

Acts 15

Read Acts 15:1-12: We have been talking about two things in the most recent chapters of Acts. The gospel is exploding and spreading all over Asia and northern Africa with great success. Secondly, the Jews with only a traditional understanding of the Mosaic Law and circumcision were only focused on the **ceremonial rituals** associated with righteous living rather than understanding the underlying purposes for those ceremonies and rituals and sacrifices. Paul had a full-time job fixing erroneous biblical teachings. The wrong people thought that they were in charge. Many of the New Testament are corrective writings.

BOOK	PURPOSE/CONTEXT
Romans	Addresses theological misunderstandings and cultural divisions between Jews and Gentiles.
1 Corinthians	Corrects moral issues, divisions, and questions about church practices within the Corinthian church.
2 Corinthians	Defends Paul's authority and corrects misunderstandings about his previous correspondence.
Galatians	Addresses the issue of Gentile circumcision and emphasizes justification by faith.
Ephesians	Teaches on the unity of the Church and corrects misunderstandings about Christian behavior.
Philippians	Encourages unity and humility among members and addresses conflicts within the church.
1 Timothy	Provides guidance on church leadership and corrects false teachings within the community.
2 Timothy	Encourages perseverance in the faith and corrects doubts about Paul's teachings and authority.
Titus	Addresses church organization and the need for sound doctrine among church leaders.
Hebrews	Warns against discrediting Christ's superiority and addresses Jewish-Christian relations.

In this chapter, the relevance of some religious observances are shown to be a means to prepare for the coming messiah; not an end unto themselves. In general, all the Mosaic observances and rituals and religious requirements point to the work of Christ. In fact, the Law was to show us our sin; not to make us righteous.

The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. 2 Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. 3 But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins. 4 It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. 5 Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; 6 with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. 7 Then I said, ‘Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do your will, my God.’” 8 First he said, “Sacrifices and

offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them”—though they were offered in accordance with the law. 9 Then he said, “Here I am, I have come to do your will.” **He sets aside the first to establish the second.** 10 And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. 11 Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. 12 But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, 13 and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. 14 For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. 15 The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says: 16 “This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.” 17 Then he adds: “Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more.” 18 And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary. (Hebrews 10)

It is interesting that our intentions have a big impact on what we pull out from scripture. The Jews wanted to be seen as righteous and perfect more than they wanted to find God. The point is that a careful reading of scripture reveals that we are not righteous at all. Any effort to keep the Law would reveal how this is impossible.

Brothers and sisters, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. ² For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. ³ Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness. (Romans 10)

This quest for establishing self-righteousness and intellectual dishonesty caused Judaism to *short circuit* and become a hybrid of men’s ego and men’s logic. When the word originally got back to Jerusalem that God opened the door for Gentile salvation there was an argument as to how that complies with the Law of Moses. After all, the Gentiles were all idolaters to stay away from at one point in history. It would be like sending former alcoholic evangelists into bars to evangelize. The Jews saw the world as ‘us’ and ‘them’. What happens when we see the world this way; but one day you wake up and realize that you are a ‘them’? That happened to me in college. I was giving myself latitude in my lifestyle, because I felt that I had the faith essentials in order. My life got out of control, and I found myself being part of that worldly lifestyle. I had to resort to a legalistic approach to zero tolerance with alcohol to escape. That does not mean that my Christian friends and family could not have a drink. Abstinence from alcohol was not a salvation essential for me. It was just a great idea. It was not a safe practice for my personality and genetic tendencies. We have to be careful about becoming envious and possessive or protective of the faith. Do we judge people who are covered with tattoos? If God can make a Jew holy why couldn’t he make a Gentile holy? It may not be a good look; but they might love God. These questions are why we need to focus on the essentials and leave the rest to the influence of the Holy Spirit on each individual.

Now the apostles and the brethren who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. ² And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him, ³ saying, “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.” ⁴ But Peter began speaking and proceeded to explain to them in orderly sequence, saying, ⁵ “I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, an object coming down like a great sheet lowered by four corners from the sky; and it came right down to me, ⁶ and when I had fixed my

gaze on it and was observing it I saw the four-footed animals of the earth and the wild beasts and the crawling creatures and the birds of the air. ⁷ I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' ⁸ But I said, 'By no means, Lord, for nothing unholy or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' ⁹ But a voice from heaven answered a second time, 'What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.' (Acts 11)

We study and memorize scripture to draw close to God. We need to draw still closer by meditating on his intention and heart and the underlying desires behind his statements. Many of the prescribed offerings and practices are like *bond-breakers*. God does not need our money; but we need to break the cycle and reliance on things. We tend to enslave ourself to the wrong mental constructs. Regardless, the idea is more about getting as close and intimate with God as we can. To do that we need to see the big picture and underlying purposes for things.

Even Bible reading can be like either reading a newspaper or as a self-examination tool. It would be like reading a history book about George Washington verses reading his diary and speaking with him personally. It all comes down to this: Do you just want to be recognized as being on the right side of things (religious), or do you really want to walk with God and know his heart (faith)? 42% of Americans read the Bible regularly. Only 31% of US Boomers read the Bible regularly. 50% of millennials read the Bible regularly. Many of those who do read scripture don't prayerfully meditate on how it applies to their life.

Key Insights from Barna Research

1. **Impact of Scripture:**
 - 60% of adults who read the Bible stated that it transformed their lives. This indicates that many readers seek to comprehend and apply biblical teachings in personal contexts.
2. **Engagement Levels:**
 - Barna defines "Bible Users" as those who read, listen to, or pray with the Bible at least **3-4 times a year**. Among these individuals, 61% realize their need for God with each reading, suggesting they reflect on how Scripture impacts their personal spirituality.
3. **Prayer Practices:**
 - A high percentage of Americans (approximately **64%**) pray to God at least once a week, which often includes prayers focused on personal needs or contexts that relate back to their Bible reading.
4. **Meditative Practices:**
 - While specific data on the practice of meditation was not detailed, the emphasis on personal prayer and reflection implies that many engage in forms of meditative thinking on the Scriptures.

You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, ⁴⁰ yet you refuse to come to me to have life. (John 5)

Circumcision

The question in this chapter is regarding the necessity of circumcision. *Circumcision* also the general descriptor used for those who follow the letter of the Mosaic Law. Circumcision was originally called for by God to Abraham; and it symbolizes a person who has committed to follow God's direction and to become publicly associated with God. The Jews viewed

circumcision as a showstopper, if you tried to side-step it. God himself said that this is an ongoing requirement to be God's people. Whoever does not keep it must be killed. It was obvious why the Jews wanted to be vigilant about it.

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. ² Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers." ³ Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, ⁴ "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. ⁵ No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. ⁶ I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. ⁷ I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. ⁸ The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God." ⁹ Then God said to Abraham, "As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. ¹⁰ This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. ¹² For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring. ¹³ Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. ¹⁴ Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant." (Genesis 17)

What Paul came to understand is that the Law of Moses was not the ultimate desire of God. It was given as God was on the verge of destroying them all. It was just a *societal sustainability covenant* for people who did not really know God personally. If you do not love God or love people, you have to have hard rules to govern you and to protect others.

⁹ We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, ¹⁰ for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine (1 Timothy 1)

If the Law of Moses was to create a sustainable civil code (with enforcement teeth); then what are those people who want to walk with God and know him supposed to do?

Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. ³ Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. ⁴ You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵ For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. ⁷ You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth? ⁸ That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. ⁹ "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough." ¹⁰ I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion, whoever that may be, will have to pay the penalty. ¹¹ Brothers and sisters, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being

persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished. ¹² As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves! ¹³ You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. ¹⁴ For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵ If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. ¹⁶ So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. ¹⁸ **But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.** (Galatians 5)

The Law is a minimum behavior standard. Faith and walking in the Spirit is more about how we are more able to love God and others? Circumcision is to publicly identify with God. It is a surrender of what is most precious to you and cut off whatever is a gateway to compromise. It also relates current decisions to the benefits to future generations. It is a surrender our lusts and will power on God's terms. Even so, anything that happens to men at 8-days old is not an act of faith. We are told that for this to be of any lasting value must be done in faith.

And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. (Hebrews 11)

We begin to see that an empty thoughtless keeping of God's holiness by rote practices are not enough. Abram was in good standing with God before his circumcision. Circumcision also predates the Law of Moses.

Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. ¹⁹ Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts. (1 Corinthians 7)

The Jews call circumcision Brit Milah. It is a moral equivalency standard of becoming a Jew and belonging to the nation of Israel. The conflict and confusion involve the idea of going beyond circumcision to obtain more with God; not to negate or counter the actual practice. If a baby is circumcised, what does that have to do with his faith in God? It's a parental decision.

We know that salvation is only in Jesus. Jesus is the sum total of God's promises. Jesus is also the fulfillment of the Mosaic Law and of the prophets. Old Testament saints did not have awareness of Jesus, specifically, but they could be saved by having *faith in God's promises* to men.

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him. (Deuteronomy 18:15)

Similarly, salvation includes cutting out the *ports of sinful infection* in your life...and circumcision is just one physical example. Bad TV shows, promiscuity, and bad music are ports of spiritual infection. Being a *solid citizen* and a *good scout* will not save you, but it will make your life and your society better.

Paul tackles this issue in Romans as well. He says the physical act of circumcision is nothing by itself. The bigger issue is what you are trying to accomplish with your life.

Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. ²⁶ So then, if those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? ²⁷ The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker. ²⁸ A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. ²⁹ No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God. (Romans 2)

Paul is not saying that there is no value in circumcision or keeping the letter of the Law.

What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? ² Much in every way! First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God. (Romans 3:1-2)

Abraham became our prime faith example before he was circumcised. His circumcision was just an outward label representing his existing inner commitment.

Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness. ¹⁰ Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! ¹¹ And he received circumcision as a sign, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. ¹² And he is then also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also follow in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised. (Romans 4)

There are many people who were circumcised who could not care less about God. Abram's circumcision transcends the Hebrew race. It is more about people of any nation who follow God with all of their heart. The idea is to be spiritually circumcised, whether you are physically circumcised or not.

It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. ⁷ Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." ⁸ In other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. ⁹ For this was how the promise was stated: "At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son." ¹⁰ Not only that, but Rebekah's children were conceived at the same time by our father Isaac. ¹¹ Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: ¹² not by works but by him who calls—she was told, "The older will serve the younger." ¹³ Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." ¹⁴ What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! ¹⁵ For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." (Romans 9)

Read Acts 15:13-41: James was the leader of the church in Jerusalem at this time. He arrives and weighs in on the matter. He begins by recognizing what God told Peter about including Gentile salvation. He also adds that there are some valuable aspects of the Law to keep away from; such as being complicit with idolatry, drinking blood and fornication. James refers to what the prophet Amos wrote as being applicable. Amos noted that the Hebrews had become

extremely sinful and had to be nearly exterminated to preserve a tiny remnant to start over. Amos prophesies that a day is coming when the Jews will return to Israel and restore that land. The Jews were supposed to invite the Gentiles to join them in following God. The end goal is that all nations would seek God. Gentiles' salvation was always the phase 2 part of God's plan.

these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.” (Isaiah 56:7)

God did everything to help the Jews see the light. The salvation among the local Jews was limited. Of those precious believing Jews, God did a miracle. The scattering of these believers across the world led to a more fruitful harvest. The Gentile salvation inclusion was exponentially larger.

⁷ What then? What the people of Israel sought so earnestly they did not obtain. The elect among them did, but the others were hardened, ⁸ as it is written: “God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that could not see and ears that could not hear, to this very day.” ⁹ And David says: “May their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them. ¹⁰ May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever.” ¹¹ Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. ¹² But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their full inclusion bring! ¹³ I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I take pride in my ministry ¹⁴ in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. ¹⁵ For if their rejection brought reconciliation to the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? ¹⁶ If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches. ¹⁷ If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, ¹⁸ do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. ¹⁹ You will say then, “Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.” ²⁰ Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but tremble. ²¹ For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. ²² Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. ²³ And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. ²⁴ After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree! (Romans 11)

Today, we have Messianic Jews who still observe circumcision and the observe the Laws of Moses...but they understand that is not what saves them. It is faith in Christ.

Messianic Jews believe that salvation is primarily through faith in Jesus (Yeshua) as the Messiah. However, they also emphasize the importance of the **Mosaic Law (Torah)** in the life of a believer, reflecting a commitment to both faith and practice.

Key Points

1. **Faith in Jesus:**
 - Messianic Jews hold that faith in Jesus is essential for salvation, viewing Him as the fulfillment of Messianic prophecies and the means through which individuals are reconciled to God.
2. **Role of the Torah:**
 - While they affirm faith in Jesus as the basis for salvation, they also see the Torah as a vital guide for living a holy and righteous life.
 - The Law is viewed as a covenantal framework that enriches their relationship with God and provides ethical guidance.
3. **Balance of Beliefs:**
 - Many Messianic Jews emphasize a balance: salvation is through faith in Jesus, but the teachings of the Torah remain relevant for discipleship and communal life.
 - They seek to live out their faith by following the moral and ethical instructions found in the Law, viewing this as an expression of their faith.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Messianic Jews believe in salvation through faith in Christ while valuing the importance and relevance of the Law in their everyday lives. This dual commitment reflects their identity as both followers of Jesus and observant Jews.

Now the church at Antioch has to send out a clarifying message with Judas and Silas to counter the errant teachings from Jerusalem Jews about the necessity of circumcision. At this point receiving authentic and approved biblical teaching was important. There were too many self-appointed teachers who did not have their facts right. Paul and Barnabas split up into two teams to visit the churches for the second church-wide tour. Paul would not let Mark be part of his team after leaving in the middle of one campaign.