

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 14 OF 104

Authorized Worship

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	Leviticus 8-13
Wisdom Literature	Proverbs 16
Gospels	Matthew 14:13-15:9
General New Testament	Acts 15

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to put one question in your students' hands and let them carry it through four very different readings: who decides how God is approached? Leviticus answers it with fire, Proverbs with a warning about roads that feel right, Jesus with a quotation from Isaiah, and the apostles with a letter. By Friday your class should be able to state the principle in a sentence and apply it to something in their own practice.

Doctrinally there is a great deal here. Nadab and Abihu establish that what God has not authorized is not therefore permitted. Matthew 15 shows human tradition able to cancel divine command. Acts 15 shows the opposite error, men binding on others what God never bound, and it settles that a person is not saved by keeping the law of Moses. Along the way you will need to say clearly that the law of Leviticus is fulfilled and taken away in Christ, that clean and unclean food is no longer an issue, and that the promises to David are being fulfilled now in Christ and His church.

Formationally, watch the thread of restraint. Aaron is silent. The disciples hand out bread they did not make. The Jerusalem church declines to lay on a burden. Every one of these is someone declining to add his own idea to what God has said. Put the question to your class this way: name one thing you do in your service to God because you prefer it, and one thing you do because He asked for it. Then ask which of the two you would defend more fiercely if someone questioned it.

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up Acts 15. It is the clearest and most immediately useful of the four, it settles a doctrinal question your students will meet all their lives, and it gives you the vocabulary of binding and loosing that the other readings will need. Save the last ten minutes for the split over Mark.

Second session: Take up Leviticus 8-13, and give most of the hour to chapters 9 and 10. The ordination and the strange fire will carry the whole session. Deal with clean and unclean food briefly, settle that it is not binding today, and move on before the class gets lost in the lists.

The other two readings: Matthew 14:13-15:9 and Proverbs 16 are well suited to home reading. Announce the connection out loud: Matthew 15:9 is the New Testament commentary on Leviticus 10, and Proverbs 16:25 is the reason both warnings are necessary. Encourage families to read the feeding of the five thousand together.

Ordained Priests and Strange Fire

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

These six chapters can feel like reading somebody else's instruction manual, so give your class a reason to stay with them. Leviticus 8 and 9 are not ceremony for its own sake; they are God teaching a nation that access to Him is a gift He arranges, not a thing people improvise. Seven days of washing, robing, anointing, and sacrifice pass before Aaron lifts his hands to bless the people, and only then does the glory appear. Nothing in the sequence is decorative.

Leviticus 10 lands like a dropped plate. Two men who had just been ordained take censers, put in fire the Lord had not commanded, and are consumed by the same holy fire that had accepted Israel's offering minutes earlier. The text gives no long explanation, only Moses quoting God: "By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy." Aaron says nothing. Teach the silence as well as the fire.

Chapters 11 through 13 then work outward from the altar into ordinary life: what is on the table, what happens in childbirth, what appears on the skin. The recurring words are clean and unclean, and they are not chiefly about hygiene or morality. They are about a people learning, in a hundred daily ways, that they belong to a God who is set apart and who has set them apart with Him.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Leviticus is Moses writing to a nation camped at Sinai, roughly fifteen months out of Egypt, with the tabernacle newly raised (Exodus 40).
- The literary shape is priestly instruction: God speaks, Moses records, Israel obeys. The phrase "as the Lord commanded" is the drumbeat of the whole book.
- Nadab and Abihu are Aaron's two oldest sons, ordained in chapter 8 and dead in chapter 10. The warning against strong drink that immediately follows (10:8–11) may hint at a contributing cause.
- Clean and unclean here are ceremonial categories, not moral ones. An unclean person was not a sinner; he was temporarily unfit to approach the tabernacle.
- The skin disease of chapter 13 covers a range of conditions, not only what modern medicine calls Hansen's disease. The priest functions as examiner and as the one who pronounces the verdict.
- All of this belongs to a covenant that has been fulfilled and taken out of the way in Christ (Colossians 2:14–17; Hebrews 8:13; 10:1–10). It is written for our instruction (Romans 15:4), not for our observance.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Leviticus 8 and 9 build through seven long days toward one moment, the glory of the Lord appearing before the whole congregation. Walk through what God required before that moment came, and talk about why He was so particular about every detail.*

Walk the class slowly through the sequence: washing with water, the garments, the anointing oil, the sin offering, the burnt offering, the ram of consecration, blood on the ear and thumb and toe, seven days at the door without leaving, and then on the eighth day the offerings for himself and for the people. Only at 9:23–24 does the glory appear. God was not being fussy. He was teaching a nation what it means that He is holy and they are not.

Then draw the line forward without flattening it. Hebrews 10:19–22 says we now enter the Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, our hearts sprinkled and our bodies washed with pure water. The access is free, but it was never casual and it is still not ours to arrange. Ask the class what carelessness in worship looks like in a congregation that believes it is saved by grace.

Question 2. *Leviticus 10:1–3 says Nadab and Abihu offered fire before the Lord “which He had not commanded them.” Why was God’s silence not permission, and where are we tempted to reason the other way about worship today?*

The key phrase is “which He had not commanded them.” God had said in detail where the fire was to come from (16:12, from the altar) and who was to bring it. Nadab and Abihu were not idolaters; they were innovators. They added. The text treats addition to God’s instruction as seriously as rebellion against it, which is why Leviticus 10:3 grounds the judgment in God’s holiness rather than in the size of the offense.

Handle the application firmly and kindly. A congregation that asks “where is the authority for this?” is not being narrow; it is doing what Nadab and Abihu failed to do. But make the point about ourselves, not about other churches. Ask what we have added out of preference: an element of worship, a requirement for membership, a rule about dress or schedule that we have begun to enforce as though God wrote it.

Question 3. *The food laws of Leviticus 11 made an Israelite noticeably different at every single meal. In what ways does God make His people visibly different now, and what has that difference already cost you?*

Leviticus 11 reached into every meal, every kitchen, every market. An Israelite could not eat without remembering whose he was. That is the point the New Testament keeps when it drops the diet: 1 Peter 1:15–16 quotes Leviticus directly, “Be holy, for I am holy,” and applies it to conduct. The distinguishing marks changed; the distinction did not.

Push for specifics or the conversation will stay comfortable. Where does a Christian today become visibly different? In speech at work, in what is watched at home, in how money is handled, in Sunday morning being settled rather than negotiated, in marriage held as God defines it. Ask each person to name one place where being the Lord’s has already cost them something, and one where it has not yet cost them anything.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Trace the ordination in Leviticus 8 and list each thing Moses does in order. Count how many times the chapter says “as the Lord commanded Moses.”*

Moses assembles the congregation, washes Aaron and his sons, clothes Aaron in tunic, sash, robe, ephod, breastplate, and turban, anoints the tabernacle and Aaron, clothes the sons, offers the bull of the sin offering, the ram of the burnt offering, and the ram of consecration, puts blood on the right ear, thumb, and toe, sprinkles oil and blood on the garments, and confines them to the door seven days. The refrain “as the Lord commanded Moses” sounds repeatedly through chapter 8, seven times in most translations. The obedience is the point.

2. *Leviticus 9:24 and 10:2 both describe fire coming out from before the Lord. Set the two scenes side by side and write down what is the same and what has changed.*

In 9:24 the fire consumes the offering on the altar and the people shout and fall on their faces; in 10:2 the same fire consumes two priests. What changed is not God but the offering. The fire that accepts what God commanded also refuses what He did not. Hebrews 12:28–29 draws exactly that conclusion for Christians.

3. *Read Mark 7:18–19, Acts 10:9–16, and 1 Timothy 4:1–5. What happened to the clean and unclean food laws, and on whose authority did they end?*

Jesus ended them. Mark 7:18–19 records His declaration, with Mark’s own comment that He thus purified all foods; Acts 10 shows Peter learning it in a vision whose real subject turns out to be people, not animals; 1 Timothy 4:1–5 calls the later forbidding of foods a doctrine of demons and says every creature of God is good, received with thanksgiving. The authority is Christ’s, exercised as He fulfilled and removed the old covenant (Colossians 2:16–17).

4. *Leviticus 13 puts the priest, not the sufferer, in charge of pronouncing a man clean or unclean. Notice how Jesus honors that arrangement in Luke 5:12–14, and say why He might have done so.*

The priest examined, waited, examined again, and pronounced. The sufferer did not decide his own status, and neither did the neighbors. When Jesus cleansed the leper in Luke 5:12–14, He sent him to the priest with the offering Moses commanded, honoring the law that was still in force during His earthly life and providing a public, legal certification that a genuine cleansing had happened. It was evidence to the priests, not a loophole.

5. Aaron had just lost two sons and “held his peace” (10:3). Name one place this week where you will have to accept God’s word without receiving an explanation, and decide now how you will respond.

Answers will vary. Listen for something real: a command obeyed without a satisfying reason, a death or diagnosis accepted without an answer, a scriptural requirement kept when the person would rather argue. Aaron’s silence is not stoicism; it is a man refusing to put God in the dock. Guard against the class turning this into advice for suppressing grief.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Do not bind the food laws, purification laws, or any other part of Leviticus on Christians. They were shadow, and the substance is Christ (Colossians 2:16–17; Hebrews 10:1). Teach them as instruction about God’s character, not as rules to keep.
- Leviticus 12 prescribes purification after childbirth. This says nothing whatever about the child being sinful or guilty. Ceremonial uncleanness is not sin, and Scripture is clear that guilt is personal (Ezekiel 18:20; Matthew 18:3; 19:14). If anyone raises infant baptism here, answer kindly from those texts.
- Avoid treating skin disease in chapter 13 as a picture of the sufferer’s sin. The text is a diagnostic procedure, not a moral judgment, and sick people in your class will hear it personally.
- Nadab and Abihu can be preached with a sharpness that damages. Make the point about worship offered on God’s terms and about our own additions, and resist the temptation to aim it at another congregation.

The Lord Weighs the Spirit

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Proverbs 16 sits near the center of the Solomonic collection, and it reads like a man thinking out loud about sovereignty and responsibility at the same time. Verses 1 through 9 are the densest cluster of Lord-sayings in the book: the answer of the tongue is from the Lord, the Lord weighs the spirits, commit your works to the Lord, the Lord has made all for His own purpose, a man's heart plans his way but the Lord directs his steps. Human planning is assumed throughout, never dismissed.

The middle of the chapter turns to kings, speech, and appetite, and then comes the famous pair: pride before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall. Solomon knows what he is talking about. He had the wisest head in the world and still walked himself into ruin. That gives verse 25 its weight: the road that seems right is dangerous precisely because it does not feel dangerous.

The chapter ends where wisdom literature likes to end, in the small and daily: gray hair honored, a slow temper prized above a conquering army, and even the lot in the lap disposed by the Lord. Teach this chapter as a corrective for competent people. Most of your class is good at planning. That is exactly who needs verse 9.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Solomon is the author of this section (10:1), and these are individual two-line sayings, mostly unconnected, arranged by sound and theme rather than by argument.
- Hebrew wisdom describes how life normally runs under God's moral order. It is not a set of promises to be claimed, and it is not prophecy.
- Verses 10 through 15 concern the king. Remember that Israel's king was to be God's servant under the law (Deuteronomy 17:18–20), which is what makes these sayings something other than royal flattery.
- The theme of the chapter is the gap between appearance and reality: what a man weighs and what God weighs, what seems right and what is right.
- Several verses here are quoted or echoed in the New Testament's ethical teaching (compare 16:18 with 1 Peter 5:5–6, and 16:32 with Galatians 5:22–23).

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Verses 1 through 9 keep putting a man's planning next to the Lord's rule over the outcome. How do you commit your work to the Lord without sliding into either anxious control or lazy passivity?*

Verse 3 says commit your works to the Lord and your thoughts will be established; verse 9 says a man plans his way but the Lord directs his steps. Both assume the man is planning. Scripture never treats planning as unbelief (Luke 14:28–32; Proverbs 21:5). What it refuses is planning that never consults God and never releases the outcome to Him. James 4:13–16 is the New Testament version of the same lesson, and it corrects the presumption rather than the calendar.

Get practical. Ask how a person's prayer life would look different if he actually committed his work at the start rather than bringing God the wreckage at the end. Ask what he would stop doing if he believed verse 9. Somebody in the room is carrying a project he has never once prayed about; that is the person this passage is for.

Question 2. *Proverbs 16:18 says pride goes before destruction. Describe how pride actually operates in a decent, hard-working, church-attending person, and what usually brings it into the open.*

Pride in a respectable person rarely announces itself. It shows up as an unteachable streak, as the inability to hear correction from a spouse, as keeping score of service rendered, as a quiet certainty that the congregation would

struggle without him. Verse 18 says the fall comes after, not before, which is why pride is so hard to detect from inside. The evidence usually arrives late.

What exposes it is almost always loss: being passed over, being corrected publicly, being unable to fix something. Ask the class how a person can get ahead of that, and let 1 Peter 5:5–6 answer: humble yourself under God's hand now, and He lifts you up in due time. Self-humbling is the only version of this that does not hurt.

Question 3. *Verse 25 says there is a way that seems right to a man, and its end is death. If it seems right the whole way down, how would a person ever find out he is on it, and who is positioned to tell him?*

The danger in verse 25 is the word “seems.” Every self-deceived person on earth is comfortable. That is what makes the verse frightening and what makes it so useful. If our own sense of rightness were reliable, we would not need revelation, counsel, or a church. The verse is an argument for an authority outside yourself, which is where Proverbs has been pointing since 1:7.

So how does a person find out? Through the Word he did not choose (Hebrews 4:12), through people who love him enough to say something unwelcome (Proverbs 27:6), and through submission to the pattern of Scripture rather than to what feels right. Ask the class, plainly, who in their life is actually permitted to tell them they are wrong. If the answer is nobody, the answer is verse 25.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Go through the chapter and mark every verse that names the Lord. Read just those verses together and describe the picture of God that emerges.*

The Lord is named in verses 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 20, and 33. Read together they present a God who governs outcomes, weighs motives, receives committed work, hates pride, provides mercy and truth by which sin is atoned, controls even the odds, and blesses the man who trusts Him. This chapter is not chiefly about self-improvement; it is about the God under whose hand you plan.

2. *Set Proverbs 16:2 beside 1 Samuel 16:7 and Hebrews 4:12–13. What are these passages saying about the difference between how you see yourself and how God sees you?*

All three insist that God evaluates what no one else can see. Proverbs 16:2 says a man's ways are clean in his own eyes; 1 Samuel 16:7 says man looks at the outward appearance but the Lord looks at the heart; Hebrews 4:12–13 says the Word divides soul and spirit and all things are naked before Him. The practical result is that self-assessment is not the final word, which is both humbling and a relief.

3. *Proverbs 16:32 ranks self-control above military conquest. Write down two moments in an ordinary Tuesday where that battle is actually won or lost for you.*

Answers will vary. Press past general statements like “my temper” to actual moments: the reply typed and not sent, the silence held when a spouse says the wrong thing, the second helping, the phone put down. Proverbs 16:32 dignifies these unseen victories by ranking them above conquering a city, and that is exactly how the class should learn to see them.

4. *Remember that a proverb is a general principle and not a guarantee. Read 16:7 alongside 2 Timothy 3:12, and explain how a Christian should hold both verses at once.*

Proverbs 16:7 says when a man's ways please the Lord, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him. As a general principle it is true; a life of integrity disarms much hostility. As a guarantee it collapses, because 2 Timothy 3:12 says all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution, and Jesus Himself pleased the Father perfectly and was crucified. Hold the proverb as a pattern, not a promise.

5. *Verse 24 calls pleasant words a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and health to the bones. Name one person who needs such a word from you, write the sentence you will say, and say it before Sunday.*

Answers will vary. The point is the specificity: a name, a sentence, and a deadline. Listen for whether the word chosen is genuinely for the other person's good or is a piece of flattery that costs nothing. Encourage a word of honest encouragement to someone who serves without being noticed.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Proverbs 16:4, that the Lord made all things for Himself, “yes, even the wicked for the day of doom,” is sometimes used to teach that God creates people for destruction. The verse says God orders all things toward His own righteous ends, including the just end of wickedness. It does not teach that any man is predestined to sin or to be lost. Ezekiel 18:23, 32 and 2 Peter 3:9 say the opposite.
- Verse 33, the lot cast into the lap, describes God’s providence over what looks random. It is not a method for guidance today; we have the completed Word (2 Timothy 3:16–17).
- Keep reminding the class how to read a proverb. Verses 3 and 7 especially will be misused as guarantees of success and peace if you do not.

Loaves, Waves, and Tradition

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Matthew hinges this section on grief. The paragraph before reported John's head on a platter, and 14:13 says that when Jesus heard it He departed by boat to a deserted place by Himself. He never gets the solitude. Five thousand men besides women and children find Him, and instead of resentment Matthew records compassion, healing, and a meal. Whatever else your class takes from the feeding, let them feel that it was done by a man carrying fresh sorrow.

The night on the lake is the second half of the lesson. Jesus sends the disciples ahead and goes up the mountain alone to pray, which is the solitude He had been seeking all day, and He interrupts it again to walk out to men rowing against the wind. Peter's request is bold and his failure is instructive: he sank not when the wind rose but when he attended to the wind rather than to Christ. The chapter ends with the first full confession in the boat, "Truly You are the Son of God."

Then the tone changes completely. Scribes and Pharisees come down from Jerusalem, not about Sabbath or blasphemy but about handwashing, and Jesus answers by moving the argument from ceremony to authority. Their tradition, He says, had reached the point of canceling the fifth commandment. He quotes Isaiah and lets the verdict stand: worship can be sincere, energetic, and entirely in vain.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Matthew writes to a largely Jewish audience, which is why he assumes his readers know what the tradition of the elders is without explaining it.
- The feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle besides the resurrection recorded in all four gospels (Mark 6, Luke 9, John 6), which suggests how central the early church considered it.
- The number five thousand counts men only (14:21); the actual crowd was considerably larger.
- The tradition of the elders was an accumulating body of oral rules meant to protect the law of Moses. The handwashing in question was ceremonial, not sanitary.
- Corban was a formula declaring something dedicated to God, which some used to shield property from the obligation to support aging parents (Exodus 20:12; Mark 7:11).
- Isaiah 29:13, quoted in 15:8–9, was originally spoken against Judah's hollow religion in Isaiah's own day. Jesus applies it as a pattern that repeats.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Jesus has just learned that John was executed and He withdraws to be alone, yet the crowd follows and 14:14 says He was moved with compassion. How does that scene change what you assume compassion costs?*

Compassion here is not a feeling Jesus had when He was rested and available. He was grieving a cousin and a forerunner, He had deliberately withdrawn, and the crowd tracked Him down anyway. Matthew 14:14 says He went out, saw the multitude, and was moved with compassion, then healed their sick and stayed until evening. Compassion of that order costs solitude, energy, and the right to one's own schedule.

The application is uncomfortable in the best way. Most of us are generous when it is convenient. Ask the class where someone regularly interrupts them: an aging parent, a needy neighbor, a child at bedtime, a coworker who always wants one more minute. Then ask what it would mean to meet that interruption the way Jesus met this one. Not sentiment; presence, time, and the healing of somebody else's trouble before your own is resolved.

Question 2. *Peter asks to come, walks, and then begins to sink. Work through exactly when he starts to go down, and consider what the Lord's question in 14:31 is actually asking him.*

Watch the sequence in 14:29–30. Peter comes down out of the boat and walks on the water to go to Jesus. The wind was already boisterous when he started; verse 30 says that when he saw the wind he was afraid. Nothing external changed. His attention changed. He began to calculate his situation instead of attending to the One who had said “Come,” and the moment he did, he went down.

Jesus' question, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” is asked while His hand is already holding Peter up, which is the whole tone of it. It is not contempt; it is instruction offered to a man who is safe. Be careful not to turn this into a lesson that failure means insufficient faith and that enough faith would keep anyone from sinking. The point is where Peter looked, and that the Lord caught him anyway.

Question 3. *In 15:3–9 Jesus says their tradition made the commandment of God of no effect. How does a good practice quietly become a binding rule, and what can a congregation do to keep that from happening?*

Traditions usually begin as good judgment. Somebody decides how to do a thing well, it works, it gets repeated, and after a generation nobody remembers it was a decision. The trouble starts when the practice acquires the authority of a command, so that questioning it feels like questioning God. That is exactly the road the tradition of the elders traveled, and by the time Jesus met it a man could use it to avoid feeding his own mother.

The safeguard is not to have no customs; it is to keep the line visible between what God said and what we decided. A congregation can do that by teaching the difference out loud, by regularly asking of any practice, “Is this commanded, or is this how we have chosen to carry out what is commanded?” and by leaving room to change the second kind without anyone treating it as apostasy. Ask the class to name one thing in each column.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List the steps Jesus takes in 14:18–19 to feed the crowd. Notice who actually carries the bread to the people, and suggest why Matthew bothers to record that.*

He commands the crowd to sit on the grass, takes the five loaves and two fish, looks up to heaven, blesses, breaks, and gives the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples give to the multitudes. The disciples carry it. Jesus multiplies what He is given and then puts it into the hands of ordinary men to distribute, which is a fair description of how the gospel has moved ever since. Twelve baskets are left over, one apparently for each man who thought there was not enough.

2. *In 14:33 the men in the boat worship Jesus and call Him the Son of God. Find two other places in Matthew where someone says the same thing, and note who is speaking each time.*

Matthew 16:16 has Peter's confession, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” and Matthew 27:54 has the centurion at the cross saying, “Truly this was the Son of God.” Matthew 3:17 and 17:5 record the Father Himself saying it. Note the range: fishermen, an apostle, a Roman executioner, and the voice from heaven. Matthew is building a case.

3. *Read Mark 7:1–13 next to Matthew 15:1–9. Explain what Corban was, and trace how a rule made by men allowed a son to sidestep a command written by God.*

Corban meant “given to God.” A man could declare his property or income dedicated, and the tradition then treated that declaration as releasing him from using it to support his father and mother, even while he often kept the benefit of it himself. Jesus points out that the fifth commandment and Exodus 21:17 are thereby nullified by a man-made rule. A tradition had been permitted to overrule Scripture.

4. *Isaiah 29:13 is quoted in 15:8–9. Copy out what Isaiah says is wrong with that worship, phrase by phrase, and hold your own worship up against each one.*

Isaiah says the people draw near with their mouth and honor God with their lips while their heart is far from Him, and that their fear of God is taught by the commandment of men, so that their worship is in vain. Three failures: words without heart, authority drawn from men rather than God, and worship that accomplishes nothing. Any one of the three is enough to empty an assembly.

5. Name one practice in your own life of faith that you cannot find anywhere in the New Testament. Decide this week whether you hold it as a personal preference or have begun to treat it as law.

Answers will vary. The aim is honest sorting, not iconoclasm. A congregation may rightly have a song leader, an order of service, a building, and a class schedule; none of those is sin, and none of them is law. Listen for the person who realizes he has been judging brethren over something God never said, and for the opposite error of treating a plain command as a preference.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Do not let the handwashing passage become a license to dismiss all tradition. Jesus condemns tradition that nullifies God's word, not every inherited practice. Teach the distinction between a command of God and an expedient way of carrying it out.
- Resist using Peter's sinking to teach that hardship or illness proves weak faith. Jesus caught him. The passage is about attention and about the Lord's reliability.
- The feeding and the walking on water are presented as history, not as symbols. Handle them as real events with real witnesses (John 6:14) and let their meaning grow from that.
- Isaiah 29:13 applies to us as easily as to the Pharisees. Preach it toward the room, not toward other groups, or the class will leave feeling superior rather than searched.

The Question Settled at Jerusalem

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Acts 15 is the hinge of the book and arguably of church history. Everything to this point has been building pressure: Samaritans baptized, an Ethiopian official baptized, Cornelius and his household receiving the word, and now whole Gentile congregations planted across Galatia. The question could no longer be avoided. Is a Gentile saved by coming to Christ, or by coming to Christ and then becoming a Jew? Luke reports the dispute honestly, including that it was “no small dissension.”

The method of settlement deserves as much attention as the outcome. There is no vote of the majority, no appeal to custom, no single presiding officer handing down a ruling. Peter recounts what God Himself had plainly done, Paul and Barnabas report the miracles God worked among the Gentiles confirming their message, and James turns to the written prophets and says the Scriptures agree with this. Testimony of God’s action, confirmed by sign, tested by the Word.

The letter that goes out is a model of pastoral care. It denies the false teachers any authorization, declines to lay on any greater burden, and asks for four abstentions that would allow Jewish and Gentile Christians to live and eat together without conscience being wounded. Then Luke, with characteristic honesty, immediately records two good men disagreeing so sharply that they separate. The chapter shows a church that can settle a doctrinal question and still be made of people.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- The date is roughly A.D. 49 or 50, after the first preaching tour of Acts 13 and 14 and before the second begins in 15:40.
- Galatians 2:1–10 very likely describes this same visit from Paul’s side, which is worth reading aloud in class.
- The party pressing the issue is identified in 15:5 as believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees. These were Christians, not outsiders, which is what made the dispute so serious.
- The law of Moses had been fulfilled and taken away at the cross (Colossians 2:14; Ephesians 2:14–16), but many Jewish Christians had not yet worked through what that meant for Gentile converts.
- The four abstentions of 15:20 address things woven into pagan temple life and things deeply offensive to Jewish conscience, together with fornication, which was a moral matter for everyone.
- John Mark had left Paul and Barnabas at Perga (13:13). Barnabas was his cousin (Colossians 4:10).

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *The chapter opens with a sentence that could have split the church in half: unless you are circumcised you cannot be saved. Why was this not a small disagreement, and what exactly was at stake in how it got answered?*

The sentence in 15:1 attaches a condition to salvation that God had not attached. That is why it was not a disagreement about practice; it was a redefinition of the gospel. If circumcision were required, then the death of Christ was insufficient, the Gentile church was not the church, and the law that had been nailed to the cross was back in force. Paul says as much in Galatians 5:2–4, where he warns that such a man has fallen from grace.

Make the principle visible for your class. Adding a requirement to God’s terms is as serious as subtracting one. Both say that what God arranged is not adequate. Then ask the harder second question: are there conditions we have added, or conditions God gave that we have quietly dropped? A congregation can err in either direction, and the same chapter rebukes both.

Question 2. *Follow how the question was actually settled in verses 6 through 21. What kinds of evidence did these men appeal to, and just as importantly, what did they never appeal to?*

They appeal first to what God demonstrably did. Peter points to Cornelius, where God gave the Holy Spirit to uncircumcised men and made no distinction. Paul and Barnabas describe the miracles and wonders God worked through them among the Gentiles, which was God confirming their preaching (Mark 16:20; Hebrews 2:3–4). Then James says, “And with this the words of the prophets agree,” and quotes Amos. Divine action, confirmed by sign, tested against the written Word.

Notice what is absent. No one counts hands and declares the majority right. No one says this is how we have always done it in Jerusalem. No one claims personal authority to decide it, not even Peter, and James is not presiding as a bishop but is summing up what the Scriptures say. This chapter is no warrant for synods or church hierarchies; local churches with their own elders remain the pattern (Acts 14:23; 1 Peter 5:1–3). Ask the class how a congregation today settles a hard question by the same method, now that revelation is complete (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

Question 3. *Paul and Barnabas separate over John Mark in 15:36–41, and Luke does not take sides. How should Christians handle a sharp disagreement that is not about doctrine, and what evidence is there that this one eventually ended well?*

Luke does not tell us who was right, and the restraint is deliberate. Barnabas, whose name means son of encouragement, wanted to give his cousin another chance. Paul, who had watched Mark leave mid-campaign, would not stake a second effort on him. Both concerns were legitimate. The contention was sharp, the separation was real, and Luke records it without excusing either man or condemning either.

The evidence that it ended well is scattered but clear. Barnabas takes Mark and sails to Cyprus, and Mark grows; years later Paul writes from prison, “Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry” (2 Timothy 4:11), and mentions him warmly in Colossians 4:10 and Philemon 24. Peter calls him “Mark my son” (1 Peter 5:13). Ask the class what it would look like to disagree with a brother, part over a judgment call, and still speak well of him ten years later.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Write out the four things the letter asks Gentile believers to abstain from (15:20, 29), and suggest why these four in particular were named to churches full of new converts out of paganism.*

Things polluted by idols, sexual immorality, things strangled, and blood. Three of the four touch what a new convert out of paganism would meet constantly at the meat market and the temple feast, and all three were matters over which a Jewish Christian could not sit at table. Fornication belongs to the list because pagan religion had normalized it. The letter binds nothing of the law of Moses; it asks for restraint that makes shared life possible and holiness plain.

2. *Read Galatians 5:1–6 alongside this chapter. Explain what Paul says accepting circumcision would have done to a Gentile Christian’s standing before God.*

Paul says that if a man is circumcised as a requirement, Christ profits him nothing, he becomes a debtor to keep the whole law, he is estranged from Christ, and he has fallen from grace. In Christ neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but faith working through love. The issue was never whether circumcision is harmful in itself; it was whether it is required for salvation, and Paul answers that adding it undoes everything.

3. *James quotes Amos 9:11–12 in verses 15 through 18. Identify what he understands the rebuilding of David’s fallen tabernacle to be, and let that shape how you read Old Testament promises about Israel.*

James takes the rebuilding of the fallen tabernacle of David as what God was doing right then, in the exaltation of Christ as David’s Son and the gathering of Gentiles into His church. The promise was not awaiting a future political kingdom in Palestine; it was being fulfilled in front of them. Read that way, Acts 15:16–18 is one of the plainest statements in Scripture that the promises to David find their fulfillment in Christ reigning now (Acts 2:29–36; Colossians 1:13).

4. Peter says God made no distinction, “purifying their hearts by faith” (15:9). Turn back to Acts 10:44–48 and record what Peter commanded those same believers to do.

Peter commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord (Acts 10:48). That order matters. Peter’s phrase “purifying their hearts by faith” in Acts 15:9 summarizes how God brought Gentiles in without the law of Moses; it does not mean they were saved at the moment of belief apart from obedience. The same Peter had already preached, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins” (Acts 2:38). Faith in Scripture is an obedient faith (Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27).

5. Name one preference of yours that you have quietly begun to treat as a requirement for other Christians. Decide what you will do about it this week, and tell one person you have decided it.

Answers will vary. Look for things like a style of dress, a school choice, a political position, a way of observing a holiday, a schedule of activities, or a method of Bible study that has hardened into a test of fellowship. Be ready to guard the other side as well: baptism for the remission of sins, the Lord’s Supper on the first day of the week, and singing without instruments are matters of God’s authority, not preference. Teaching the class to tell the two apart is the whole point.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Acts 15:9 is regularly quoted to support salvation by faith only. Keep it in Peter’s own context: he is recounting Cornelius, and in that very account he commanded baptism (Acts 10:48). Teach the whole pattern plainly and without heat.
- Do not let this chapter be used to justify a church council, synod, or headquarters with authority over congregations. The New Testament pattern is autonomous local churches with their own elders (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; 1 Peter 5:1–3).
- The four abstentions are not a complete moral code, nor are they a residue of the law of Moses binding today. Read them for what the letter says they are, along with the full New Testament teaching on idolatry and purity (1 Corinthians 6:9–20; 10:14–33).
- James’ use of Amos will meet premillennial teaching in some of your students. Handle it directly: the tabernacle of David is rebuilt in Christ and His church, which is why Gentiles are streaming in already, not in a future earthly reign.

NEXT WEEK’S READING: Leviticus 14–20 • Proverbs 17 • Matthew 15:10–39 • Acts 16

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