

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(May 3, 2020)

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Sermon manuscript

The Jerusalem Rules

(Acts 15)

Study #3

Sermon Series: Jesus' Liberating NEW!

(the powerful uniquenesses to the way of Jesus)

Introduction: A united *ekklesia*...

We pay attention to everything Jesus taught. Whatever teachings of Jesus are recorded in the New Testament, it's all good stuff, practical, wise, true.

And we pay attention to what Jesus prayed. His prayers were always perfectly aligned with the Father's will. We learn how to pray by listening to Jesus' prayers.

When we hear Him praying prayers for us, we are even more attentive. His prayers for us reveal His deepest desires for us.

So, when we find Jesus praying to His Father for us on His last night on earth, we are completely dialed in.

The Apostle John was there listening. This prayer so impacted him that he remembered and wrote it down for his friends and for us.

Here is what Jesus prayed for us. ***[John 17:20] I do not ask on behalf of these alone*** (the disciples who were with Him on that last night), ***but for those also who believe in Me through their word*** (that's us); ***[21] that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me.***

Jesus prayed for unity between us who follow Him. Unity is important to Jesus.

Yes, of course, we'll be VERY different from each other in many, many ways. But He wants us to pursue unity because our unity shouts that the Jesus who unifies us was sent by the Father.

That's stunning. Among the greatest witnesses to the truth of Jesus is our unity.

Unity is an essential adornment of Jesus' *ekklesia*. It has been throughout the ages and that unity is worth fighting for.

Today, we'll see the early church fighting - and then fighting for unity, a powerful image for this needy moment in our world.

Review last two messages...

Over the past couple of weeks, you and I have seen clearly that Jesus did not come to establish Judaism 2.0. He came to do something much more radical.

His mission was to bring a new commandment, a new covenant, and a new community that would create a new movement.

We've seen in the first two messages of this short series just how *new* Jesus' NEW really was and how global was its focus.

Today, we'll explore another aspect of Jesus' NEW, specifically, the way His NEW impacts our relationship with the OLD that God established with Moses and the Jews. And we'll see how getting that relationship with Moses' OLD impacts our unity.

What I'm presenting today is actually Part 1 of a 2- part message, which will continue next Sunday.

Part 1 will conclude with us looking at one of the most pivotal moments in the history of the church. That's not an exaggeration. No hyperbole.

It may be that what we'll see today was THE pivotal moment out of the last two thousand years for Jesus' *ekklesia*.

Bear with me for a couple of minutes as I string together some of the stories that led up to that moment.

Following the death of Stephen by stoning, the followers of Jesus - who all just happened to still be in Jerusalem - were "*scattered*". (Acts 8:1)

Luke tells us that those who were scattered went out telling everybody about Jesus.

Prelude to a "Come to Jesus" Moment (Acts 8-14)

Gospel Progress Prompted by Persecution (Acts 8-9)

By Philip (Acts 8)

One of those who was scattered from Jerusalem was Philip, known as Philip the Evangelist.¹ He spread the Gospel in Samaria, winning a magician named Simon to Christ.

He was then used by God to win an Ethiopian to faith who was just leaving Jerusalem after having worshiped at the temple.²

The gospel was also spread by Simon Peter who had also left the persecuting heat of Jerusalem.

By Peter (Acts 9-11)

He healed a lame man named Aeneas in the city of Lydda, prompting many people to believe in Jesus.

¹ He was one of the seven table-servers from Acts 6, not the Apostle Philip.

² In addition, there was active persecution by Herod the king (Agrippa I) who killed the Apostle James and imprisoned Peter (who was miraculously released). (Acts 12)

In that same region, he raised a woman named Tabitha (or Dorcas) from the dead in the nearby city of Joppa. Not surprisingly, many people believed in Jesus in Joppa after this powerful miracle.³

And, then, as we saw last Sunday, Peter was used by God to bring the Roman centurion, Cornelius, along with his family and friends, to faith in Christ, marking the first time that a group of Gentiles joined Jesus' *ekklesia*.⁴ (Acts 10-11)

There was a lot of outreach going on following Stephen's death.

If we back up a bit in the book of Acts, we'll see more outreach, some of it linked to an unlikely target of evangelism.

God targeted Saul of Tarsus for conversion, the same man who had applauded the stoning of Stephen and who had started the persecution of the church in the first place.

Gospel Progress Prompted by a Former Persecutor (Acts 9, 13-14)

Saul of Tarsus is converted to Jesus by Jesus (Acts 9)

Saul was on his way to the city of Damascus (north of Israel) to arrest any followers of Jesus he could find. That mission was arrested just outside the city gates by none other than Jesus.

Saul saw a blinding light and heard a voice from heaven, asking, **[Acts 9:9] "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"**

This was how Saul learned that by opposing Jesus he was actually opposing God and His plans.

Seeing that he had leaned his ladder against the wrong wall, he did the logical thing and climbed down, thoroughly converted.

³ Perhaps Simon the tanner, the man with whom Peter stayed in Joppa, was won to faith thanks to Peter's having raised Tabitha from the dead...?

⁴ After some convincing, those in Jerusalem rejoiced with Peter about the Gentiles' salvation and stopped bugging him about his having eaten with them. (See Acts 11)

Saul of Tarsus became, instantly, just as much a sold-out, on fire, evangelist FOR Jesus as he had been an opponent OF Jesus.

And, except for the little detail in his background of killing Christians - a detail that God seemed very willing to overlook - he was a very well-educated, culturally eclectic powerhouse, perfectly suited to be Jesus' apostle to the Gentile world.

THIS - reaching the whole world, not just the Jews! - was so heavy on God's heart that He recruited / drafted the uniquely gifted Saul of Tarsus to lead that charge and to get 'er done. (See Acts 9:15)

Immediately after coming to faith, Saul began preaching in Damascus. He was opposed and threatened by those who only days earlier had been his partners in Christian-bashing and was rescued by the Christians he had come to Damascus to arrest.

He made his way to Jerusalem where he was welcomed by the *ekklesia* there, thanks to a really good guy named Barnabas.

Saul then went away to Arabia for preparation for a lifetime's worth of serving Jesus and was eventually recruited by Barnabas for a year's worth of teaching in the thriving, multi-ethnic church at Antioch.

While in Antioch, Saul and Barnabas were commissioned by the church and by the Holy Spirit to travel to Asia Minor (the region of Galatia) to tell people who had never heard the Good News about Jesus.

Saul's and Barnabas' big trip (Acts 13-14)

Today, we refer to that barnstorming tour through Asia Minor as the First Missionary Journey.

Paul (formerly called Saul) and Barnabas made extended stops in the cities of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium (where they were run out of town), Lystra (where Paul was stoned nearly to death), and Derbe.

In each place they shared the Gospel and they saw God perform miracles that validated the message.

And, they led lots of people to faith in Jesus - both Jews and Gentiles - establishing thriving *ekklesias* (i.e. - communities of faith; churches) in each city.⁵

Shortly after they returned to their sending church in Antioch, word of trouble reach the church in Antioch. The trouble came from Judea, from Jerusalem.

Jesus' Ekklesia's First Business Meeting

A Toxic New Teaching from Jerusalem (vv. 1-4)

Trouble comes to Antioch (v. 1)

[1] Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

Great - until this point, the churches of Judea had sent out no missionaries to non-Jewish lands.

But now Jews from Judea are going to non-Jewish lands, but not to spread the liberating NEW of Jesus, but to undermine the efforts of Paul and Barnabas!

This brand-new teaching would have been completely unsettling to the Gentiles in the church.

Partly, of course, it would have been troubling because of the physical pain involved in a mid-life first-century surgery.⁶

More troubling, though, was that if circumcision, a Jewish rite, was required of non-Jews, then the Jesus Way really was nothing more than Judaism 2.0.

⁵ After going back to each of the cities where they had planted churches, they appointed elders and headed back to their home church of Antioch for much much-needed and well-deserved R&R.

⁶ To clarify, the focus of the discussion of circumcision was male circumcision. The Bible never mentions, encourages, or condones so-called *female circumcision*.

The full message of these men from Judea was, *“If you want to be a Christ-follower, you have to be a Moses-follower. If you want to be a Christian, you’ve got to be a Jew.”*

The men who had brought this teaching came from Judea, at that time the center of the Jesus movement. So, there was about them a measure of *gravitas*.

But the Antioch church wasn’t made up of shrinking violet pushovers. Paul and Barnabas had faced assassination attempts in Iconium and rock-throwing crowds in Lystra.

Antioch - a church with backbone (v. 2)

[2a] And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them...

When these guys from Judea began telling all the Gentile men in the church that they had to get circumcised and that everybody had to start following the Mosaic Law, Paul and Barnabas stood up and said, *“No way!”*

They had just returned from a trip to Galatia where they had seen Jews and Gentiles receive the gift of eternal life through faith alone in Christ alone.

Not once while in Galatia did they encourage the Gentiles to observe Jewish holidays, keep a kosher diet, or get circumcised. The Galatians believed in Jesus and were saved. Period. End of story.

The problem was that these guys from Judea had never seen faith in Jesus without the trappings of Judaism.

They thought the two were linked, that observing Moses’ Law was part and parcel of following Jesus.

The two sides being unable to come to agreement, they...

Off to Jerusalem (Acts 15:2-4)

[2b]...determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.

The folks in the church in Antioch knew what was at stake in the upcoming debate in Jerusalem. They knew that what was decided in Jerusalem about this issue would determine the shape Jesus’ church took.

So, when the delegation left for Jerusalem, they left with the church’s complete blessing.⁷

Pretty soon after their arrival it was time to get down to business. The first-ever meeting of the overall leadership of the church was going to decide on a make-or-break issue: *“What do we do with these Gentiles who are coming to faith in Jesus?”*

Luke first records the words of the men who had brought the troubling message to Antioch.

The Anti-Toxin: The GRACE of Accommodation! (vv. 5-29)

Meeting the issue head on (vv. 5-6)

[5] But certain ones of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed, stood up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them (i.e. - the Gentiles), and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.”

During Jesus’ three-year ministry, the Pharisees had been among His fiercest enemies. Now, praise God, some of the Pharisees have become Christians!

Sadly, just as they had while Jesus was around, these guys still gravitated toward a rules-based orientation to life with God.

⁷ The delegation from Antioch made their way south through Phoenicia and Samaria, reporting the details of Gentile conversion. All the believers in all the areas through which they passed were rejoicing. And when they got to Jerusalem, they kept telling the stories, the “God-sightings” of what the Lord had done among the Gentiles in Asia Minor. (v. 4)

They argued that if a Gentile wants to become a Christian, great. But he or she has got to play by the rules and become a Law of Moses-following Jew.⁸

They've staked their position, and **[6]...the apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter.**

Thus begins the Jerusalem Council.⁹

After **"much debate"** (Acts 15:7) by Pharisees, apostles, elders, the delegation from Antioch, and others, three others spoke.

First, the Apostle Peter.

The great debate rages (vv. 7-18)

The Apostle Peter affirms Gentile inclusion (vv. 7-11)

Peter's a bold guy. He reminded the Council that Jesus had given him the **"keys to the kingdom."** (Matthew 16:17-19) He was the one Jesus had tagged to welcome Gentiles into the *ekklesia*.¹⁰

⁸ Male circumcision had long been recognized by the Jews as a symbol of the covenant God made with His people. Dating back to the days of Abraham, circumcision set the Jews apart from non-Jews.

⁹ Throughout the last two thousand years, whenever the church has confronted major issues related to faith or practice, leaders have come together to study, to discuss, and to pray. Then, after their deliberations, they have issued statements along the lines, *"This is what we believe"* that clarify the issue at hand. It was not uncommon during the early centuries of the church's life to pull prominent leaders together from different areas and from influential churches to come to one mind on a pressing issue. Early on, these church councils helped define essential Christianity. The very first time this happened was in Jerusalem around AD 50. Acts 15 gives us the Minutes from that meeting.

¹⁰ The background to this was when Jesus had asked the apostles, *"Who do you say that I am?"* Peter answered, *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."* (See Matthew 16) Jesus replied, **[Matthew 16:17] "Blessed are you, Simon son of John...[18] I also say to you that you are Peter (i.e. - the rock) and upon this rock (i.e. - the "rock" of Peter's confession) I will build My church...[19] I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven."** With these **"keys"** Peter opened the door to the Jews on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). Then, God allowed Peter to

With respect to the issue at hand (what to do with Gentiles who believe in Jesus), Peter reminded everybody, **[8]...*"God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us."***

Peter still had that scene in Cornelius' home in Caesarea at the front of his mind. God made **"no distinction"** between Jews and Gentiles, **"cleansing their hearts [and ours] by faith"** (i.e. - NOT through obedience to the Law!).

Peter got bolder and accused the Pharisees of putting God **"to the test."** He asked them why they would place **[10]...*"upon the neck of the [Gentile] disciples a yoke* (a reference to the Law of Moses) *which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?"***

And he wrapped up his talk with this, **[11] *"But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."***

Next up to speak were Paul and Barnabas.

Paul and Barnabas tell "Galatia stories" (v. 12)

Remember that they are recently returned missionaries to Galatia. Their role in these proceedings was to tell stories, to relate "God sightings".

[12] *And all the multitude kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.*

They definitely would have told about the healthy churches and the many new converts and the changed lives they had left behind.

unlock the door for the Gentiles when he went to Cornelius' house (Acts 10) and saw the Holy Spirit poured out on non-Jewish people for the very first time.

The final speaker at the Jerusalem Council was James. Not the Apostle James, as he was killed earlier by Herod (Acts 12). This is James, the half-brother of Jesus.¹¹

Earlier, James had been skeptical. Jesus was just a big brother, nothing all that special.

But after the Lord's death and resurrection, James became convinced that his half-brother was indeed Savior and Lord and had become a key leader in the Jerusalem church.

James speaks from experience and Scripture (vv. 13-18)

After saying, "Amen!" to what Peter and Barnabas and Paul had said, James turned a corner and spoke directly from the Jewish Scriptures.

This is from the prophet Amos.

[15] "And with this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written,

**[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,**

**[17] IN ORDER THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD,
AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,'**

**[18] SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM OF
OLD."**

James says that the Gentile conversions to faith in the Messiah was what the Jewish prophets had been predicting for centuries.

The Gentiles had always been on God's heart. He had always loved them. But the point of the words James quotes is that Gentiles, AS GENTILES - not as Jewish converts - will be accepted into God's family.

¹¹ This is also the James who wrote the letter of James.

So, since God has given to both Gentiles and Jews eternal life in Jesus and since there are now Jews AND Gentiles in Jesus' ekklesia, it's clear that they've got to figure this thing out.

James suggests a way forward.

Of course, this all happened nearly two thousand years ago, but what we are about to read is one of those places where we see how timeless and relevant the Bible is.

And...

...if you are interested in how to protect and maintain unity in the church, what James says is for you.

...if we want to see our church be a great welcoming place to the guest and to the outsider who's just about ready to put a toe into the church for the first time or for the first time in a long time, what James has to say is for us.

First, he speaks to the Jews about how they are to treat Gentiles who are coming to faith in Jesus.

What to Do with the newcomers? (vv. 19-21)

#1: Don't be annoying (v. 19)

[19] "Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those¹² who are turning to God from among the Gentiles..."

Literally, James says, "Don't annoy the Gentiles."¹³

The Gentiles who were coming to faith in Christ were to not be annoyed by things like circumcision. The Jews were not to attach Jewish baggage to the Gospel and then expect Gentiles to carry it.¹⁴

¹² Or, "we should not make it difficult."

¹³ The word we translate "trouble" is the same word used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament that describes Delilah's treatment of Samson. She annoyed him.

¹⁴ After all, as Peter just pointed out, the Jews, themselves, hadn't done all that well obeying Moses...

That would be annoying.

In other words...

...don't demand that they assimilate to the way "we" do things.

...don't make it any more difficult to follow Jesus than you have to.

The Jews were the dominant culture in the first century church and that's what the Jews were to do. Don't be annoying.

Second, James has recommendations about how Gentiles, for their part, should behave as they connect to the church.

So. Here we go. This is where James is going to bring down the hammer on the Gentiles. Right?

#2: Don't be offensive (vv. 20-21)

[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."¹⁵

That is a very interesting - and a very short - list. But that's it.

No mention of the requirements of the Mosaic Law. Nothing about the Ten Commandments. Nothing about diet or special days.

Nothing is said about tithing or testing for leprosy or keeping kosher or circumcision.

James didn't hand pick these four guidelines from the 613 commandments in the Old Testament as the most important that the Gentiles needed to keep. They weren't the sins that the Gentiles had to avoid.

¹⁵ "**Strangled**" has in view a form of death for an animal in which the blood is not drained. When cooked, the blood is cooked with the animal and the blood is eaten. The last words "**and from blood**" speaks of eating or drinking blood, a practice condemned by the Jews because they understood that [**Leviticus 17:11**] **the life...is in the blood**. Eating/drinking blood was tantamount to eating life, which is sacred.

No. Each of these four guidelines spoke to behaviors that Gentiles commonly practiced that were particularly offensive to Jews.

If the Gentiles practiced these things, it would make fellowship with Jews really difficult.

"So," James is saying, "*Let's ask the Gentiles to refrain from these practices to keep the peace in Jesus' ekklesia.*"

James urges the newcomers (the Gentiles), "*Be careful to not offend the sensitivities of your Jewish brothers and sisters.*"¹⁶

And, to the Jews, he says, "*Don't make things harder than they need to be to follow Jesus. Don't annoy the Gentiles. Don't try to assimilate them. Make accommodations for them.*"

Thankfully, James' advice won the day.

The troubling teaching that went to Antioch was the COVID-19 of the early church. The Jerusalem Council's conclusion was the antidote.

They drafted a letter that was hand delivered by Paul and Barnabas and others to Antioch.

From there, it was distributed to all the *ekklesias*, bringing great joy to all who followed Jesus, both Jews and Gentiles.

And they lived happily ever after...

Well, not exactly. There will be lots more challenges for the church. But the Jerusalem Council accomplished what it set out to do.

¹⁶ As Darrell Bock says in his commentary on Acts, "*There is a cultural sensitivity [being urged] here where the issue is not establishing a fixed set of practices. The issue is establishing respect for the [culture] of others and making a commitment to not force one's own [culture] on others.*" Paul addressed this in 1 Corinthians 8-10, identifying many practices as not necessarily sinful in and of themselves, but wrong if they caused a (weaker) brother to stumble. See Romans 14 as well.

Let me tell you what I think are the two major things it did, for them, then, and for us, now.

Conclusion:

First, the Council made it clear that the Law of Moses is not binding on followers of Jesus. (repeat; put that on a loop)

None of it is. Not diet, not special days, not sacrificial system, not Ten Commandments.

That may sound radical, but it's actually a very major New Testament theme.

We'll explore this more next Sunday where my aim will be to show from the New Testament that what God gave in the Mosaic Law had an expiration date. It has expired and doesn't apply to us today.

Second, the Jerusalem Council's deliberations and conclusions make clear that unity in Jesus' *ekklesia* is worth fighting for.

At the beginning this morning, I pointed out that Jesus prayed for our unity. (John 17)

Unity - especially unity where there is great diversity - is rare and precious in our world.

The Lord knew that when we unite we will be announcing to the world that Jesus was sent to earth by the Father. Our unity shows outsiders that Jesus' NEW is a God thing.

- It's worth it to join Jesus in praying fervently and frequently for unity in our church and in any other church.

If Jesus prayed for unity in the church, surely we should, too.

- It's worth addressing disunity and working through challenges to unity.

When things get tough and it's tempting to separate...don't give up so easily. Don't throw in the towel on unity. Stay with it.

- It's worth forgetting about assimilation and embracing accommodation.

Let's not try so hard to get those who are different to assimilate to the way we do things around here. The point of life in the *ekklesia* is to accommodate as much diversity as possible under the Lordship of Jesus.

The more accommodation, the better; the more sacrifice for the other, the better; the more care taken to not offend, the better; the more love, the more those watching will say, *"That unity is supernatural. The Jesus Way must be true."*