

JAMES AND THE PRESSURE TO COMPROMISE
ACTS 15:12-35

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

On the world stage this week the war in Ukraine grinds on. There have been great human and material losses on both sides. Russia is the obvious invader, but its gains have been minimal. From our perspective the only end to the conflict will come when both sides are willing to compromise. Vladimir Putin has so far been unwilling to do that.

Closer to home Congress is fighting over another budget deadline with the threat of shutting down the federal government looming over the situation. It is hard to keep track of which party wants to shut down the government and which party will get the blame if a spending bill is not passed or an agreement is not made to raise the debt limit. Again it would appear that a compromise is necessary.

As human beings it is difficult to succeed in life without making compromises. In marriage if you always insist upon going to your favorite restaurant and spending money according to your preference, your relationship is going to suffer. If in other friendships you always insist upon getting your way, that relationship will also suffer. As Christians living in a secular world we are faced with another kind of pressure to compromise. There are subtle, and not so subtle, attempts that people make to compromise our faith. But then there are some compromises that we are pressured to make that don't directly involve our faith. So sometimes it is tough to know just when we should compromise and when we should not.

The passage before us today by no means answers all of the questions that we might have about compromise. But it does give us some direction, especially in regard to issues which involve our faith.

In our ongoing study of the New Testament Book of Acts we have seen that Paul and Barnabas have completed their first missionary journey. (PROJECTOR ON--- FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY) They were sent out by the church in Antioch, and they went to the island of Cyprus and then to Asia Minor. Paul became the dynamic leader of this expedition.

His strategy was to go to the synagogue in these various towns and tell the people about Jesus. He was happy to have calm, meaningful, personal interactions. But he always met a significant amount of opposition. He encountered much hostility. He was called a lot of names. In one town he was stoned and left for dead. Fortunately nothing like that ever happens today, does it?

Charlie Kirk follows in a long line of martyrs for the faith. But as was the case with the head of our church, it was only after the death of Jesus that the Christian cause really

took off. Such may be the case with the group which Charlie Kirk has led. Reportedly his group has received 54,000 requests to start new chapters on college and high school campuses.

Last time we saw that after Paul and Barnabas gave a report about their adventures to their home church in Antioch, Jewish leaders came from Jerusalem and argued that the Gentile Christians had to become Jews to be fully right with God. There was a sharp disagreement about that. (ANTIOCH TO JERUSALEM MAP) Paul and Barnabas recognized that the basics of the gospel were not something upon which they could compromise. Because there was such a sharp disagreement about this issue and because the Judaizers came from the Jerusalem area, it seemed prudent to have Paul and Barnabas and a few other representatives go to Jerusalem to straighten this out with the church leaders there.

I.

So we saw last time that Peter made a strong defense for the position of Paul and Barnabas. Today in vv. 12-19 we learn something about WHEN NOT TO COMPROMISE. (I. WHEN NOT TO COMPROMISE) First, in v. 12, we are told about the immediate response to the comments of Peter. The crowd kept silent. It was difficult to argue against Peter. He made a clear defense of the gospel that salvation for Gentiles, as well as for Jews, comes simply through faith in Jesus. Then Paul and Barnabas talked more about the signs and wonders that God had done through them with the Gentiles.

In v. 13 James speaks. Earlier in Acts we saw that James, the brother of John and son of Zebedee, one of the twelve apostles, had been killed by King Herod. So what James is this? The Gospel According to Mark lists a "James" as the next older brother of Jesus in the family of Joseph and Mary. Then also in 1 Corinthians #15 Paul mentions specifically that Jesus appeared to his half brother James after His resurrection. We also saw in Acts that when Peter escaped from prison in Jerusalem and showed up at a prayer meeting, he told the Christians to tell the other brethren and James about what had happened. So there is a hint already at that time that James had taken a leadership role in the Jerusalem church.

The Scriptures do not directly say that this James is Jesus' brother. But there are hints of it in the New Testament, and early writers in church history say that this James was the half brother of Jesus and the author of the New Testament Epistle of James.

James in this situation was faced with considerable pressure. The church had been in existence now for fifteen or sixteen years. There had been several incidents of persecution. At the very beginning the Sanhedrin had hauled in the apostles because they didn't like their preaching. But they also recognized that the Christians had a lot of popularity with the people. When Stephen began to preach and stress the differences between Christianity and Judaism, he was killed. Those Christians like him who had been born outside of Judea were forced out of the city. Then a few years later when

Paul showed up in town, there was another big stir. At a later point James the Apostle had also been killed.

Serious though these incidents were, there seems to have been a rather tolerant climate for much of the rest of the time. The mere fact that the Christian leaders could have a conference in Jerusalem without any apparent fear of outside interference suggests that conditions weren't all that bad for Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

Much of the reason for this is that the Jewish Christians had worked at being good Jews in Jerusalem. They continued to observe the traditions of the faith. James took a lead in maintaining these Jewish traditions. An early Christian writer by the name of Hegisippus said of James, **"...he would enter the temple alone and was often found on his knees praying for forgiveness of the Jewish people... Because of his unsurpassed righteousness he was called 'the Just...'"** This early writer also notes that James had a reputation for having a simple lifestyle and for carefully observing the Law of Moses.

But now James was faced with a crucial decision. There was pressure being exerted upon him by the Pharisaic Christians. These were Christians who came from a strict Jewish background. They were devout followers of the Law of Moses. Only these Pharisees had also come to believe that Jesus was truly the Messiah. They were also convinced that Gentiles had to not only believe in Jesus but also to become Jews. Back in v. 5 they had been very vocal about their convictions. Most of the Christians in the church at Jerusalem were native born Hebrews. They all may have been comfortable with a decision to require Gentiles to become Jews. It would not have directly affected their lifestyles at all.

Then James also felt pressure from the unsaved Jews in Jerusalem. The fact that the Christians freely held a meeting in Jerusalem with no mention of fear of the religious or political authorities suggests that relations between the Christians and the other Jews in Jerusalem were not too bad. James and the other Christians were trying to reach these people with the gospel. They were trying to show these unbelieving Jews that faith in Jesus was consistent with most of their traditional beliefs. The desire to win them to Christ was at least part of the motivation for some of them to live according to traditional Jewish standards.

But now if James sides with Peter and Paul and Barnabas that Gentiles could be right with God apart from adherence to the law of Moses, the unbelieving Jerusalem Jews were sure to hear about it. It would not go over well with them. "What? James says that those dirty, pagan Gentiles can be right with the God of our nation apart from following the Law of Moses? It's obvious now that he really is a cult leader. We can't listen to him."

It would have been a lot easier for James in his immediate situation to oppose Peter and Paul and Barnabas and side with the Judaizers. But he didn't do that. Notice how he begins in vv. 13 & 14: **"After they finished speaking, James replied, 'Brothers,**

listen to me. 14 Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name.” The Hebrew Bible spoke about Israel as “a people for God’s name.” Now James was talking about a people among the Gentiles for His name. That may not have gone over well with some members of his Jewish audience.

But James was siding with Peter. Peter had described how God had worked in the **past** with the Gentile Cornelius. Then Paul and Barnabas described how God was working in the **present** with the Gentiles in Antioch and Asia Minor. Now James was going to make reference to God’s dealing with the Gentiles in the **future**.

So in vv. 15-18 James appeals to the Old Testament to support his argument that the Gentiles don’t need to become Jews to be right with God. Specifically he refers to Amos #9 vv. 11 & 12. There is considerable debate about the proper interpretation of these few verses. The issue involves one’s understanding of eschatology, or end time events. Amillennialists are those who believe that there will be no literal thousand year reign of Christ on earth at the end of world history. Instead they argue that the prophecies that were made in the Old Testament concerning the restoration of Israel to a position of world prominence and a coming time of peace and prosperity that relates to the coming of Israel’s Messiah should be understood figuratively. They argue that the church is now fulfilling those promises that were made to Israel.

So amillennialists look at vv. 15-18 and say, “The tabernacle of David that is being restored is the church. Jesus is the descendant of David and He is ruling now from heaven over the church, which includes believing Gentiles as well as Jews. By referring to Amos James is showing that the Old Testament foresaw the coming of the church. That prophecy has now been fulfilled. The Jerusalem Jews need to realize that the Hebrew Scriptures prophesied that Gentiles could be right with God apart from becoming Jews. So they need to lay off the Gentile Christians.”

Premillennialists argue that there will be a literal millennium when Christ returns to earth and rules from Jerusalem for a thousand years. The promises made to Israel in the Old Testament about a restoration to world prominence will be fulfilled literally by the nation of Israel. Premillennialists, of which I am one, would **first** point out that the statement in v. 15 that “the words of the Prophets agree” is the only New Testament reference that introduces an Old Testament quotation in this way. Usually the New Testament writer says something like “as it is written” or “and the Scripture was fulfilled which says...” But because James carefully chooses terminology that doesn’t specifically speak of fulfillment, we need to look carefully at what is being said.

Then **secondly** premillennialists would point out that the first words of v. 16 don’t appear in the text of Amos in either the Hebrew manuscripts or the early Greek translations. So the words “after these things” are not part of the quotation from Amos. They are words that James put in. After what things is James talking about that the tabernacle of David will be rebuilt? If you look back in the context you will see that in v. 14 James spoke of the taking out from among the Gentiles a people for His name.

When is that happening? In the church age. James is saying that after the church age the tabernacle of David will be rebuilt.

What does that have to do with James' argument that Gentiles should be accepted as fellow believers without making them become Jews? James is saying that the Old Testament spoke of a future time when Israel is restored to world prominence when also the Gentiles will be called by God's name apart from being Jews. What is happening now and what Peter has been arguing about is consistent with what the Bible says will happen in a time that is yet future. So if God will have that arrangement in the future, why do you Jews find it so objectionable that He should accept them by faith alone right now?

In v. 19 he concludes, **“Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God...”** “The truth is that God has clearly accepted these Gentiles who have trusted in Christ as their Savior apart from them becoming Jews. It would be wrong for us to make them submit to the Law of Moses.”

In terms of James's relationship with the Jerusalem Christians it would have probably been easier to side with the Pharisaic Christians. In terms of the acceptability of the gospel to the unbelieving Jews in Jerusalem it definitely made his job harder, at least in human terms. For the inclination of orthodox Jews would be to reject a message that carried with it the notion that Gentiles could be just as acceptable before God as Jews without having to follow the Old Testament law.

The Book of Acts does not give us specific details about the progress of the gospel in Jerusalem during the next ten years. We also know that twelve years later James and a few other Christians were put to death upon orders of the high priest.

James would not compromise about the basics of the gospel, and he would not compromise on the issue of truth. From what we know about his immediate circumstances it would have been more pragmatically advantageous to his own situation to make a different decision. But he would not compromise on the matter of basic doctrine and of truth. Last week we saw that Peter also would not give in to the Judaizers who had come to Antioch with a message that added a false condition to the gospel. We see that principle of refusing to compromise on basic doctrine and truth reinforced again today.

The notion that the basics of doctrine or personal belief systems should not be compromised often doesn't even communicate in our culture. Consider the flack that the Catholic Church takes for its positions on celibacy and male leadership and birth control. Now we might disagree with their doctrine. But we might also be able to appreciate the Church's commitment and refusal to compromise on matters of doctrine that it regards as foundational.

The secular press, however, and even some Catholics, seem not even able to comprehend the church's refusal to change. The thinking seems to be that these stands

are practically disadvantageous to their cause, and the majority of their members disagree with the official church position on at least some of these issues. So obviously the Church should change its position.

Years ago an article appeared in the *Journal of Business Communication* (Vol. 22[1]:9-Jan. 1, 1985) which said, **“The idea of a ‘universal ethic’ with accompanying guidelines that would be definite for all people at all times and in all places is a myth. The acceptance of what is right and good is determined by the culture in which the question arises.”** With that kind of thinking around it is not surprising that we Christians will be pressured to compromise on basic doctrines of the Christian faith. The example of Peter and James tells us that we should not.

George Barna conducts an annual survey called the American Worldview Inventory. In this year's survey he found that two out of three American adults reject or doubt the existence of absolute moral truth, including 69% of Catholics and 61% of those who attend a mainline Protestant church. He also found that 67% of adults agree that being open-minded and accepting of alternative philosophies of life is a sign of maturity. These things ought not to be. We should not compromise on absolute moral truths or the basics of the gospel.

That does not necessarily justify being cruel and tactless in our commitment to truth. Paul did add the helpful statement in the Book of Ephesians that believers should speak the truth in love. But truth and basic doctrine are not to be compromised.

[Compromise in these areas can be dangerous. Perhaps you read about the incident in Alaska where a hunter encountered a grizzly bear. This guy came around a bend in the trail when he found himself looking at a huge grizzly bear which was only about fifty yards away. The hunter quickly lifted his rifle to his shoulder and was about to squeeze off a round when the bear suddenly shouted, “Wait. Don’t shoot. What do you want?”

Before the hunter could fully grasp the fact that the bear was talking, he blurted out that he wanted a fur coat. “That’s reasonable,” responded the bear. “All I want is a full stomach. Let’s sit down and see if we can come to a compromise.”

The hunter had never encountered a talking bear before, and he was intrigued enough to see what they might be able to work out. So he cautiously sat down on the same log beside the grizzly, but not too close.

About five minutes later the bear got up and sauntered away--- alone. He had a full stomach--- and that hunter, well, I guess you could say that he had his fur coat. Such is the danger of compromise.]

II.

So when is it OK for Christians to compromise? Verses 20-29 give us at least some information about the subject **WHEN TO COMPROMISE.** (II. WHEN TO COMPROMISE) In verse 20 James says, “...but [we] should write to them to abstain

from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood.”

There has been considerable debate among Christian scholars about the reason that these four items are chosen as practices that Gentiles are called upon to avoid. Certainly sexual immorality is wrong. Idol worship is clearly a violation of the Ten Commandments. Verse 29, however, describes the prohibition as abstaining from things sacrificed to idols. And what is the deal about abstaining from “**blood and from what has been strangled”?**

All four of these practices were associated with pagan religion and idol worship. Animals were strangled before the idols and the blood allowed to stay in them. This was contrary to how the Torah commanded Jews to make animal sacrifices. Animals were to be killed with a knife and the blood was to be drained from them.

So the church leaders were apparently encouraging Gentile Christians to make a clean break from their old religious life. They were also calling upon them to avoid practices that were offensive to Jewish people and that were associated in their minds with pagan culture. By avoiding involvement with these practices Gentile Christians would make it easier for Jews and Gentiles to get along with each other in the church.

In 1 Corinthians #8 v. 4 Paul makes reference to the practice of eating meat in many parts of the Roman world. Typically the best place to buy meat was at a pagan temple meat market. The meat there had first been offered to idols. (1 CORINTHIANS 8:4) So Paul writes in 1 Corinthians #8 v. 4, “**Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that ‘an idol has no real existence,’ and that ‘there is no God but one’.**” Idols are just pieces of wood and rock, and there is nothing inherently evil about eating meat that has been offered to them.

(I CORINTHIANS 8:7) In v. 7 then Paul says, “**However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.**” Paul is here addressing a concern that some new Gentile Christians would have. They might associate eating this meat with their old pagan life, and eating it might violate their conscience. But many Jews would have the same problem. Thus James in our passage urges Gentiles to give up these practices that are not inherently evil for the sake of Jewish Christians who might be offended, as well as for Gentiles who might need to make a clean break with a pagan religious past. Thus there is a kind of compromise. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Jews and Gentiles were ending up together in churches now throughout Asia Minor and northern Syria. They probably had potluck dinners just like we do. The Gentiles were being asked to give up a right that theologically they could claim. Doctrinally there was nothing wrong with eating this kind of food. But practically the Gentiles were being asked to forego a right for the sake of Jewish Christians.

The notion of giving up personal rights does not go over well in our culture. Our society's values are mixed up. The Bible tells us not to compromise on basic issues of truth and doctrine. The society says that there are no absolute truths and that everything is relative. Everything is to be tolerated and accepted except that which is absolutist. The Bible says that Christians should be willing to give up their rights. Society so often says that we must stick up for our rights.

James explains the basis for his appeal in v. 21. The fact that Moses is preached in every city means that there are Jews all over the place in the Gentile world, and Gentile Christians would do well to forego their rights by observing the restrictions that he has put forward.

So all of the leaders and what James describes as "the whole" church went along with his proposal. They drafted a letter containing these instructions and sent it off with Paul and Barnabas and two representatives from the Jerusalem church. They were wise to send a couple of Jerusalem Jews along to make sure that there was no further miscommunication. If there were any Jews in Antioch or other cities who were inclined not to believe the testimony of Paul and Barnabas about the results of the Jerusalem meeting, there would be two respected members of the Jerusalem church who would confirm the message.

The Gentile believers then were called upon to give up some of their rights for the cause of the gospel and for the sake of the unity of the church. Compromise in non-doctrinal and non-truth issues is OK. Sometimes it is good. Much of what it means to be a Christian involves giving up our rights. If we claim to serve Jesus as Lord, then we must give up our rights to Him. So when we are faced with the pressure to compromise, we should determine what He would have us to do. If truth and the gospel are not adversely affected, it may be wise to compromise and give up our rights.

III.

Finally, in vv. 30-35 we come to **THE RESULTS OF KEEPING THE RIGHT BALANCE.** (PROJECTOR ON--- III. KEEPING THE RIGHT BALANCE) With the letter in hand and two representatives from Jerusalem along, the Antioch leaders reported back to their home church. According to v. 31, "**And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.**"

Did the Gentile Christians see the restriction suggested by James as a mean, difficult sacrifice that they were being asked to make? No. They focused on the positive results of the meeting. They rejoiced at the recognition that they could be right with God apart from commitment to the Law of Moses. They rejoiced at the opportunity to promote unity in the body of Christ by making a sacrifice of a small amount of freedom.

According to v. 32 Judas and Silas also had the gift of prophecy. They used it to give further encouragement to the Christians at Antioch. Notice that they did it by means of a lengthy message. How long do you suppose this lengthy message was? Thirty minutes? Sixty minutes? Two hours?

Judas and Silas spent some more time in Antioch and then returned to Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas continued their work in Antioch.

So in one area--- the area of doctrine and truth--- the church leaders would not compromise. In the area of daily behavior they compromised. They spoke the truth, but they also did it in love by working out a compromise that would show sensitivity to the traditions of Jewish Christians. The results in Antioch were that the whole church was encouraged. It continued to grow and prosper.

The results in Jerusalem are less clear. But the decision may actually have made life tougher for the Jewish Christians. The unbelieving Jews would not be more positive toward the gospel by hearing about the accepting attitude that the church had adopted toward Gentile Christians. But the ultimate test of what is right and what is wrong is the Lord and His Word.

There are some things about which we Christians should not compromise. But there are many areas where we can compromise. In Stephen Covey's valuable book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (THE 7 HABITS) the author points out that people take different approaches to the various interactions of life. Some people take a win-lose approach. "If I get my way, you don't get yours. If you win, I lose. So I am going to do my best to win." Business, sports, and even the family are seen as competitive arenas where only the fittest survive.

Another approach is simply the win approach. People with the win mentality don't necessarily want someone else to lose. They just want to get what they want. Whatever happens to others is not of any concern.

There are also some other possible approaches. But Covey suggests that the best approach to take toward life is the win-win approach. I suspect that the first century church leaders would have approved of this method. For it requires that the people involved take an interest in the effect that one's decisions have on others. It takes an approach to life which says that we both can be winners; we both can succeed. As Covey explains it, the win-win method says, **"I want to win, and I want you to win. I wouldn't want to get my way and have you not feel good about it, because downstream it would eventually surface and create a withdrawal. On the other hand, I don't think you would feel good if you got your way and I gave in. So let's work for a win-win."**

Such an approach is a key to success in the job, at home, at school, and in the church. (PROJECTOR OFF) A big reason that we have had good relations in this church is that we don't have big power battles. We don't approach our church life together as a win-lose proposition. We approach it as a team effort. We try to build a consensus on issues that come before us. We don't compromise on the truth and on fundamental doctrine. But we compromise on other matters for the sake of the Lord and for the general good

of the body. We work for win-win solutions. Our basic attitude should be to submit ourselves to the Lord and ask Him to accomplish His purposes in us.