

As Paul wound down his third missionary journey, he took up a collection from among the gentile churches to aid those who were in need in the Jerusalem church. He thought that if the Jewish Christians accepted the gift from the gentile Christians, they would then accept the Gentiles as brothers and sisters in Christ. He felt that he was the only one who could present this offering, because he was best qualified to tell the Jewish Christians about all that God did among the gentiles, and to persuade them to receive gentile believers into their fellowship, as equals, without placing upon them the burden of Jewish tradition.

Even though the Holy Spirit, in every city where he traveled, warned Paul that danger and hardship awaited him in Jerusalem, and believers, through the Spirit, warned him not to go, Paul could not be persuaded to not go. In our passage last time, Paul finally arrived in Jerusalem. In our passage this evening we read about his meeting with James and the Elders of the church in Jerusalem, and the events that set up the future of Paul's life and ministry. Please read Acts 21:17-26.

Upon arrival in Jerusalem, the church received Paul with great joy. Paul was well known, as were many of the things God accomplished through him. He was an Apostle, and the greatest known evangelist in the church of that day. They received Paul in the same way that we might receive Billy Graham if he visited our church. They were excited, and felt blessed to be able to fellowship with Paul, and get to know him. They were eager to hear, first hand, about all the wonders God accomplished through his ministry.

In Galatians 1:19, Paul says that when in Jerusalem, he met with James the Lord's brother. Most scholars accept the idea that the James mentioned in this account was the half brother of the Lord Jesus Christ, who became the senior pastor of the church in Jerusalem. Along with James, the other elders of the church met to hear all that Paul had to share about God's grace and the ministry given to him.

While Luke does not mention it in these verses, in Acts 24:17 Paul says, in his trial before Felix, that this is when he presented the offering from the Gentile churches. Apparently there was a great need within the church at this time, and God supplied that need through the generosity of the Gentile churches, and by Paul's hand. Think about the blessing to our brothers and sisters in Peru, when we send our love offerings in support of the Jack Goldfarb Christian School. Consider what a blessing it would be to us, if our economy collapsed, and we struggled to get by, and then Pastor Mario visited us, and he brought us an offering that he collected from the churches in Peru to help us in our time of need.

The biblical model is for churches to support missions and ministry wherever there is a need. We give out of the abundance of what God gives us. We sacrifice, when necessary, in order to meet the needs of brothers and sisters in Christ, because we love them in the Lord.

When the church in Jerusalem heard about everything God did among the gentiles, and they received the love gift from them, they glorified God. They could see that all of this was at God's hand. They gave Him thanks. They worshiped and celebrated God's goodness together.

Implied, but not spelled out in these verses, is the fact that while Paul shared his testimony, his emphasis fell upon how the gospel went out from the Jews to the Gentiles. His emphasis was not on the offering. The offering was just a tangible reminder to the Jews why they should accept the gentiles.

At this point, in verses 20 and 21, we see a shift in the dialogue when they said to Paul. "You see brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the

law. They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs.”

With these verses Luke informs us of the problem that will forever change Paul’s life and ministry. It is why the people, through the Holy Spirit warned Paul not to go to Jerusalem. This is why it was dangerous for Paul to carry the offering. While the church leaders received the gift with joy, and glorified God over the salvation of the gentiles, there were many folks in the pew who were suspicious of Paul, and resented the things that they heard he taught.

Notice that this opposition found its base among the people in the church. Thousands of Jewish believers opposed Paul. They were Jews first, and Christians later. The Gentiles were Christians first, and not Jews at all. The Jewish Christians were zealous for the law, and the customs of the Jews. Their complaint was not that Paul taught that the Gentiles did not have to obey the laws and customs, but that Paul taught the Jews these things. The question we have to ask ourselves is, “Were they right about Paul?” Did he teach that the Jews did not have to observe the laws and traditions of Jewish faith in order to be saved?

We remember that Paul was a Jew, and a trained Pharisee. He too was zealous for the law, especially before his conversion. He longed to celebrate the Passover, but when he could not get there on time, he set his sights on Pentecost. He circumcised Timothy before they departed to Macedonia. In every new town, if there was a synagogue, he preached first to the Jews. We see in this passage that he was willing to comply with the Jewish customs to try to win the hearts of the people. But, we need only read one of Paul’s letters to understand that the Jewish concern was well founded. Paul did not teach the Jews to not obey the law, but he did teach that observing the law could not save anybody.

We are saved by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ, and Him alone, not by works, not by obeying the law, not by observing traditions, or customs. There is only one gospel. The gospel of salvation for the Jews is the same as the gospel of salvation for the Gentiles. The truth of God for one is the truth of God for all.

The problem in the Jewish mind was their understanding of being the decedents of Abraham, and thus, God’s chosen people. They were the recipients of the Law, and the word of God. They based their customs on obedience to the law, in order to please God. So was there value in those traditions and customs for the Jewish people? Absolutely. Is there value for the Christian today to live according to the Ten Commandments and the principles of God’s word from the Old Testament, as well as the New? Absolutely. But, observing these things does not save us. We are saved by God’s grace when we repent of our sins and trust Jesus Christ into our hearts as Savior and Lord.

Traditions and customs become useful only when they facilitate worship, and help us to grow and mature in our relationship with the Lord. Paul would never teach that the Law had no value. Paul, I am sure, drew upon the teachings of his Jewish faith in the expression of his relationship to the Lord. Today, there are many traditions within one church that may not seem right to people in another church, or they may be misinterpreted in some way.

Recently a man from our church called me, upset, because when he visited another local church, the preacher said from the pulpit that those people over there at Hickory Hammock Baptist Church teach that you cannot be saved unless you go through their six week training class.

What? Where would he get such an idea? A person needs only to listen to any sermon preached by Brother Carl, or me, to know that we would never say anything like that. Salvation

is all about having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. What I believe that pastor referred to, and misunderstood, was our Discovery Class, which I teach, to seekers and new members. That class is a tradition in our church that is not shared in many other churches. The Discovery Class is a six-week study to help people coming into the church to find out what we believe, why we believe it, and orient people as to how we conduct the business of the church. We go over how to be saved in that class, because church membership is meaningless without a relationship with Jesus Christ, and Christians need to be able to share their faith with others, but most of the people who come through the class are already brothers and sisters in Christ. There are many understandings of various doctrines of the bible that divide the church into denominations, and factions. People deserve to know what we believe, and teach, before they make a commitment to this body of believers. It also helps me to determine a person's gifts, and level of spiritual maturity, so that we can help them assimilate into the ministries of the church, but it has nothing to do with whether or not a person is saved.

The traditions and customs of our church are precious to our members, but they may seem strange to people coming into the church from other areas. I am often asked about the way I baptize. The more traditional way is to lay a person backwards under the water. I place my hand upon a person's head as they bend down to go under the water. We take communion four or five times a year. At Exodus church, where we go when we are in North Carolina, they take communion every Sunday morning. They baptize in a galvanized water trough, where the person sits and is dipped backwards into the water. We have a blended service and use a choir, praise teams, and various other special music presentations. We often use prerecorded music to accompany the singers. They have fewer resources, and all of their music is played live by a praise band. Our way is not better than their way, and their way is not better than our way. Neither way determines whether or not a person is saved. Each church develops its own customs and traditions that help to facilitate worship.

Paul's teaching on salvation was correct, but in order to have peace, so that he could continue in the ministry of the gospel, he was willing to practice the customs in the Jewish church. It was no big deal so long as it did not compromise the gospel message. Elsewhere Paul says I have become all things to all people, so that by all means, I may win some.

In the same way, we should discipline ourselves to be tolerant of others who have different customs, so long as their customs facilitate worship and do not come in conflict with the gospel and the principle of the word of God. I would not be comfortable joining a church that teaches that you must give evidence of salvation by speaking in tongues, or that you can lose your salvation, because I understand the context of the passages of scripture that deal with those issues. But on the other hand, I know many people who are members of Charismatic churches that I receive as my brothers and sisters in Christ. Speaking in tongues is no more an issue in salvation than circumcision. The goal of every Christian should be to understand the contextual word of God, and to apply its principles to his or her life, in the best way to facilitate a growing relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

The issue of the Jewish church not receiving gentile believers did not go away with the offering brought by Paul as he hoped it would. He found it necessary to ceremonially purify himself and take on the expense of four men who were under a vow, which he was happy to do. Meanwhile, James and the elders restated what they believed to be required of gentile believers, so that at the end of our passage of scripture this evening, nothing had changed the wall of separation between Jewish and Gentile believers. Paul was unable to secure the spiritual advancement that he longed to obtain. Maybe he would have been better off if he had listened to

the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit filled people, and avoided going to Jerusalem at all. Maybe it was God's will for this to happen just the way it did.

This marks the beginning of many trials for Paul, which we will examine in the chapters ahead. Whether we view Paul's trip to Jerusalem as a success or a failure, we will see how God continued to use Paul, and bless him, regardless of his circumstances. In the same way, God will use and bless each one of us, regardless of our circumstances, if we trust and rely upon Him.

In closing, let's set aside all religion, traditions, and customs, for just a moment, and focus on what is really important. Jesus is God who took on flesh to live among us, and to experience life just as we do, so that we can know that He can relate to us in our circumstances. He came, in love, for the purpose of offering His own life as a sacrifice for our sins. He died on a Roman Cross, was buried in a tomb for three days and three nights, but arose from the grave, and showed Himself to hundreds of eyewitnesses. He is alive today, and sits at the right hand of God the Father. He is coming again to take those who belong to Him to live with Him forever.

The promise of the gospel is that if we confess our sins to Him, He is faithful to forgive us and cleanse us of all our sins. If we confess with our mouths that Jesus is Lord, and believe in our hearts that God raised Him from the dead, we will be saved. If there is anyone here who needs to be saved, I will be glad to meet with you and answer your questions.