fall in love with the money, too; and you cannot live by virtue of the fellowship of greed. Or you cannot live by virtue of fellowship with promiscuity. Rather, you become bound by that particular relationship.

The last condition that James makes is to abstain from things strangled and from blood. He wants them to abstain from that which is strangled from blood. Probably the best description is “from drinking blood.” By the way, this is not a Mosaic command. It was originally a command to Noah in Genesis chapter 9. Noah lived before the Law was given to Moses. Why is it that you should abstain from blood? Because life is in the blood. What does that mean to us? I do not think any of us are going around drinking blood, hopefully. Drinking blood is an act of worship. More specifically, it is an arrogant declaration that says, “I control life.” Life is in the blood. Remember, there are three fundamental sins.”

(1 John 2:16) “For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.”

What is that last one? Boastful pride of life. With the boastful pride of life, a person feels that he controls his own life and then shakes his fist at God. He is cruel in his power pursuits. This ties into strangling animals. When the Jews would sacrifice, there were very, very strict laws about how they were killed. We talked a while back about the trauma that an animal goes through if it is a slow death or a strangling death. The body shoots out a large amount of hormones that are extremely dangerous. That is one of the reasons why we are encouraged to not do that. Nevertheless, I think people still do it. Beyond that, it is a demonstration of cruelty. With much of pagan worship, the sacrificial deaths were like this. They were killed out of cruelty. We hear of cruelty to animals in our day, but sacrificial deaths went beyond that. It was rejoicing in cruelty. It was rejoicing in treachery. We as Americans do not, in general, rejoice in cruelty, do we?

But you know what? I would avoid conversations where that is true. I would avoid fellowship with those who rejoice in cruelty, with those who boast of great things, with those who claim to be in control of their lives and of the world. I would stay away from that. It is quite a dangerous fellowship to be a part of. It is the arrogance of man. I think that there are a lot of people who have an insatiable thirst for power. Power exhibits itself in a need to devour and consume. I think that is one of the reasons why this is in the context of eating because it is a picture of devouring. Paul, in his letter to the Galatians chapter 15 talks about having freedom. You are not use your freedom to devour one another. We partake of something very unique in Christ. If you look with me in First Corinthians chapter 10, when we come together at the Lord's Supper, what are we celebrating? His sacrifice for us. This is very different from the world where people celebrate their arrogance of power and treachery towards other people. (I Corinthians 10:20) “No, but I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to

God; and I do not want you to become sharers with demons.”

Why use the word sharers? Sharers participate with or fellowship with the things that they are doing.

(I Corinthians 10:21) “You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.”

There is the act of devouring in the process of eating. I know people say that it is simply a meal. Yet, there is something about the fellowship. What are you celebrating when you come together? What are you celebrating? What are you talking about at that table? He is telling the church to not gather around greed, to not gather around lust, to not gather around power. You gather around grace. That is what will distinguish you. That is what will make you different. The book will end with Paul and Barnabas. There are things we skipped over, obviously. We are not doing a detailed study of these chapters. The book will end with a debate between Paul and Barnabas. There is a reason why this is interjected. What we know is that

somewhere along the line, John Mark not only left, but he left for a bad reason. In verse 38, it says he deserted them. He deserted them. It is the same phrase that is used in

(II Timothy 4:10) “for Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia.”

Why did they desert? They loved something else. How did that happen to Demas? What happened to Demas? He was with Paul in fellowship, and then he deserted him. What happened? What happened to John Mark at this early stage of his life? Thankfully, John Mark ultimately comes back and does much good for and with Paul. He had been lured away by other desires. We do not know specifically what they were. But what we do know is that he was not committed to grace. He was not committed to the church. He was not committed to the body of Christ. The passage will end with

(Acts 15:40) “But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord.”

Look at the phrase here. He was committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord. See? Why now is Paul united to Silas? Because Silas has been committed by the brethren. The brethren have unity, and we know that these men will be committed to the grace of the Lord. They will claim the grace of the Lord. The grace of the Lord is where the camaraderie is. This is what will hold them in continued fellowship. There was a sharp disagreement. Why was the church at Antioch celebrating the news that was sent to them by the church in Jerusalem? Because they were given the message of grace. They were celebrating. There is a bond that draws people together, and now they are united with church of Jerusalem through grace. The church of Jerusalem says, "Let's not bother them anymore; rather, we will say that it is all about the grace of God. That is what we celebrate." The churches are very different. The Gentile and the Jewish churches now come together around that wonderful message of grace. To oversimplify it, that is

what this chapter emphasizes. How wonderful it is to me that this is what you and I have been called to as well.

Prayer

Father, we give You thanks for this word and for the church, a place in which we gather together because we love You. It is a place of acceptance because I have sinned, yet You forgave me. These folks have sinned and You have forgiven them. Our fellowship is because we have been forgiven. The one thing that we all have in common is that You saved us. You rescued us. None of us can boast of anything that we have done, and it creates such a wonderful atmosphere that is not condemning. It keeps us out of the realm of loving the wrong things and distorting our thoughts. We give You thanks for the atmosphere that You have created through the Spirit of God, through the power of Your grace. We give You thanks in Jesus' name. Amen.