

Acts: Turn the World Upside Down – The Gospel and Legalism

Jake Barker | Acts 15:1-33

Well, hey Traders Point. I hope you are having a great weekend so far. If this is your very first time with us, we are so honored and grateful that you would spend time with us here this weekend. It means so much to us.

Before we dive in, I want to tell you about something really new that we're starting around here. We realize that we need to add a little bit to the content that we put out on a regular basis. So we're starting a brand new podcast. It's called the Traders Point podcast show.

Now what it is—it's an opportunity for our church leaders to talk to you guys about the stuff that's going on around here. Sometimes we'll address some cultural issues and try to equip you with the right tools to be able to have conversations about them in your everyday life.

Then, every once in a while, we're writing sermons and we end up cutting a lot of stuff because if we said everything it would be a two-hour sermon and then you guys would stop coming and that's not good. So, really what we want to do is to give an opportunity to go a little deeper, next level, on some stuff.

We recorded our very first one last week. It gave Aaron the opportunity to speak with one of our staff members, Diana Weir, a little more about what he talked about last week, which was the gospel and racism. You can imagine that with that topic it's hard to cover that in one sermon. So they were able to add some layers of depth onto the already existing conversation.

Be ready for that. We'd like for you to subscribe and stay in tune with what's going on around here, alright? Be ready for that podcast.

Now, we're in the middle of a series in the Book of Acts and if you are new to church, if you're new to the Bible, then you need to know that Acts is the history of the early church—how all of this got started.

What we've heard so far is that God chose some very ordinary people to do some extraordinary things. He chose ordinary fishermen who were really untrained and they got up and started preaching these sermons and thousands of people came to faith in a single moment—just incredible stuff.

Last week we heard that the gospel can break some really strong boundaries like ethnic boundaries, which previously existed. Today, we're going to dive in to Acts, chapter 15. So, if you have a Bible or a Bible app, I'd love for you to join me in Acts 15. That's where we are going to be hanging out. You can get a head start.

Now you and I know that, in our world, in our culture, every once in a while we find ourselves in an *us* versus *them* situation. There's *us*—the people group that I belong to—and then there's *them*—those other people. And if we're really being honest, and if we were to cut through it all, we would say *us* are the people who are right and *them* are the people who are wrong. That's kind of what we mean by that.

In our culture there is Coke versus Pepsi. So, let's see the hands. How many of you would say that you are team Coke? Raise your hands real quick. Look around. Some whoos. And what about Pepsi? Anybody team Pepsi? Very good. Now, how many of you would leave a restaurant if they were serving the wrong soft drink? Raise your hand. A couple of people. That's insane. You need help, alright? That's not good. There have been people in every service that would have done that crazy thing.

Then, there is the debate between *us* and *them* in the computer world—Apple and Microsoft, right? Apple people look at Microsoft people and they are like, “Oh, wow! Another spreadsheet. How cool.” And then Microsoft people fire back and say, “Well, at least we have computers, not a toy that plays Candy Crush. That's pretty much it.” Computer people are feisty, alright? I would not want to pick a fight with your IT guy. I just know that to be true.

In the automobile industry there's Ford versus Chevy. There is massive SUV versus hybrid. There is American made versus foreign made.

In pop music there are people who enjoy the music of Taylor Swift and people who just don't know how to have a good time. That's pretty much the debate. That's really true. You can tell what side I'm on. Lighten up, people.

In this city, on this particular night of all nights, there is one particular *us* and *them*. There are Patriots fans and pretty much the rest of the country. That seems to be pretty accurate—*us* and *them*.

Now, usually when we're referring to *them*, or *they*, or *those people* we rarely use flattering terms because we're not part of them, right? So we usually lump *them* all into one, over-generalized category and we say this is what *they* are like. And we use stereotypes to describe them. It's not always positive and it extends beyond pop stars and soft drinks. It can go to other religions, other races, other political parties, or generational gaps or those associated with economic gaps. We say, “*They, them, those people.*”

What we find in Acts, chapter 15 is that the early church finds itself with an *us* and *them* problem. Now, often when we think about the church and maybe an *us* and *them* debate we may think that the *us* are Christians and the *them* are the people who do not yet believe. So *us* is the church and *them* is the world.

But what we find in chapter 15 is that there is an *us* and *them* debate happening within the church, that within the ranks of Christians there are people who disagree and they don't see things the same way. They debate something that has had generational impact—even until today.

See, it's been about 10 years since what Aaron taught about last week happened in Acts chapter 10. We learned that the gospel was no longer reserved for the people of Jewish background but now was being extended to everyone. So the church was growing numerically and it was also growing more and more diverse.

With that came its own, unique challenges. There were people from different backgrounds and ethnicities trying to find unity in the body of Christ. They had different assumptions, and presuppositions, and convictions about the way this should be done. So they found themselves in this *us* and *them* debate. And the decision that was made by the early church fathers has made complete ripple effects, even until today.

If you are here and you would not consider yourself a Christian, you are just checking it out—first of all, we want you to feel that you are welcome here; we are so glad that you are here so that you can hear what we know about Jesus. And you will get a behind-the-scenes look at how Christians see people who do not yet believe.

Now you may be wondering about that because you've heard some rumors about how Christians see those who don't agree with them. And what you're going to find out is why your friends, and family, and co-workers are so intent on introducing you to Jesus and getting you here. You may even find out how you got tricked into being in the very seat that you're in right now.

For those of you who would say that you are Christians this is going to illuminate one of the tensions that still exists today. Even though the debate began 2,000 years ago, it is alive and well.

Acts, chapter 15—we're going to begin in verses 1 through 5 and then we're going to break it down. Here we go. It says, "But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.' And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.

"So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the part of the Pharisees rose up and said, 'It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the Law of Moses.'"

So there is a debate happening within the early church. Christians disagree about something and here's what it really amounts to: One question. Do you have to be Jewish to be Christian? That was the question they were asking. Do you have to be Jewish to be Christian? That may seem like an odd thing for us to ask now, but that's really what they were debating.

Here's why. Early on in the Christian church, the gospel or the good news of Jesus was extended, primarily, to people with Jewish backgrounds. It started out as a Jewish group of people. That's where the good news began. But then in Acts, chapter 10 we see that the gospel broke through those barriers and the flood gates opened and now all kinds of people were responding to Jesus—people who weren't from a Jewish background, people called Gentiles.

At first everybody was pumped about this. This was very, very exciting because... Look at all of these new people learning about Jesus, look at all of this new talent, and look at all of the resources. Everybody was really excited about the church growing so fast. But then the dust settles and the people who had been around for a long time looked around them and realized, "You know what? These new people, they don't look like me, they don't act like me, and they don't talk like me. Is that okay? Is that allowed? Are you allowed to just be a Christian or do you have to be a Jewish Christian?"

You see, their assumption was that Christianity was simply a next step from Judaism. So when new converts would come to faith they would either begin or continue observing all of the cultural, all the ritual laws of the Jewish faith. That's how they did it so that's how they assumed everyone else would.

But then word got back to them about all of these new converts from Paul's and Barnabas' church plants and they were just being Christian. They just believed in Jesus and they weren't doing the Jewish stuff like circumcision, and dietary laws, and cultural norms. And they just had to ask the question, "Is that okay? Are we allowed to do that?"

And if we were to really cut through it all in the realest of terms, they were worried that all of these messy, pagan converts would lower the moral standard of the church to which they belonged. And there are some of us who have had a very similar experience.

In our church, and in our church experience, we came to faith in a very particular experience. We came to faith in a very particular church, with a particular worship style, with a particular ministry program, with a particular pastor.

And then, all of a sudden, these new people started showing up. And they didn't really know the language and they didn't know how to act, and they were kind of messy, and sometimes they said those words that only have four letters in them—we don't really know how to respond to that, "Are they allowed? Is it okay to be here if you don't know how to act?"

Around here we say it all of the time. We want environments that anybody can come to and hear, clearly, the good news of Jesus. People from all kinds of backgrounds, and experiences, and all different levels of spiritual maturity should feel comfortable here so that they can hear Jesus clearly.

We don't say that because we want to be relevant, or cool, or because we came up with it—it's because that's what Jesus said. Look at Luke, chapter 5. Jesus said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."

"When messy people start to showing up to my church, is that okay?" that's what they were debating.

I have a friend and he attends Traders Point. He works for a law firm in downtown Indianapolis. And he said that there's this phenomenon that happens in their firm. When people go from attorney to partner, something happens inside of them. When they accomplish that goal, when they finally become one of the head honchos, they start looking at people differently.

And even though they became partner under a particular set of rules and regulations, they now want to make it harder for anyone else to become partner. So, as soon as they accomplish that goal they want to look back at all of the other people who are aiming at the same target and say, "Hey, even though this was my bar, I want your bar to be higher." They refer to it as pulling up the ladder to where the lowest rung is a couple of feet higher for them.

As Christians, there are a handful of us who have done the same thing. When we look at people who are yet to be as far along in their faith journey as we are, or maybe we've been on this road of sanctification and maturity a little bit longer than everyone else, sometimes we have a long-term memory problem. We forget where we came from. We forget how messy we were. We forget how little we knew.

So we say, "Hey, even though I was saved exclusively through faith in the grace of Jesus, I'm going to need to see a little bit more from you. I'd like for you to get your act together before you come around my church." This is the challenge they had in the early church. This isn't something that we invented. This is something that has been around for a long time.

Here's really what they were asking and this is so fundamental that we still have to ask it of ourselves. They were asking the question, was Jesus enough? Was Jesus enough? Did Jesus' sacrifice on the cross pay for all the debt I owed God because of my sin or did He only cover about 75 percent of the debt and I am responsible for 25 percent?

Pastor John Stott put it like this. He said, "Has Jesus Christ by His death and resurrection done everything necessary for salvation? Or are we saved partly through the grace of Christ and partly through our own good works and religious performance?" Not only was this a question that was being batted around 2,000 years ago, we still ask it today. Was Jesus enough or did I play any part in my salvation.

Maybe this isn't unfamiliar to you—this is the story that you've been told. Anytime you were ever told about Jesus, or the Bible, or Christianity it was always about what you do. So it was like, "Yeah, believe in Jesus and then also do this." So it was, "Yeah, Jesus plus church attendance; and Jesus plus serving somewhere; and Jesus plus giving your money; and Jesus plus, 'Don't drink so much;' and Jesus plus, 'Don't say those words;'" Jesus plus something.

So we have to ask the question, am I saved exclusively through the sacrifice of Jesus or am I saved by something that I contribute to the equation? That's what they were debating. So, here we have them debating and they bring this debate back to Jerusalem so that the church leaders can settle this once and for all. They needed a ruling on this.

So Paul and Barnabas bring it back to Jerusalem and look what happens in verses 6 through 11. It says, "The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, 'Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the Word of the gospel and believe.

'And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as He did to us, and He made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.'"

So they're debating this issue and our guy Peter stands up and he uses *us* and *them* language four different times. He says, "First of all God gave them the Holy Spirit just like He gave us so we should not place a yoke on them, we should not place a burden on them that we could not bear. God didn't make a distinction between *us* and *them*. And finally, we are saved by grace just like them. There is no difference. There is no difference.

What Peter is referring to is exactly what Aaron talked about last week in chapter 10. See, Peter was given a vision by God and it said that no longer is the gospel just for Jewish people, it's for everyone. So Peter started hanging out with this guy named Cornelius. And Cornelius is described as an Italian special-forces guy—just a real intimidating guy. So Peter goes and hangs out with Cornelius and his crew, he tells them about Jesus, and before they can ever publically confess their faith, God gives them the Holy Spirit.

Peter is like, "Look, man. That was 10 years ago. I was there. I preached them Jesus. They received the Holy Spirit. They are saved and they didn't have to be circumcised. And so now you're asking me to go

back to an Italian Rambo and you want me to say, “Hey, by the way the last 10 years are kind of fake and now, as a grown man, you need to be circumcised. Yeah, I’ll get right on that. For sure, I’m going to do that.” Peter is really sarcastic in my head, I don’t know why. But he’s just saying, “No way am I going back to that guy and tell him that he has to do this really painful thing so that he can validate the last 10 years of his faith. No, he was saved. I was there.”

He uses this word that may be unfamiliar to you. It’s the word *yoke*. And, literally, the word yoke would refer to a piece of farm equipment that would rest on the shoulders of farm animals for the work of plowing a field. And the yoke would keep them aligned, it would keep them on task, and ultimately it would keep them submissive to their master. It was a heavy piece of equipment that kept the master in charge.

Now, metaphorically, the word yoke was used to refer to a Rabbi’s teaching. A Rabbi would have his interpretation of Scripture and the way that he wanted it lived out and he would teach his students to assume his yoke. That’s what it meant. So these students would come along and they would try to live up to the yoke that the Rabbi taught.

Now a lot of the teachers, especially the Pharisees, they would take God’s law and then they would add some of their own rules out to the side of it to make sure that they never broke God’s law. So, not only did their students have to remember God’s law, they had to remember their teacher’s rules as well. This was a heavy yoke. It was a heavy burden which they had to submit to and try to live out.

Then Jesus shows up on the scene and He says, “Look, I am a Rabbi. But, I am a different kind of Rabbi. I have teachings, but I have different kinds of teachings. So here’s my interpretation. In Matthew, chapter 11 Jesus says this, “Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light.”

Maybe this is the first time that you have heard that verse. Maybe this is really surprising to you because every time Christianity has ever been offered to you it’s always been really heavy. In fact, if you were to summarize the way that Jesus has ever been explained to you it was—be perfect and maybe God will love you. And Jesus is saying, “No, no, no. It’s easy, and it’s light, and it gives you rest.”

So Peter’s standing up and he’s saying, “I was with Jesus when He said that, I was with Cornelius when he was saved. He didn’t have to do anything. His salvation was not dependent upon anything he did. He didn’t have to be circumcised. He didn’t have to follow the law. He’s just a Christian.

Peter stands up and says, “Here’s my experience.” And then Paul and Barnabas stand up and say, “Yeah. For the last 10 years we’ve been planting church and we’ve been reaching Gentiles and none of them have been circumcised and none of them are Jewish and they are saved.”

So we have Peter saying it, we have Paul and Barnabas saying it. And then this guy named James stands up. James is the early leader of the Jerusalem church. And James had the great distinction of being the brother of Jesus. He’s the brother of Jesus.

Now, as I was thinking about James’ childhood, I was thinking that if I were him, being the brother of Jesus, I would have had a massive inferiority complex. Do you know what I mean? Just imagine that your mom gets mad at you and she says, “Why can’t you be more like your brother?” And you’re like, “Mom,

I literally can't, alright? He is God. What am I supposed to do? Get off my back mom." And then he'd get grounded because you can't talk to your mom like that. But still, that would have been my childhood as James.

But instead of James crumbling underneath the comparison game of being the brother of Jesus, he rose up to be the leader of the church that worshipped the Guy who was his brother as he was growing up. Get your mind around that. That is crazy stuff. James grows up and he's the leader of the Jerusalem church.

And on top of that, James has a nickname. And James' nickname is James the Just. James the Just. And the reason that he had that nickname is because he was so sold on the cultural and the ritual of the Jewish law. He was a teetotaler, I's dotted, T's crossed guy—he did it all. So you can imagine where a guy with the name of James the Just stands up in this debate. He might say, "Look if I can follow the rules, everybody else should too. If I can be James the Just, you can be Jake the Just, you can be John the Just, you can be Whoever the Just. You can be that person. I can do it. You should do it as well." He's a rules guy.

But look what he stands up and says in verse 13 through 19. Here are James' words. It says, "Brothers listen to me. Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for His name. And with this the words of the prophets agree," that's so important. The words of the prophets agree, "just as it is written, 'After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old.' Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, ..."

Alright, remember, this is James the Just. He has that nickname. On his coffee mug is not a Bible verse that talks about love—he's got a rule on there. He's got the verse, "Don't eat shellfish." That's James the Just. He loves the Law of God. And he stands up and says, "You know what? Even though I do all of this stuff, I'm not expecting it of anybody else. No one is saved by anything that they do. I've heard Peter's story. I've heard Paul's and Barnabas' stories and then I checked God's word."

I want to take a moment and just say, let's watch how James develops his conviction because I think it's so important for you and me to consider today. James process was this. Peter, the apostle, stood up and said, "This is what I have experienced." And then there were Paul and Barnabas, the church planters. And they stood up and said, "This is what we've experienced." But instead of James just saying, "Wow, those are really good stories. That sounds like God is up to something. Maybe that is true." He said, "Okay, I hear what you've experienced, now let me go to the Word of God and see if that is true."

He checked their experience against Scripture. And what he found is that the prophet, Amos, back in the Old Testament said this was going to happen. God told them a long time ago that Gentiles were going to come to faith. And so he says, "It's true not because Peter said it and not because Paul and Barnabas said it, but because God's Word said it was going to happen and now I can confirm it." Simply put, Scripture confirmed their experience. Scripture confirmed their experience. He said, "Here's your story. Here's what God said. And now this is my conviction."

That's so important because James is modeling for you and me how we should develop our convictions. But in our culture, in the world in which we live today, we are often encouraged to do the exact

opposite. We're often encouraged to take our life experience, what we've felt, what we've known, the people who we love and allow that to be the filter through which we interpret Scripture.

So, the people who I love, the people who I know, and my experience are now the primary authority in my life. This is the thing in which I have my convictions. And it informs whether I accept or reject Scripture. So, the way I feel and what I think now is the ultimate authority, not what God has said. And, ultimately, if you're not a Christian and you're just here checking us out, you can believe what you want—that's totally fine. For those of us who are *All In* we are submitting ourselves to the authority of God's Word.

Now, very few of us ever say it like this because that wouldn't be very Christian where you just know the right things to say. But here's often how it sounds. When I allow my experience to trump God's Word, here's what it sounds like, "I grew up in a particular church tradition so I want it in all other churches, even if it's not commanded in Scripture."

Or, it sounds like, "It seems like our culture is redefining the major moral principles and because I don't want to end up on the wrong side of history, I'll reject any Scripture that disagrees with that."

Or, "I have a loved one, a friend, or a colleague who lives a particular life-style and so I will reject any Scripture that confronts their sin."

Or, "I really love her, and I know what the Bible says about the type of person I should marry but, if I love her enough, I'm sure that she will change."

Or, "I had a professor in college who debated some of the foundational beliefs of Christianity. And because he seems intellectually superior and I don't want to seem dumb, I'll selectively omit some of the Bible from my worldview."

Probably the most common one that all of us have said at one time or another is, "Because I don't want to change, I'm going to ignore certain commands in God's Word."

Our experience, and our feelings, and our relationships become our primary influence and God's Word becomes secondary. So we need to observe the way James came to his conviction. It wasn't just like, "Hey, my buddies," "Hey, these apostles," "Hey, these really Godly men said this thing..." he's said, "That's great that that was your experience but, ultimately, I'm always going to check it against God's Word." He tested it. James modeled the healthy way for us to form our convictions.

Your experiences are not invalid. I want to say that. Your experiences are not invalid but when my experience contradicts Scripture it is not true. When my experience is confirmed by Scripture, it's powerful. It's life changing. That's what was happening here. So James the Just, James the law guy, James of the rules stands up and says, "Look, I'm with Peter. I'm with Paul and Barnabas. Here's what God's Word says. It says you are exclusively saved by faith through grace, nothing more. You didn't do anything to earn your salvation."

And at this moment team liberty, team freedom is standing up and high-fiving. They're saying, "Look, that's what I've been saying the whole time. I don't have to do any of that stuff. I can't do anything to make God love me more. I can't do anything to make God love me less. It's not about what I do. It's

about what has been done for me. I don't have to live by your traditions, or your laws, or your rules—na-na na-na boo-boo.” That's the tone that they have taken.

So before we start releasing balloons and putting party streamers out we have to read the rest. For those of us who are team liberty, team freedom we've got to read verse 20. So, here's all of James' statement. He says, “Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood.”

Alright, at this point I think team freedom is looking like, “What?!!” Didn't you just say that we are saved exclusively by our faith through grace? Why do I have to everything else? Basically the only thing you left off of the list was circumcision, which... Like, thanks. But I don't know why I have to do all of this stuff if I'm not saved by it. Why do I have to do anything? Why do I have to be sensitive to anyone else's culture? Why do I have to watch out for what other people think? Why should I have to do that?”

See James is not requiring these as a condition for salvation, but he is coaching us on community. James is saying, “Look, yes. You are free to do what you want. The yoke of Christianity is easy, light, and restful. It's not about what you do. It's about what has been done. Nothing you do will make God love you more. Nothing you do will make God love you less. You are free.”

But it's not just about what I'm allowed to do as a Christian. In fact a Christian life is consistently defined by laying down what I'm allowed to do for the sake of others. It's for the sake of others.

Now, I have to confess to you that this is not my style. I belong to team freedom and team liberty. That's my jam. That's the team that I most likely align with. I am a minimalist at heart. So I want to reduce everything to its simplest form. So when it comes to the Christian life, I'm just telling you that I want as few restrictions as possible. I want to find only the rules that get me in and then everything else is up to me.

On top of that, if you tell me that I'm not allowed to do something—it just makes me want to do it all the more. That's just me. I'm sure my parents loved raising me. I think that, basically, I was just a big turd. That's the way I see it.

This idea that someone else's conviction, or someone else's preferences—even like worst case scenario, for me, someone else's immaturity could restrict the way I behave. That is really unattractive to me. And James says to me and people like me—to those of us who are Christians, those of us who are All In, he says, “Get over it. You're a Christian now. It's not all about you.”

That's what James is saying. He's like, “Look, yes you are saved by faith through grace—nothing you do. God will not love you more or less depending upon your behavior. You are absolutely right. You are free to live however you want. But why would you do that? If you know that you are offending someone else, a brother or a sister, and you know that it is getting in the way of your community, why wouldn't you lay that down? Why is that most important to you?”

So, for him, his example was finding and eating the rarest steak in the world and allowing the blood to drip down your mouth while you're hanging out with your Jewish brother or sister. Don't do that. Why would you do that? It's going to offend them.

For us, it's probably not rare steaks but maybe it's our political preference. We so identify ourselves, our identity, with the political party with which we most align with here in America that we can't have a conversation without it coming up. And even though I know that you are on the opposite side of me, or even though I know that it might stir things up, I'm going to willingly say it because I can't get over it. And I am in the way of you hearing about Jesus. It's dangerous.

Man, honestly for me, some of it has been my sports teams, the teams that I love. I take them so seriously and I love them so much that I can't even get along with other people. And I trash talk. And I'm so sarcastic that sometimes people can't take me seriously and they can't hear about Jesus. I'm a barrier in their way.

Look, my sports teams, my politics, they don't define my salvation but they might get in the way of someone else hearing about Jesus. Maybe it's the way you dress. Look, your wardrobe has nothing to do with your salvation but when it's low-cut, and tight, and revealing, it's possible that you're getting in the way of someone else seeing Jesus clearly. You're allowed to. You're free. Go for it.

But ultimately James is asking, "Why? Why would you unnecessarily offend someone? Why would you unnecessarily get in the way of someone clearly hearing about Jesus?" The Christian life is consistently defined by laying down what I'm allowed to do—my rights, and my freedoms, and my liberties for the sake of others.

Where do you think that James got that idea? Do you think he just came up with it one day while he was having coffee and looking at his law mug? No, it was probably from the life of his brother, Jesus.

In fact, this is how Paul describes Jesus in Philippians, "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

If anyone had rights, if anyone had freedom, if anyone had liberty it was certainly Jesus Christ. He was the only man who ever lived a perfect life. He did not deserve to die on a cross. He didn't have to do that for you and for me. But instead of flexing His freedom, instead of flaunting His liberty and demanding what is just, He surrendered and He laid down what He was allowed to do for the sake of you and me. And I am so grateful that He did.

If you are with me, if you are with me on team liberty, team freedom let me just ask you this. It may be time for you and me to start asking a different question. Most of my life I've spent asking this question, "What can I do?" As a Christian, what can I do? What's in bounds, what's out of bounds? Would you tell me where the limit is so that I can get right up next to it?

Really what I'm asking... I ask that because I know that I'm supposed to ask it like that. What I'm really asking is what can I get away with? How much can I get away with and still be a Christian? That's really the question that I am asking. Show me the line and allow me to slightly dangle my foot over it so that I can live a life that maybe doesn't look much like a Christian, but I'm still saved. That's really what I am asking.

I did student ministry for quite a few years. I hung out with teenagers a bunch. Do you know the number one question I got from them? “When I’m with my boyfriend,” or, “When I’m with my girlfriend how far is too far? How far can I go and still be a virgin? How far can I go and still be considered pure? How far can I go and still be a Christian?”

Even if you are an adult, even if you are married—we’re still asking questions like that all of the time. How far can I go? How close can I get to the line and still be saved?

So, what I’d like to do is to encourage us to start asking a different question. Instead of, “What can I get away with, instead of what am I allowed to do, instead of how free am I to do whatever I want,” what if we started asking the question, “What’s the wise thing to do?” What’s the wise thing to do? Not what can I get away with, but what is the wise thing to do in my particular scenario.

See, many of us have allowed the goal of our Christian life to be to live as free as possible. So we push the limit no matter how it makes other people feel, or whether it ever gets in the way of someone else clearly seeing Jesus. I’m going to do me. I’m going to live my life.

And instead switching our goals... Instead of how free can I live? It’s more how many people can I get to Jesus? How many people can I make clearly see Jesus and then grow in their faith as deep as possible? Even if it requires me to surrender the thing that I’m allowed to do, I’m willing to do that. I’m willing to lay it down so that people can clearly see Jesus.

Now, here’s one of the troubles, here’s one of the tricky parts about Christianity just in general. Many of us have wanted to use the Bible as God’s heavenly rule book to answer our dos and don’ts in life. We would love for God’s Word, God’s Bible to give us a, “Here’s how you should handle each and every ethical and moral situation that you come across. Here’s what you should do. Here’s what you shouldn’t do.

But the problem is, this is how Pastor Tim Keller says it, that the primary purpose of the Bible is not to advise, it’s good news. That’s what it is. It’s the good news that Jesus came to live amongst us, to die for our sin, and give us the hope of eternal life. That’s the point of the Bible.

Now, there are certainly moral principles in there that can guide our decisions but that’s not its primary purpose. So, in the Christian life there is going to be gray—not everything is black and white. The Bible doesn’t immediately address how we should use our social media. It doesn’t immediately address who we vote for in American politics. It doesn’t immediately address the wisdom of luxury cars. These things are just not in there because they weren’t a cultural situation when it was written.

So you and I have to read God’s Word. And we’ve been given the gift of the Holy Spirit so that we can live a life of wisdom, not legalism—wisdom not legalism. So, ultimately, what James was saying in that moment 2,000 years ago is, “Look, you are free. You’re saved by faith through grace, nothing else. You didn’t do anything to earn your salvation, your status with God is not affected by that, but make community your goal. If you are doing something that you know is in the way, surrender it willingly so people can clearly see Jesus. Have an others first attitude.”

Now most of us, if not all of us, have a leaning on this issue, some of us lean toward team liberty like I described and said that that is probably how I lean. Some of us lean toward team obedience. That’s just your natural outcome. Clarity for you is really important. Dos and don’ts is really how you like it and you

want to know if you are winning or if you are losing. But what can happen is, when we lean that way, when we live the Christian life for a long time we start convincing ourselves that we've had something to do with our salvation. We think that the reason God loves us is because we are good enough and the reason that God doesn't love them is because they aren't good enough.

So, let me ask you this question—something for you to consider, something for you to wrestle with. I'd love for you to talk about it in your Life Group this week, "Am I adding anything to the gospel?" Am I adding anything to the good news of Jesus? Am I saying, "Yes, it's faith in Jesus *and* fill-in-the-blank?"

What behavior am I adding to the gospel? When I tell my friends about it, when I tell my co-workers about it, even when I tell my kids about it, am I adding anything to the gospel?

I just want to take a quick moment and talk to the parents in the room and, man I'm with you, I have three little ones at home and most of my days are pretty much like, "Hey, don't do this. Do this. If you could just not burn the house down that would be awesome." That's kind of the bar that we set in our house—I don't know about you. That's really what it is—do this, don't do that.

And one of the hardest parts of being a parent is that my obedience driven parenting can sometimes seep into the way I talk about God. And when I accidentally, very unintentionally, communicate to them that God is affected by the way that He sees them and by the way that they behave, like, "Daddy loves you when you're good, but Daddy's mad at you when you're bad and so is God..."

See, legalists aren't born as adults. They are born in kindergarten. That's where they learn. So, as a parent, we have the ultimate responsibility of guarding their hearts and teaching them the gospel, early and often, that we are saved by faith through grace alone. It's nothing that we have ever done that has impacted our salvation. It's simply this, receiving the gift of grace—so important. So am I adding anything to the gospel? Ask yourself that question.

If you lean toward liberty then I will go back to the question I already asked. What is the wise thing to do? Am I so determined to prove a point, am I so determined to flaunt my freedom even if I think it's silly that the rest of you don't? Even if I think it's silly about your personal convictions, am I willing to lay it down so that people will see Jesus as clearly as possible? What's the wise thing to do?

As we're wrapping up, let's read verses 30 and 31 and see the response of the church. They make this decision and then watch how the church responds. They wrote them a letter explaining it and it says this, "So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement."

See, the church didn't rub it in the circumcision party's face saying, "Ha, we won the argument." And they didn't whine and complain because they were asked to be sensitive to cultural norms. Instead they rejoiced because the gospel was clarified and their community was encouraged. So let us rejoice in the same.

Right now we're going to do this thing called communion. Communion is our weekly opportunity to remember the only thing that has ever saved us. It was the sacrifice of Jesus. We're going to have bread and juice and that represents Jesus' body and blood. It's a moment for us to reflect. And you have a

question—no matter where you lean on this you have a question to ask yourself and to ask God. Allow Him to get inside and rewire what is necessary to re-do.

Let me pray for us.

Father we are so humbled and grateful that You have given us Your Word and that You have spoken so clearly and powerfully to us. Please let us listen. Let us have ears to hear. Let us be open to a new way of thinking. Let us be open to being more like You. God, You have access to our hearts. Do Your thing. We want to submit to You. We want to live for You. It's in Your name I pray. Amen.