

READ Acts 2:1-6

Following Jesus's ascension back to the Father in chapter 1, we find the Apostles being together in one place on the day of Pentecost. It was on this day when suddenly there was a great noise like that of a *"violent rushing wind"* that came into the house where they were gathered. Luke identifies this force as the Holy Spirit and states that it rested upon each of the Apostles like flames of fire. This resulted in the Apostles being about to speak with different languages that had previously been unknown by them. We often think of this occasion as being a sign of Jesus's promise of the pending Holy Spirit (**John 15,16**) being fulfilled, which it was, but we need to recognize this was also very pragmatic in nature based upon what the Apostles did with these new found miraculous abilities.

Luke goes on to tell us that there were many Jews in Jerusalem at that time who were from *"every nation under heaven."* These would most likely have been Jews of the Diaspora (the scattering of the Jews) which began to take place hundreds of years prior, even dating back to the 8th century BC with the Assyrian captivity. Jews at that time and since had scattered all over the middle eastern lands as we know them. It would have been tradition for many of them to make a yearly migration back to Jerusalem to participate in Jewish holy days and feasts. The listing of the specific nations can be found in **vv.9-11**, but I believe we can rightly understand Luke's listing of those specific nations to simply be evidence for his claim of these Jews being from *"every nation under heaven."*

With so many Jews being present from so many places, we can easily see the pragmatic nature of the Holy Spirit's arrival in giving the Apostles the ability to communicate with all of these men from all of these different places. This is precisely what caused such a commotion with what was done as these astounded Jews began to ask, *"Look, aren't all of these who are speaking Galileans? How is it that each of us can hear in our own native language?"* (**Acts 2:8**) There was a great deal of diversity in this group, and yet they were all joined together in their faithfulness to God through the Law of Moses. The Apostles, with Peter specific recorded for us, deliver the incredible message of the Gospel of Jesus to these men, and about 3,000 of them are not joined together in faithfulness to God through Jesus. They go on from this day continuing to grow in that faith by adhering to the Apostles' teachings and signs (**Acts 2:41-43**).

However, this is far from the only time that we will see such great diversity within the early church. In fact, a few chapters later we are introduced to a man named Cornelius, a Gentile, who is described as *"a devout man and feared God along with his whole household"* (**Acts 10:2**). Peter is led by God to share the Gospel with this man and his household, and this is the first instance of Gentiles receiving and being obedient to the Gospel. Unfortunately, **Acts 11** tells us there were some Jews within the church of Jerusalem who took issue with Peter even being in contact with Gentiles, and this also begins a pattern of persistent problems between Jews and Gentiles as they sought to learn how to coexist in this every growing and diverse family of God that was united upon faith, nothing more & nothing less.

This morning, we are going to take a closer look at the Jew & Gentile problem that existed within the early church. We are going to look at the history of both groups in order to understand why things were as they were in the first century, and how God desired for things to be. We will focus mostly on the issues as they are described in Paul's letter to the Galatians & Acts 15.

The Jew & Gentile Problem In The Early Church**A. Jewish Issues & Misunderstandings****1. Their View Of Gentiles**

- a) We can see clear evidence of the negative view that many Jews had of Gentiles from the response of those in Jerusalem to Peter having shared the Gospel with them. Notice that

their issue wasn't even specifically with his sharing of the Gospel, but they were criticizing him for having spent time with them (**Acts 11:3**). Such an attitude is prevalent throughout the Gospel accounts and other New Testament writings. Honestly, there is good reason for the negative view of the Gentile nations given what is said about them in some of the writings of the Prophets such as Hosea, Micah, Joel, Isaiah, and others. Even Jesus uses language that would seem to identify the Gentiles as negative examples for certain behaviors (**Matthew 5:43-47 (only greeting brothers and sisters); 6:7,8 (praying to be heard)**). Was Jesus using these examples of poor behavior often characterized by Gentiles because He saw something inherently evil about Gentiles? Were His teachings supposed to lead His Jewish listeners away from the Gentiles who were around them? Was Jesus in any way racist towards Gentiles?

b) I'm pretty sure the many loving acts of kindness shown by Jesus towards the Gentiles completely rules these thoughts out. It was Jesus who went to the woman who was at Jacob's well in **John 4** and sought to speak to her about the needs of her soul. It was Jesus who healed the daughter of a Gentile woman in **Mark 7:24-30**, who healed the deaf & mute man brought to Him in the region of the Decapolis in **Mark 7:31-37**, and who fed a multitude that was almost certainly comprised of at least some Gentiles (**Mark 8:1-10**). It must be recognized that any avoidance that Israel should have had towards Gentiles was for the explicit purpose of not being influenced by their pagan behaviors and practices. There was no reason for Israel to have taken things to the point they had at demanding hands be washed just in case they touched something in the marketplace that might have also been touched by a Gentile (**Mark 7:3,4**).

2. Their View Of The Law

a) The issues that existed between the Jews and Gentiles were only made worse because of the misunderstandings of the Jews in reference to the Law of Moses. The greatest trouble we can see in the early church stemmed from certain members of the Jewish community trying to bind aspects of the Law of Moses upon their Gentile counterparts within the church. Multiple letters deal with this issue, but none more specifically than Galatians. Paul opens this letter completely disgusted and disappointed with these churches because they were allowing the Gospel to be distorted and made into something it simply was not. (**1:6-10**)

b) As we continue through the text, we see the issues stemmed from the Jews seeking to not only allow themselves to be bound under a yoke of slavery through the Law, but they were also trying to force the Gentiles to do the same (**5:1-12**). They were in essence seeking to force the Gentiles to become Jews in order for them to follow Christ. This forces Paul to have to concretely nail down exactly why the Law was given. "*It was added for the sake of transgressions*" is Paul's clear teaching in **3:19**, and he follows this up by writing in **3:21**, "*if the Law had been granted with the ability to give life, then righteousness would certainly be on the basis of the Law*" which is precisely what he is trying to show isn't the case! Paul is trying to show the unnecessary nature of the Law in this text because of the presence of Christ, His sacrifice, and His covenant, but is also showing the limitations of the Law in and of itself. The Hebrew writer had much to say about this in **Hebrews 9,10**. Therefore, the Law was not only unnecessary for the Jews who had lived under it, but it was all the more unnecessary for those who had not lived under it. Yet this begs an all-important question, where did that leave the Gentiles?

B. Gentile Path To God In The Old Testament

1. Through Israel & The Law

- a) For the many misunderstandings of the Jews in the 1st century, we must admit that some of that misunderstanding stemmed from what had been the reality of their people during the times of the Old Testament. They might have been wrong in thinking the Law was the end all be all, but that doesn't mean that it wasn't something extremely special in nature that corresponded with the special place Israel occupied in the eyes of God. We would be remiss to not acknowledge the unique nature of the Jews among all of the other people of the earth. It was of Israel that Moses spoke when He said, *"you are a holy people belonging to the Lord your God. The Lord has chosen you to be his own possession out of all peoples on the face of the earth"* (**Deuteronomy 14:2**). It is especially important that we recognize this was said in the context of Israel being a special and set apart people from the pagans around them who engaged in all sorts of impure deeds and were participating in unclean behaviors.
- b) Israel was blessed to serve in a unique and special role as the showcase for what a people who belonged to and sought after God ought to look like. This is key to understanding Israel's role as a special people in a special relationship with God through the special covenant He had established with them. *"Now if you will carefully listen to Me and keep My covenant, you will be My own possession out of all the peoples, although the whole earth is Mine, and you will be My kingdom of priests and my holy nation."* (**Exodus 19:5,6**) These words spoken by God to Moses give us great insight into Israel's role as a priesthood that was to draw the nations back to God by serving as that guiding light. Out of all the nations and families on the earth at that time, Israel was chosen to serve in this great role, and they would fulfill it at times by even bringing Gentile people into their fold and allowing them to submit themselves to the Law through being proselytes. Rahab (an ancestor of Christ - **Matthew 1:5**) and her family (**Joshua 6:22,23**) along with the Gibeonites (**Joshua 9**) come to mind. This is one way in which they could draw the nations of the earth, who oh by the way also ultimately belonged to God, back to Him. It was in these situations that Gentiles might become subject to the Law of Moses.

2. Apart From Israel & The Law

- a) However, it is important for us to note this wasn't something that had to be done. What I mean by that is Gentiles did not have to join themselves to Israel and become amenable to the Law of Moses in order to please God. The example of Naaman from **II Kings 5** comes to mind as someone who was outside of Israel, came to put faith in YHWY as God, and yet did not stay with Israel or seem to continue on in keeping the Law of Moses. The city of Nineveh also seems to be an example of such as can be found in the writing of the prophet Jonah. This reluctant prophet preaches a message of doom to this great Assyrian city if they would not repent, but lo and behold they do repent even with fasting, sackcloth, and crying out to God. The Lord relented from the punishment He had planned on delivering to this great Gentile city (**Jonah 3:6-10**).
- b) Again, let's notice there was not a mass process of becoming proselytes or turning to keeping the Law of Moses. This seems to be consistent with what Paul says in **Romans 1:18-21; 2:14,15**; and is culminated in **4:9-12**. There was some sort of natural law that the Gentiles were responsible to uphold apart from the Law of Moses. I can't tell you exactly what that looked like with specifics, but I would imagine it would be something similar to how we see people such as Abel, Noah, Abraham, and others behaving in their lives. In fact, Paul specifically says that Abraham is an example of faith to those who were both of

the circumcised and of the uncircumcised. He stood as a testament of faith to Jews and Gentiles alike because of his faith and trust in God, which is exactly what was expected of those who desired to come to God through Christ.

C. Faith In Christ Unites Both Peoples

1. *"for through faith you are all sons of God in Christ Jesus."* (Galatians 3:25)

- a) These issues that existed in the church between Jews and Gentiles in regard to adherence to the Law of Moses needed to be moved beyond, and Paul makes a strong argument for such by once again focusing in on the purpose of the Law. It was for transgressions, yes, but it was also to serve as a guardian (**Galatians 3:24**) to bring the people of Israel to faith in the Messiah upon His arrival. *"But since that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for through faith you are all sons of God in Christ Jesus."* The Law, which had served as a dividing wall (**Ephesians 2:14**) between the Jews and Gentiles of centuries had been torn down, and the two peoples were to be joined together in one body through a common faith and trust in Jesus.
- b) It was through this faith and trust in Jesus that every person, Jew or Gentile, would be clothed with Christ through baptism (**Galatians 3:27**). In Christ there would be no difference between those who were Jew/Gentile, slave/free, or male/female because they were all equal in being in Christ. Just as Abraham's faith was an example to both Jews and Gentiles, so now they both could be considered Abraham's seed and heirs to the promise. (**3:28,29**)

2. *"we should not cause difficulties for those among the Gentiles who turn to God"* (Acts 15:19)

- a) This message is also clearly given in what took place in Jerusalem concerning some of the circumcision who had made their way up to Antioch seemingly demanding the same as was being demanded in Galatia (**Acts 15:1**). Paul was also involved with this dispute, along with Barnabas, and the two end up taking this hotly contested topic to Jerusalem where the Apostles and the elders of Jerusalem could also weigh in (**Acts 15:2-4**). Yet, there were even some there within the church of Jerusalem who continued to demand, *"It is necessary to circumcise them and to command them to keep the Law of Moses"* (**Acts 15:5**).
- b) Peter goes on to speak again about what took place at Cornelius's house as evidence for the Gentiles inclusion in the Gospel (**Acts 15:7-11**). Paul and Barnabas also speak of the work they had done in the Gospel among the Gentiles (**Acts 15:12**). James concludes the testimony by looking all the way back into the Scriptures from **Amos 9:11,12 & Isaiah 45:21** to determine that God had planned for the inclusion of the Gentiles all along. If this was God's plan for Gentile inclusion in Christ then it was James' judgment to not cause anymore difficulties on those who sought to come to God through Jesus (**Acts 15:13-19**). Just as we saw back in **Galatians 3**, all people of every background could come to Jesus through simple faith and trust in Him as Savior and Lord. The Law had served its purpose, but it was now time for it to be put to the side and no longer serve as a burden.

Application Thoughts

1. **Every person, no matter their individual characteristics, is equally valued by God.**

- a) There is no one group of people who either come to Christ or are in Christ who hold more value than any other group of people. The Jews might have viewed themselves as more special than the Gentiles through their historical place before God, but we have seen that they have equal standing in Christ with the Gentiles. We know this because Paul speaks of all people being one in Christ. We can also conclude this based upon all people have equal access and equal entry into the body of Christ. Everyone must do the exact same thing no matter who they are or where they are from.

b) Further, we recognize the important truth that there is absolutely not room in Christ for any of us to harbor any semblance of racists thoughts or attitudes. If there is absolute equality in Christ then we should view all people as such. We are all created as imagers of God for whom He gave His Son for our redemption. No single group of people is owed any more or any less in Christ based upon their race, ethnicity, or nationality. Our culture is giving great effort to cause us to see great distinctions across racial and ethnic lines, but we of all people should outright reject these efforts and see the inherent value in all people in every place.

2. Those of us who have grown in “in the church” will be saved because of our own individual faith, not the faith of our families.

a) The special nature of the Jews certainly seemed to get to their heads at times. They had been around the longest and had the best chance of understanding the ways of Christ because of their background in Judaism. However, they still had to give effort individually in order to possess a faith that guided them in what they did. We know this was necessary because any individual within Israel who failed to live by faith was either rebuked or condemned in one way or another. This is seen from the foot of Mt. Sinai through the wilderness wanderings, into the conquest, through the judges and kings, and especially in the writings of the prophets. Just because you belonged to Israel did not mean you were living rightly before the Lord, and this is a great reminder for those of us who have grown up in an environment where God was at the forefront of our families.

b) We certainly should count ourselves as lucky if we were blessed to grow up recognizing the importance of living for God in all that we do. However, simply growing up in such an environment does not mean we are grandfathered into God's family on account of the faithfulness of our families. We must be a people who have come to possess, embrace, and live out our own faiths. We won't be counted as faithful simply because we are _th generation Christians. Too many Jews rested upon their Jewish ancestry without ever truly following the Law, and I fear too many people are resting upon their family's generational faithfulness without truly developing their own faith that will guide them in this life.

**Main Point/Conclusion: No matter who you are, where you're from, or what you have done...
faith and trust in Jesus will join you to the family of God.**

While we might not be able to fully sympathize with the struggles of the early church in regard to learning how to exist together with those who are so historically different from us as the Jews and Gentiles were, we can still learn a great deal about the need for complete faithfulness and trust in Jesus apart from any works of law. Not a single one of us can earn God's favor because of who we are or what we have done. We are all in the same boat in need of a Savior. May we all therefore humble ourselves before God, embrace the diversity of this big family, and all find ourselves united by faith in His Son who loved us and gave Himself for us.