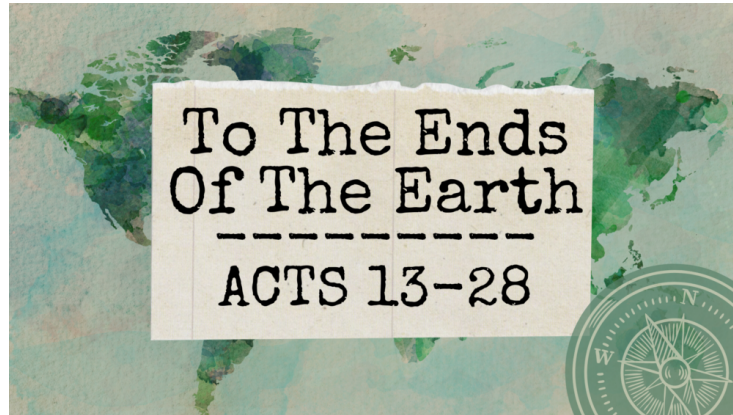


# Christianity without Clothes



**Acts 15:22–42**

**Bro Kory Cunningham**

Now that I have completed my seminary endeavors, I want to tell you about one of my most embarrassing moments in seminary, and it had to do with writing a letter (We are going to get to another letter in a moment, so we are going to connect the two dots). It was my first semester at seminary and I was taking a course, Systematic Theology II, by Dr. Bruce Weir who is one of the leading scholars at Southern Seminary. Crider was about six months old. I was wrapping up the semester, literally typing my last paper. Mother's Day was the next Sunday and we are about to go on vacation, so we have a lot of things happening. But it was late at night and I was trying to get this paper finished because I wanted to get it sent and then just turn off all technology so I could leave for a week and just have an awesome time on vacation. But again, Mother's Day is right around the corner and I know I needed to do something for Katie, so I decided that I was going to write a note from Crider, a 6 month old, to his mom. So, while I am working on this paper, I get my stationary out and get ready to write the note. But then I thought I would type it up first to make sure it sounds good, and make sure everything is how it should be. So on the end

of my seminary paper, I just typed a few lines from Crider to his mom, I look at what I wrote and made sure it looked good, and then I deleted it (at least I think I deleted it) and then I hit send to email my paper in. Then I write the note and give it to Katie for Mother's Day, turn off technology, and head to the beach for a week.

We get to the condo at the beach and it is just an awesome time with me, Katie, and our little boy. On the last day of our vacation, I start wondering what I got on that last paper, and I am really wondering what my final grade was so I thought I would check my email. So the night before we leave, I just have to know what my grade was in that class, so I open my computer and go to my student email. There was an email from my grader of the class, and he said, "Great paper. Really confused about the ending. Can you explain?" I thought... *What?* I wrote a paper about the deity of Christ, so what could be wrong about the last paragraph? So I open it up and I scroll down to the last paragraph. I am sitting on the floor of our condo reading it and I start laughing hysterically — because I am trying to keep myself from just crying! I mean, I am mortified at what my eyes are reading! Katie comes into the room and says, "What is going on? What is happening?" and I began to read the last paragraph to her. Now note, this doesn't say: "To Mom from Crider." It is just the last paragraph of a paper that I submitted to Dr. Weir. This is what it read: "Thanks for changing my poop diapers. Thanks for snuggling and making me laugh. Thanks for the tickles. Thanks for giving me baths, rocking me to sleep, and kissing me all over." End of sentence.

My grader, who did not know me from Adam, was reading a paper to his superior from a student, and that was the last paragraph he reads, assuming this is from me to Dr. Weir! And he said I need some clarification...this seems strange! Of course, I was just mortified, I was trying to explain myself, and I was thinking do I just need to drop out of school? I do not know how I can rebound from this! I will always be marked as "that guy" from now on — it was horrible! See, my grader needed some information. He had what appeared to be a letter at the end of my paper, and he needed some explanation because it didn't seem like it belonged in the letter. It seemed like it was out of place. What was in there was

outlandish and could not be true. He needed some verification. He needed some clarification. I was happy to give that to him, to apologize, and hopefully never see Dr. Weir in person! That was my goal.

In Acts, we are going to read a letter that is delivered to a church, and though it is not as humorous and funny as the letter I wrote, I promise you that when it was read out loud, the hearers would have found it as strange, as out of bounds. You have Jews and Gentiles who are in this church together. They are trying to figure out what it means to follow God. What does it mean to have faith? What does it mean to be in the family of God? What does that look like, practically? They have all these rules and all these regulations, they are coming with all these new things, and a letter is going to settle the issue. And I promise that when this letter is written, some people had that same reaction. This cannot be true, this cannot be right. Somehow, we have missed some things. So, we are going to see that accompanying this letter are some of the apostles, some men from the event that had happened, so they could verify and clarify the reading, because these people would have assumed this couldn't be true.

I want us to read the letter. Please turn to Acts Chapter 15. If you have been with us the last two weeks, it is going to be a little redundant, but I think the Lord is really trying to make sure that we get this pause in the middle of Acts. We are not going to talk about the situation, or the beginning or the end just yet, we are going to read the surrounding verses, but I want us to read the letter. I want you to pretend that you are in the Church of Antioch, you are a Gentile, you have just come into the Faith, and now, you are being told all sorts of things by your Jewish brothers and sisters that basically say you need to become a Jew now. You are trying to figure all of this out, and all of a sudden, a letter is brought. You have heard that there was a debate that happened in Jerusalem that settled the matter, and now you have all gathered, ready to hear this letter. We are going to read the letter beginning in verse 23.

## Scripture

**"...with the following letter: "The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell."**

This letter is delivered to these people, and we are going to talk about the background of how it came, but first I want to give the overview of what I think is the main point of the letter. If we summed it up, I think letter says that if you are a Gentile you do not have to become a Jew to be a Christian, but you do need to stop acting like a pagan. It is kind of the summary point of the letter. If you are a Gentile, you do not have to assume all the practices, all the rituals, all the cultural cues to become a Jew, but you do need to stop doing some of the pagan things you did before you met Christ. So these people would have assumed, what they are being told, is that Christianity comes with a culture, the culture of Judaism. In other words, you have to become like the Jews if you want to be the people of God, which made sense, because the Old Testament is about God having a people, Israel, and giving them rules to make them distinct as the people of Israel. So if you wanted to be the people of God in the Old Testament, you became Israel. Now, Christ has come and things seem to be different now. We are going to see in the big picture that Christianity has no clothing. Christianity has no culture attached to it, in the sense of having to become a Jew or having to wear a certain thing. We are

going to see that the gospel informs all cultures everywhere in how they, in their uniqueness as a culture, as a people, uniquely in holiness follow the Lord by the Spirit under His Word. So the big picture of the letter is you do not have to become a Jew to be a Christian, but you do need to stop acting like a pagan.

## **Troubled Gentiles**

Let's walk through what this letter looks like. First of all, think about the situation that brought this letter to bear. Here is the situation that necessitated this letter. Verse 24 says, "Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us (from the church in Jerusalem, Jews coming from Jerusalem) and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions..." Here is what is happening. Some people have left Jerusalem and they are going down to these churches that have both Jews and Gentiles, and soon they will probably go to all of the Gentile churches, to remind them of those other things that they need to do in order to follow Jesus. The letter says these people have troubled them, they have unsettled their minds, and they are causing controversy. Imagine you are a Gentile and you have been told Christ died for you, He rose again for you, and if you have faith in Him, you will be forgiven of your sins and are brought into the family of God. You believe those things and now you assume you are in the family of God. Then all the sudden people have come from Jerusalem — which, by the way, you can see in your Old Testament is pretty important — and they say...Yes Jesus, that is good, but there is a lot of other stuff that come with Jesus. Now we need to tell you about the other things.

So that is the situation. We know that salvation is by faith alone, through Christ alone, apart from works, but the Judaizers believed that in order to become a Christian you had to receive the covenant mark and you had to obey the Mosaic Law, the ceremonial laws, all of those 613 commandments. You had to do all those things along with Jesus if you wanted to be the people of God. So this debate happens in chapter 15 and they had to debate whether the Gentiles had to become Jews. Do they have to get circumcised? Do they have to keep the law? And Peter stood up and said we can't even keep the law, so why are we having them keep

the law? We came to Jesus because we can't keep the law, so why should we make them obey the law if we did not even obey it ourselves? And so they settle that faith is through Christ alone. Now they are going to pen this letter because there is a lot of controversy in the church. People are being unsettled in their minds, they are being troubled, because they are being told you have to obey all of this other stuff.

### **Christianity AD 45: A Culture of Judaism**

I want to try to get in the shoes of the people before we unpack the letter. I want you to imagine that it is AD 45 and we just had Vacation Bible School. Vacation Bible School had a cool theme — it was, *Jesus Plus 613 Other Things*. That was the VBS theme. It was a good one, and all the kids came. Now, you are a Gentile. You are bringing your Gentile kids into this church that you have been told is all about Jesus, and VBS is put on by the Jewish believers to remind you it is Jesus plus a few other things, like 613 things that all come from the Old Testament laws. Your kids come home talking about the different small groups they had, the different classes they had, and they tell you about the one called Diet 101. They say, "Hey Mom, did you know that we can eat cows, but not pigs?" "Dad, sorry, but the grill out back — no more barbecuing on that because we can't eat pig anymore! I know you love shrimp, but you know we can't eat that. We can eat goat, but not shrimp." The kids come home with charts of what they can eat and what they cannot eat, what is clean food and what is unclean food. Maybe your girls come home and say, "Hey Mom, did you know I learned in Clothing 101 that we cannot wear polyester anymore. And this blended cotton, we need to get rid of it because we can only use one type of yarn or thread in all of our clothing. So we are going to have to dress differently." "Dad, you know Saturday, the day we love to go out, and how you love selling hot dogs at the game? You can't do anymore. We have to stay home because it is called the Sabbath. We need to keep that. We can't do anything on the Sabbath." Your kids just brought home the literature telling you how you need to do your family now. "Oh, and by the way Mom and Dad, there is a whole bunch of festivals every few months and we are all going to have to get together to celebrate them. There is Passover, there is Feast of Booths, all these different ones, and it is going

to be great! They actually sent a handbook for you to look through. It has the 613 things that we need to do as a family now." Can you imagine picking your kid up from First Fruits Farm after VBS and that is the news you got? You would be like, "I thought it was Jesus?" "Yes, it is — but it is Jesus plus around 613 other things that you also need to do. And if you do not know those laws, you can't be in the family of God."

See, Christianity came with a culture of Judaism then. You had to look a certain way, dress a certain way, eat a certain way, and be off work a certain time. You had to do these certain things because that is what it looked like to be the people of God. Imagine Precept Bible study in AD 45! It is all about how to cook like Sarah..."Don't cook like you the pagan women!" Men's Bible studies? They have it good..."Hardin men, this week we are talking about if your sister-in-law dies, then you have to take her as a wife and have a baby by her. It is going to be good!" We would be feeling a little awkward, feeling a little confused. There is a whole lot of things that now we are supposed to do that we did not grow up doing.

The Gentiles grew up going to the pagan temples and now they are being told they have to do all this other stuff but they didn't know how, so you can see they are being troubled of mind. They thought they came to Jesus by faith alone in Christ, but now they are unsettled in their spirit because they have just been told by a certain group in the church — Hey, it's great that you are part of our team now, but you have to switch jerseys. You have to become a Jew and look like us, act like us, and eat like us, because God loves Israel, not the nations and you are part of the nations. In that story, you are with Goliath and you want to be with David. So take off your Philistine clothes, and put on David attire. You want the slingshot not the sword. And here is how you need to change your whole life to be on the right side of all of these things. — That is what was happening in this church and the people are very confused. What is the truth? What should they do as Gentiles?

### **The Council's Letter to the Gentiles**

Then we see this letter that comes. You know the situation. There are unsettling and troubling things happening at church. If we had just gone

through VBS like that, we would be unsettled and troubled too, so you have to put yourselves in their shoes so that this becomes as really good news to us. Verse 22 says, "Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, (v. 23) with the following letter..." So we talked about the big debate in Jerusalem. They decided Gentiles don't have to become Jews anymore to be the people of God. That was good news. They do not have to have the covenant mark; they do not have to keep the Mosaic Law. Christ fulfilled those things. So, they are saying it seems good to us to go tell people that. It seems like good news for these Gentiles. So they gather four guys. They elect two leaders, along with Paul and Barnabas, and they are going to send them in person to deliver this letter. And we are going to see the reason that they do that is because the letter is going to probably be a little shocking to them.

- **Addressed as Brothers**

Let's go to the first part of the letter in verse 23, "The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings." So, this is the greeting, this is how the letter starts. I just want to pause because the start of the letter actually tells us so much about the content of the letter. It says it is from the brothers to who? Not just to the Gentiles, not just to these people in these other places (Syria, Cilicia, and these different areas); it is *from* the brothers *to* the brothers, to the brothers who are Gentiles in Antioch. Do you see what the letter does at the very beginning? It calls the Gentiles brothers. So if any Gentile is listening — *Ok, How do I come into the family of God? Do I have to convert? Do I have to become a Jew? Do I have to take all your practices? What clothing do I need to put on? What dietary restrictions do I need to abide by?* — And right off the onset of the letter, it says from the brothers to the brothers of the Gentiles. In other words, you do not have to do anything to become a brother to get into the family. You already belong in the family because of your faith in Christ. The brothers are writing to the brothers. They are already brothers. They are



brothers because of their faith in Jesus, not because of something they must do or will do. What that means for us, if you are a Gentile, if you cannot trace your family tree back to Abraham, physically, it means you are still part of the family of God. You are not a second rate citizen. You are a brother, you are a sister; you are in the family of God by faith in Christ, not by what you do or how you act or behave. You are in the family of God by faith in Christ.

### **The Authenticity of Paul and Barnabas**

So, we see it is from the brothers to the brothers. In verse 24, the letter is saying we see the situation, there are unsettled mind, and it says we didn't give those guys instructions; they went on their own. Then, verses 25–26 say, "...it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord" (Again, the letter is referencing that debate that happened and all those in Jerusalem came to one accord and agreed that this is the pronouncement to the Gentiles) "to choose men and send them with our beloved Paul and Barnabas, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Now I just want to stop there for a moment and ask a question. Why did Luke include that little statement? Why didn't he just say they chose two men to go with Barnabas and Paul, and now they came to you? Why does he mention that Barnabas and Paul risked their lives for the sake of the name of Jesus Christ? Why does he add that? I think the reason he adds that is because he wants to add authenticity to the life of Paul and Barnabas. In other words, Paul and Barnabas are like the church planters. They are the ones that have gone and told these Gentiles the good news that they can come into the family of God through faith in Jesus. But how do we know Paul and Barnabas aren't doing this for their own glory, their own selfish gain? What if this is a scam? What if this is untrue? What if they are just trying to make money off this deal? How can we really trust Barnabas and Saul? That is why Luke interjects this little line that says that they have risked their very lives for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of Jesus. They were willing to die for the message they gave to you! So they are not trying to promote self because they were willing to lose self, literally. They were willing to die to give them the good news of Jesus. I

think Luke wants to make sure that these Gentiles know that Paul and Barnabas have their best interest at heart. They really care about them. They were willing to give their lives that they would hear the good news of Jesus.

It has been really heartbreaking to watch the news the last week or so and to hear that missionaries were kidnapped in Haiti, a country that we have sent people to over the years. That we have seen missionaries go to that place, and now to see how dangerous it has become in Haiti, to hear the news and to not know how it is going to end. It is still uncertain what is going to happen, and so I have been trying to follow the story, trying to pray for these men, women, and kids who are kidnapped. There is a ransom that is being demanded. I was listening to *The World and Everything In It* podcast, a news podcast I listen to every morning and I highly recommend it to you. I was listening to the podcast and they were interviewing a guy on the ground in Haiti. He has been there for twenty years. He is a medical missionary and he has a hospital, an orphanage, and a school. There is a lot of work that he and his team have done over the years, and had a great ministry, but for the last several years, it has been really hard and dangerous. So they are interviewing this man about the situation and he first said, "It is my recommendation that no short term mission trips sent from America come to Haiti right now because it is absolutely dangerous." In fact, a year ago his wife got beaten to within an inch of her life, and after she recovered, he sent her home because he did not feel it was safe for her to remain in Haiti. He said, "Most of my colleagues have gone, most people that I know have gone, most of the mission organizations that I know about have gone home because it is just so dangerous in Haiti right now." Of course the interviewer said, "Well, why are you still there?" It was a pretty obvious question. If everybody has left and you think it is dangerous, you think you could die any moment, then why are you still there after everything we have just heard and everything we know about the country right now? And without hesitation, without taking a breath, he said, "Because this is where God called me, and these people need Jesus." I do not know this guy, I do not know of his beliefs, I do not know his background, but just that little snippet of his life that I saw — it verified his authenticity for being there. He is not there for glamour,

he is not there to make money, he is not there to somehow manipulate the situation. No, he is there because he loves Jesus and he wants people to come to know Jesus. How do we know that? Because he is there at the risk of his life.

How do we know Paul and Barnabas are legitimate? They are willing to risk their lives for these things. This reminds us as a congregation living in America where things are semi-safe, that the gospel is often risky. It often costs us comfort, costs us things, costs us in job promotions, it might cost us popularity, but it can even cost us our lives sometimes. The letter says hey, these guys are willing to risk everything for the sake of the gospel. So listen to them when they come to you because they are speaking to you out of their hearts because they love you. They risk their lives for the very things this letter says.

### **The Accompaniment of Judas and Silas**

Then, verse 27 says, "We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth." So not only are Paul and Barnabas there, who risked their lives, who love you, Gentiles — they are there, they are bringing this letter — but also Judas and Silas are there. Why? So they can tell them the same things the letter said by word of mouth. In other words, why did they send these other two guys? Because they were there at the debate and they heard all of the arguments. They are coming along with the letter so that when the letter is read and people say hold up, I do not think Peter is agreeing with this. I do not think Peter would agree that Gentiles do not have to become Jews. I think he would agree that they need to keep the law. That is a pretty Old Testament thing. I do not think Peter is down with that. Then Judas and Silas can stand up and say no, we were there. We verify Peter agreed to this. The other leaders in Jerusalem agreed to this. We can tell you their arguments, we can tell you their points.

So the reason men are accompanying a letter is that the words are going to seem so strange to the people receiving them. That is why the grader had to email me and say this seems like it is not written to Dr. Weir. Because it wasn't. The words were crazy. You do not say that to a

professor! He knew that, I knew that, and I had to explain what happened. So the same thing is going to happen here — Whoa, whoa, whoa, no, no the gospel is Jesus plus like a whole lot of other things. There is going to be revolt against this letter, so the men accompanying it, men who gave their life for it, men who were there at the debate so they could, by their words, affirm yes it is actually true that Gentiles do not have to become Jews to be Christians. That Christianity actually has no clothing. It doesn't come with a set of, you have to dress a certain way and eat a certain way. No, the gospel can go into every culture and inform those cultures how they must live in relation to Christ. So there is going to be some questions asked. These guys are there to answer the questions and to make sure it is verified.

### **The Agreement of the Holy Spirit**

And then notice what it says in verse 28, "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..." They are about to say the point of the letter. They about to get to the meat of it, but I just want you to notice the authority that they are basing their decision on. The letter is saying it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to make these declarations. So I want to ask the obvious question. How do we know that the Holy Spirit actually agreed to this? I mean, couldn't they just make it up? Couldn't they just say hey, the Holy Spirit agreed, and we agreed, and everything is great? In other words, does this set a dangerous precedent? Because I think we find even in our own culture we have had mainline denominations who will get together and say, hey, the Holy Spirit agreed and we agreed, that now some of those things that the Bible once condemned now they are ok. We are going to be an affirming church; we are going to change some things because the Holy Spirit has evolved our thinking. So, is it just that a people got together, and because of their unity, the Holy Spirit said ok I will agree to it? Is it just when a church is unified in a vote that the Holy Spirit is in that? Because if that is true, then you can go in a lot of different directions that the Holy Spirit may or may not be into. So my question is how do we know this seemed good to the Holy Spirit? How could they say that, and how could they identify that?

Well, I want to call your attention to the last two weeks, the last two sermons that we have been walking through Acts Chapter 15. And I want to remind you how the debate went. Do you remember how the apostles and how the leaders debated? They debated using two things: the works of God and the Word of God. Those two things are how they reached their conclusion. Paul and Barnabas said hey, we have seen it, we have seen the Gentiles come to faith, we have seen the Holy Spirit poured out on them. We have seen God do miraculous things we have seen God's work. We can testify to those things. Peter would say yep, I saw it too. They could testify that God is working in this way. The Gentiles are coming to faith even though they do not have to be Jews.

But also, it wasn't just the Word of God. Do you remember that debate? They were constantly calling Scripture to bear — This work is just what Joel said. This work is just what the prophet said. Here is what the prophet said, and now it is coming true — In other words, they are arguing based on the works of God and the Word of God, so when they come to a conclusion on the work of God and the Word of God, they can say this is agreeable to the Spirit. How do we know? Because the Word of God confirms it. In other words, we can't just say that we all got together and made an agreement so it must be that the Holy Spirit is in it. Because that can lead us to go in a lot of different directions.

Here is what we do know. The Holy Spirit is never going to agree to something that the Word of God disagrees with. It is never going to happen. Why is that? Because the Spirit of God wrote the Word of God. The Spirit knows what is in there. The Holy Spirit, through men, penned the scriptures. So the Holy Spirit is never going to disagree with what the Bible affirms or what the Bible denies. So if you want to know you are in Holy Spirit land, you better be in Bible land, because those two things go together. They are not just saying hey, we decided this and the Holy Spirit is backing us up because I got this fuzzy feeling and it just feels right, and it just seems good, and the Holy Spirit probably agrees with this. No, they use the work of God, and the Word of God to back up the Spirit's endorsement on this new truth. Gentiles do not have to become Jews to be the people of God.

So what is their recommendation? What is the meat of the letter? What are they trying to say? That the Holy Spirit and they agreed on. Well here is what it is, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us (v. 28) to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements..." Now, that is a little sentence, so we have to think to the context. We have to think about what is going on to really understand the gravity there. What is this "no greater burden?" We know from the debate the greater burden is the Gentiles have to get the covenant mark and keep the law, and there is a whole bunch of them. There are 613 of them. That is a lot of new things they must do. That is a lot of burden, and the Holy Spirit has agreed to let the apostles and the church know that these burdens of the Mosaic Law do not apply to these Gentiles who come into faith, because the Jews never kept them anyway! And now both Jew and Gentile come into the Kingdom the same way, not through the law, but through Jesus Christ. So, it is the beauty of — there is no greater burden — there is no law that you have to find the Old Testament, find all those laws that apply to every single aspect of your life, and follow those to the T to be part of the people of God. That is the good news. There is no greater burden laid upon you, but there are some requirements, which we see in verse 29.

### **The Requirements for Wellbeing**

Verse 29 says, "...that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell." That is the letter. Now we talked about a lot of what this meant last week, so I am not going to go into great detail but I just want you to notice in summary what this letter is telling these Gentiles. If you are a Gentile you don't have to become a Jew to be a Christian, but you do need to stop acting like a pagan. Both of those are true. That is what these four requirements are about. They didn't have to obey the law anymore, but there were some things that they needed to stop doing. They need to stop eating meat sacrificed to idols. They needed to stop eating things with blood, and things that are strangled now. Why is that? Because to a Jew, those things are unthinkable. So if you are going to come into a church with Jews and Gentiles, if you are doing those things you are never going

to have fellowship. They need to stop doing those things, because it really, really offends their Jewish brothers and sisters. They didn't have to become a Jew, but they needed to stop doing some of the things that really, really offends them. And there were some things that offended not only the Jews but also are very offensive to God. That is sexual immorality. Of course these Gentiles would have grown up in a culture that celebrates sexual immorality. They would have seen or even participated in things that celebrate all sorts of things that the Bible would condemn. It was a culture much like the culture we find ourselves in. So, there were some things that were offending their brothers, and some things that was offending God that they needed to abstain from. Following Christ means some things are going to change.

So how do we apply that to our lives as Americans in 2021? How does this apply to us? I think, for one, it means that Christianity has no clothing. Christianity has no culture. And what I mean by that is Christianity does not mean that we become like the Jews and we keep all the rules and all the laws that make us a distinct people. That was true for Israel because they needed to be a distinct people to bring about a Messiah. That was the point of the laws. Now Jesus has come so we don't have to go back to those laws. The laws served their purpose. Jesus came. Now we are in Him. As American believers, we do not have to practice all of those Old Testament laws because we are now in Christ. Those laws have been fulfilled.

But on the flipside, we live in a culture that is not always godly, so we have to figure out what things in our culture is for our wellbeing. Notice the verse says that these are good for your wellbeing, not for your salvation but for your wellbeing. This is just good for you — you need to abstain from these things because it is a practice of paganism. It is a practice of your culture that is void of God. You need to keep yourself from these things for your own good. So we, as Christians, have to figure out what those things are in our culture that we need to abstain from. What are things in our culture that we do not need to participate in because they offend our neighbor, and they might offend God. So when we think about the rubrics, love God and love people, what are those things we do not

need to do because it is not loving God, it is not loving people? It is not being holy like God is holy.

### **Walk with the Spirit**

Here is what I want to point out. Not having to obey the Mosaic Law seems easier, right? There are 613 laws. There are a lot of them. They speak to every single aspect of your life. Everything about your life is mapped out and there is a rule for it. You know exactly what to do in every situation you could ever find yourself in. So in one sense, that seems a burden, like that is really hard and I am glad we do not have to obey all of those laws. But in one sense, it makes life harder because we, as Christians, do not have rules that address every single aspect of our life. So when you go to your closet to pick out something to wear, you do not have specific rules that address every single part of your clothing. When you sit down for a meal, you do not have rules that specifically layout exactly what you can and cannot eat. There is some freedom that we have as believers, as Gentiles living in our current culture, so it seems like that is a lot better. But sometimes that is actually harder because we can't just look at a rule and obey. No, what we have to do is we actually have to walk with the Holy Spirit. Our faith is not just give me a bunch of rules and I will follow them. No, it is we have the Holy Spirit living inside of us and we have the Word of God, that He penned, that points us to Jesus Christ. The Word of God and the Spirit of God is how we make the decisions in our lives. It is a little bit messier. There are principles that govern us, and yes, the New Testament is filled with don't do this, and do this; we have some clear things that we should and shouldn't do, but it is not as neatly spelled out in every single aspect of our life like it was for Israel. We have a little bit more freedom, which brings a lot more opportunity for either a life lived for the glory of God, or life lived for the glory of ourselves.

We can't just say give me the rule and I follow it. No, follow the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of flesh. It is cultivate those fruits of the Spirit like peace, joy, love, kindness, self-control, and gentleness. It is how do we cultivate those character issues, those heart issues? So when we come to a situation that we do not have an exact law that addresses it, we know what to do because we know the mind of the Spirit. We know Christ,



we know God, why? Because we have our nose in the scriptures and we are in prayer, walking with the Spirit, so He is guiding our every step. In one sense, seems really easy not to have to follow the law, but on another sense it is actually a little bit harder. Because you have to grow, you have to mature, you have to actually walk in the Spirit to not gratify the desires of your flesh.

So I want to ask one last question. What about the Old Testament? Does this letter tell all these Gentiles to just cut it out, leave it alone, and now just read the New Testament because that is the only thing relevant to them? I think this next paragraph is going to answer that question for us with a resounding no. Verses 30–31 say, “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.” The Gentile believers are rejoicing! This is encouragement. They didn’t have to become Jews anymore. They can be their own people. They can be citizens of Cilicia and dress like Cilicians. They can be in their own culture and still follow the Lord because the goal was not that they would all be one people that share the same culture. The goal was that there would be people from every tribe, every tongue, and every nation worshipping the Lamb, that every culture be invaded by Christ, to follow Christ in their unique way. That is the good news of the letter and the Gentiles are getting that — I can still be a Roman and not do the pagan stuff that Romans do, but I can be a Roman who follows Jesus, and it is going to look a little bit different. — So there is encouragement that Gentiles are not second-rate citizens, they are full members of the people of God. There is one new man in Christ as Paul argues in Ephesians Chapter 2.

### **The Old Testament in Light of the New Testament**

Notice what Paul does in verses 32–35, “And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them. But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, (Listen to what they did) preaching and teaching the Word of the Lord with many others also.” Notice what Paul and Barnabas

do. This letter just came out telling them that they don't have to be a Jew to be a Christian and they don't have to abide by all of the Mosaic Law, so we could easily conclude just forgetting the Old Testament. But what does Paul do? He remains in Antioch in that church filled with Gentiles, and preaches and teaches the Word of God to them. Now, I have to ask the question. What is the Word of God in this moment in the story line of Scripture? Is he preaching Romans? Is he preaching Ephesians? Preaching Galatians? Is he doing first Timothy? No. He hasn't met him yet, hasn't been to Rome yet. None of the New Testament is written at this point. So what is Paul preaching and teaching? He is preaching and teaching the Old Testament to Gentiles.

Hold on! I thought Gentiles did not have to obey the laws of the Old Testament? They do not have to obey all the laws in the Old Testament, but the Old Testament still applies to the Gentiles. Why? Because it is the grand story of God. It is God using one people to bring one man, Jesus Christ, as a Redeemer for all peoples everywhere. And guess what? If you read your Old Testament correctly, it is all about Jesus. We do not disconnect the Old Testament and New Testament; we see them as one seamless story. When you have an Old Testament command, you interpret it in the light of the gospel. This is what that law meant for those people but it was pointing to a people that would bring about Jesus. Now that we have Jesus, we do not have to obey this specific law, perhaps, but we see the holiness of God, and the holiness of His people. And we do need to be a holy people set apart for God. We do not say that we are no longer image bearers of God because that was Genesis 1 and 2 stuff. No! Genesis 1 and 2 tells us true things about who we are and who God is. The Old Testament is profitable, it is beneficial for our lives and our souls because it is God's Word to us, but we have to interpret it properly.

So, this letter does not mean we forget the Old Testament or that we don't read it. We read the Old Testament in light of the New Testament. We read Genesis in light of the cross. And I find that Abraham is actually my granddad too, not because I am an ethnic Jew, but because I have faith in Jesus, and in faith in Jesus, I am part of the Old Testament story. I am a

part of the Old Testament people, not by what I wear, not by what I eat, but by who my faith is in, in the Lord Jesus Christ.

See, the truth of this story is as Gentiles we do not have to become Jews to be Christians, but we do need to stop acting like pagans. So what do we do? We go into our culture and we think — what in our culture are things that we need to avoid for our own wellbeing? Because as Christians living in this culture, what does it uniquely look like to follow the Lord Jesus? It does not mean being holy like the Israelites sought holiness, it means being holy in Christ and obeying the commands of Christ.