*DEVOTIONAL*

February 12 - 17

The Gentiles’ Witness

**Monday, February 12 Acts 15:1-5**

*“Unless you are circumcised, you cannot be saved”*

 The controversy between Paul and the Christian Pharisees came down to this: while Paul insisted that faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior saves a person and that prior obedience to the Law is not required, the Christian Pharisees claimed that God would not set aside the Law when receiving a Gentile believer. Most of the converted Pharisees did not want to exclude the Gentiles; they simply wanted them to play by the same rules as they had and keep the Law God had given them through Moses.

 That kind of thinking is not limited to first-century Christianity. It is around in subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, forms today. We have our standards and values which others must meet in order to be accepted. And many of those standards are excellent and probably rooted in biblical obedience. But, if we make them conditions to our acceptance of others, we have departed from the teachings of Jesus. When people fail to keep the rules, as we understand them, are we willing to accept that they know the same Jesus that we know?

*Teach me to accept others, Lord, on your terms rather than mine. Amen.*

**Tuesday, February 13 Acts 15:6-21**

*“That all might find the Lord, including the Gentiles”*

 The debate in the Jerusalem church dealt with two connected issues: first, the requirement for Gentile conversion; second, the requirement for Gentile inclusion in the church. Our belief today is that conversion means automatic inclusion. But this was not at all agreed to in the first century. While Paul, Barnabas, Peter and others held that conversion included inclusion, others separated the two and required various forms of obedience to the law from each.

 James, the brother of Jesus, who had become the leader of the church in Jerusalem, offered a recommendation. In order to be saved, circumcision and the ritual requirements of the Hebrew religion should not be imposed on Gentiles. However, appropriate conduct after conversion should be expected. The Gentile converts should abstain from foods previously sacrificed to idols, from strangled animals which still contained blood, and from sexual immorality. In this way the new Gentile converts would not unnecessarily offend their Jewish Christian brothers and sisters by a flagrant disregard for those rules which were so sacred to them.

*May how we live, Lord, not be an offense to our fellow believers. Amen.*

**Wednesday, February 14 Acts 15:22-35**

*“So we all agreed”*

 The Jerusalem leaders decide to send some of their own people as a delegation bearing a letter from the council. The letter to the churches takes on a conciliatory tone. The trouble caused by certain Christians from Jerusalem is condemned in uncompromising language, while Barnabas and Paul are described in endearing and complimentary terms. The words describing the final position of the council are prefaced by words that show how unity had won the day after an intensely trying time in the church.

 The church as it met in Jerusalem did not start with unanimity, but as the proceedings went on, some felt led to change their positions, so that unity emerged. There was serious discussion and urgent meetings, involving people having to travel long distances. The unity of the church is so important that such a price had to be paid. We, too, must strive for unity in our churches. It may take a long time to arrive at a situation where the people are of one mind, but the price is worth paying in the long run.

*We are one in you, Lord. May that truth be evident in our church. Amen.*

*DEVOTIONAL*

February 12 - 17

The Gentiles’ Witness

**Thursday, February 15 Galatians 2:1-10**

*“They did not demand that Titus be circumcised”*

 The way into the Christian life and fellowship must be an open door through which one can move freely and joyously, not an impenetrable maze of superficialities and artificial barriers. This is the heart of Paul’s argument in his letter to the Galatians. In verses 3 through 5, Paul moves from general philosophical discussion to concrete reality in a person. Titus, a Gentile, accompanied Paul to Jerusalem where some of the Christians sought to compel Titus to be circumcised according to Jewish law.

 These “Christians of the circumcision” presumed to judge Titus’ conversion and inclusion in the church. Since Titus had not followed the same rules they had, in their eyes he was unworthy of salvation and Christian fellowship. Paul strongly condemns their judgmental attitude. The Christian style must be open. We need to be deliberate in our effort to be trusting, not suspicious; to be constructive, not condemning; to believe the best of a person, not the worst. And, we need to leave the ultimate judgment of someone’s salvation to the Lord.

*May the grace that saved us, Lord, be extended by us to others. Amen.*

**Friday, February 16 Ephesians 2:14-22**

*“Christ has made peace between Jews and Gentiles”*

 The layout of the temple in Jerusalem dramatically marked the estrangement of Gentiles. Inside the temple walls were a series of courts. The innermost court was the hallowed “holy of holies” into which only the high priest could go – and that only once a year. Then came the court of priests; then the court of Israelites; then the court of women; then finally, far back and away from the Holy of Holies was the court of the Gentiles. On the low barriers separating this lowest court from the rest were posted signs in Latin and Greek, giving warning that death would come to any Gentile who sought to advance further toward the Holy of Holies.

 Paul uses this familiar layout of the temple to speak metaphorically of what the blood of Christ had done. The warning signs had been smashed, the hostility between Jew and Gentile had been abolished. On crucifixion day, not only the barriers between outer and inner courts, but even the curtain isolating the Holy of Holies was rent in two from top to bottom. The way to God through Christ is open for all, whether having been “far off” (the Gentiles) or “near” (the Jews).

*All who by faith belong to you, Lord, are joined together into one family. Amen.*

**Saturday, February 17 Acts 15:36-41**

 *“They had a sharp disagreement”*

 We can be grateful that Luke (the author of Acts) did not gloss over crises in the early church and hide the weaknesses of its leaders. It was not an ideal church, filled with saints who lived perfect lives. It was a church with people just like us but who nevertheless were available to God and were used to do great things for him. It is significant that after so many centuries of study, the church is still not sure who was at fault in the conflict between Paul and Barnabas. Interpersonal conflicts can be complex and difficult to unravel. It is encouraging to see that God works through this conflict.

 God is bigger than our problems, and he wills for his children to live in unity. Thus, we can hope for a resolution whenever there is a problem. That we may be unable to resolve it is because of stubbornness, error, or ignorance on the part of one or both sides of the conflict. Conflict is a fact of life in this fallen world, and sometimes conflicts in Christian relationships do end up unresolved. Regardless, we pray for and work toward reconciliation.

*You do your work through us, Lord, in spite of our shortcomings. Amen.*