



Acts - Can I get a Witness?
Wk. 45 - Powerful Witnesses of the Christian Life
By Elder Candidate Onan Coca - 08/06/23

Acts 15:22-35

22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, 23 with the following letter:

“The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings.

24 Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions,

25 it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth.

28 For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements:

29 that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.”

30 So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. 31 And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.

32 And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words.

33 And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them.

35 But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

Powerful Witnesses of the Christian Life!

Good morning!

It is wonderful to be here with you this Lord’s Day, to worship and fellowship together.

Each time I am tasked with speaking, I find myself amazed at God’s providence and kindness because it feels like I’m always being given passages that speak specifically to my own heart, and this week is no different. The Bible is miraculous in that way because it is the very Word of God given to His people, and every word of it is profitable for us.



Acts - Can I get a Witness?
Wk. 45 - Powerful Witnesses of the Christian Life
By Elder Candidate Onan Coca - 08/06/23

Last week, Brother Mike explained that the Jerusalem council was called because of some who were teaching that in order for Gentile Christians to be saved, they must observe the ceremonial laws of Moses, highlighted in particular by the sign of circumcision. After a debate in Antioch could not resolve the issue, Paul, Barnabas, and some others were sent south to Jerusalem to find out what the “apostles and elders” thought. We then saw that the church of Jerusalem took the matter very seriously, as seriously as their brothers in Antioch, in fact. The debate was robust, but the arguments of Paul, Peter, and James carried the day (through the Holy Spirit’s obvious leading).

The Jerusalem Council decided that the Judaizers were wrong and stepped in to clarify the Gospel and denounce false teaching. They said the Gospel does not demand that Gentile Christians be circumcised or hold to the customs of Jewish ceremonial law. **They did so to protect the Gospel (that Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ Alone), preserve the unity of the church, and support the mission of evangelism to both Jews and Gentiles.**

In much the same way, the Early Church Councils that followed acted to do the same thing. As the writers describe in almost every book of the New Testament, there are many false teachings in the world, and they are constantly trying to infiltrate the church and undermine the Gospel. The early church faced many false teachings and teachers - a few examples besides the Judaizers are the Gnostics, the Nicolaitans, the Docetists, the Manicheans, the Arians, the Apollinarians, and the Pelagians, among others. Today, while many of these heresies have long been anathema in the Christian church, portions of their ideas live on all around us (Gnosticism in Star Wars, Christians who act like Docetists by over-spiritualizing everything, people who are functionally Pelagians because they deny the doctrine of original sin, both Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons embrace a form of Arianism and a recent survey by Ligonier Ministries, found that fifty-five percent of those surveyed agreed that “Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God.” Which means most Americans are Arians and heretics.) The point is Satan doesn’t really have any new tricks. The same false teaching that had to be battled in the early church can still be found in some form or another today.

This is why we must be as vigilant as the Apostles and the Early Church Fathers in contending for the faith that as Jude says, “was once for all delivered to the saints.”

With that being said, please open your Bibles to Acts chapter 15, verse 22, and stand with me for the reading of God’s Word.



Acts - Can I get a Witness?
Wk. 45 - Powerful Witnesses of the Christian Life
By Elder Candidate Onan Coca - 08/06/23

READ ACTS 15:22-35

This is God's Holy and Amazing Word. Let's Pray.

OPENING PRAYER

Our Sovereign and gracious Lord, we come before you today in humility and gratitude for all that you have done for us. Acts 15 is a brilliant example of how all of history is your story - and you use all things for the good of your church and for your own glory. Lord, as we spend time in your word today, may you open our hearts and minds to hear from you. Fill us with the faith to know and understand the truths that you have made plain in your Scripture. Sanctify us in the truth, your word is truth. I pray that you would use this time to edify this body - to grow us closer together and motivate us to the mission that you have called us to. Amen.

SERMON TEXT

Today, we will continue with some of the themes Brother Mike brought up last week, and we'll spend some time digging further to look at what I've titled **Powerful Witnesses of the Christian Life!**

Throughout the 1600s, Baptists, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians faced cycles of persecution and oppression from the British Monarchy. This shared suffering forged a kinship that existed despite their doctrinal differences. In the preface to the 2nd London Baptist Confession of Faith, leaders from 107 Baptist Congregations around the UK explained why they decided to publish their own Confession and why it was so similar to the recently created Presbyterian and Congregationalist counterparts.

Here's part of what those men said about the similarities in section 2 of the Preface:

... Another important reason we did this was to demonstrate our unity with both groups in all the fundamental doctrines of the Christian religion. We also wanted to demonstrate our unity with many others, whose orthodox confession have been published to the world on behalf of Protestants in various nations and cities. - LBCF Preface, section 2

Later in section 5 of the preface, they hope their "liberty" will not offend other believers who may disagree but instead allow faithful Christians to unite despite our differences.

There is one more thing we profess that we want people to understand, namely, that we do not want our work to cause conflict. We hope that people will not deny to us or be offended by this liberty of laying out our beliefs and opening our hearts to our brethren with these Scriptural grounds of our faith and practice...



Acts - Can I get a Witness?
Wk. 45 - Powerful Witnesses of the Christian Life
By Elder Candidate Onan Coca - 08/06/23

We hope that instead of focusing excessively on our differences, the focus of all who are called by the name of our blessed Redeemer would be to walk humbly with their God in the exercise of all love and meekness towards each other, as well as to perfect holiness in the fear of the Lord. We should seek to have conversations that are worthy of the gospel... - LBCF Preface, section 5

They use their liberty in an attempt to be faithful to Scripture. Still, they are considerate of those faithful Christians who may disagree in the hopes of fostering unity among believers - even if they don't always see eye to eye. In this preface, we see the same heart and mind evident in the Apostles and Elders at the Jerusalem Council more than 1600 years earlier. I hope that this same spirit will burn in us as well.

Last week Brother Mike explained that the central issue troubling Antioch and Jerusalem was a Gospel issue. The debate centered on "HOW" believers were to be saved in the wake of the Messiah's first coming. Much hinged on the outcome of the Jerusalem Council, and the tone and tenor of Acts 15 indicates that the church knew it.

Notice what it says in verse 22 of chapter 15:

22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, 23 with the following letter...

The whole church of Jerusalem was involved here, and they chose two of their most respected and well-known leaders to travel back to Antioch to deliver the news.

Judas and Silas went to make sure that everyone back in Antioch knew that the letter from Jerusalem was authentic. There could be no equivocation here - Gentiles (and Jews) are saved by grace, NOT by the works of the law.

Something that Paul reminds the church of later in Ephesians 2:8-9,

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Let's look again at the letter Jerusalem sent to Antioch:

"The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. 24 Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, 25 it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. 28 For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: 29 that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and



Acts - Can I get a Witness?
Wk. 45 - Powerful Witnesses of the Christian Life
By Elder Candidate Onan Coca - 08/06/23

from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.”

There is so much wonderful stuff in here. You can hear the love between these two churches, you can feel the empathy, and you can see the seriousness with which Jerusalem has taken this issue. But let's zero in on our first

1. Powerful Witness of the Christian Life - Liberty

It may seem strange for us to begin with “liberty” when this short letter contains four “requirements” that the Gentile Christians are expected to observe, but the freedom here comes from six simple words in verse 28 - “lay on you no greater burden.”

The New Testament writers spent much time reminding the early church that the works of the law were powerless to save. In fact, the theme of Paul's letter to the Galatians revolves around the reality that Christ's atoning work was necessary precisely because the works of the law could not save us!

Romans 8:3-4 confirms the weakness of the law

3 For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, 4 in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Christian, the law cannot save you.

We have a difficult job as believers living in our context here in Paulding County, Georgia. I say that not because we are being persecuted or mistreated for our faith, but quite the opposite. We live in the “Bible Belt,” in a community where most of our neighbors consider themselves Christians without knowing what it means. Sadly, this cultural identity has misled many of our neighbors. Years ago, I had the privilege of coaching high school baseball. One season the head coach hosted all the coaches at a cabin in the mountains for a weekend of strategy and camaraderie. We were going to plan out the coming season and talk about baseball. It was a wonderful time, but as the only believer on the staff, it meant some heavy lifting in the wee hours of the morning when the baseball talk stopped and the more philosophical spiritual conversations began. I learned a lot about my colleagues that weekend. One was a lapsed Roman Catholic whose pregnant girlfriend was tired of his late nights with friends. Another had a protestant background, and his pregnant girlfriend (a different girl) hoped he'd pop the question soon. The head coach was the toughest case, though. He was raised in the Church of God before attending college to play baseball. He was married with kids, but his parents weren't happy with him because of his constant need to drink alcohol. That evening he told me, “I figure, if drinking is the worst thing I do... I'll be ok.” To a man, every one of those coaches expected to live eternally in Heaven with the



Acts - Can I get a Witness?
Wk. 45 - Powerful Witnesses of the Christian Life
By Elder Candidate Onan Coca - 08/06/23

Lord, and to a man, every one of them thought it would be because they were “basically good people.”

Brothers and sisters, there is no such thing as a person who is “good enough” to earn eternity with the Savior.

Turn with me quickly to Revelation chapter 20, verses 11-15.

11 Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. 12 And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened.

These books are the books of our works, the things we have done in our lives, whether for good or evil. It's all recorded. It's a permanent record waiting for the day of judgment. Continuing in verse 12,

Then another book was opened, which is the book of life.

Revelation 13 tells us about the Beast, who is given the power to make war against the saints and who everyone on earth will worship, except for those whose names are written in the book of life before the foundation of the world. This is the book wherein the names of the elect, those saved by faith in Christ Jesus, can be found.

Back to verse 12

And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. 13 And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. 14 Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. 15 And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Anyone whose name is not found in the book of life will be judged according to their works, and as John explains, every person who is judged by their works will be thrown into the lake of fire. That means that the law, our works, are powerless to save us. No one will ever be justified by works of the law. No one.

OK. I know you're probably thinking, “Um, I thought we were talking about liberty. Shouldn't liberty be fun? This isn't fun.” We are, and the fun part is coming.

The Lord knew the law couldn't justify us, so He sent His Son to set us free from the law. In Jesus, we are free from the impossible chains of the law. His “yoke is easy, and His burden is light,” He lays on us no greater burden than this – that we repent of our sins and believe that He is the Holy One of God. That's it. That's all we “have” to do, and it gets better. He even gives us the faith to do that because we couldn't believe it on our own!

Ephesians 2:8 proclaims, **“8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God!”** Amen. Hallelujah. Thank you, Jesus, for that gift.



Acts - Can I get a Witness?
Wk. 45 - Powerful Witnesses of the Christian Life
By Elder Candidate Onan Coca - 08/06/23

Just like our brothers and sisters in Antioch, God has laid on us “no greater burden” than the Gospel has outlined. So what does this look like?

In the context of Acts 15, the Gentile believers were dealing with the Judaizers’ attempt to put them under the yoke of the ceremonial law. A few years earlier, the context was similar for Jesus, where the Jewish religious leaders had developed a massive web of man-made rules that they now held as tight-fisted as they did the actual laws of God.

While we may not have to deal with the Judaizers today, dueling forces still seek to enslave us. They are legalism - which enslaves us to man-made law - and licentiousness - which enslaves us to sin.

On the legalism side, I grew up hearing that drinking, smoking, card-playing, and dancing were all sinful. I never stopped to ask to be shown the Scripture.

There is wisdom in avoiding some of these things. It may even be better to never go near any of it - I keep trying to get Leah to stop making me dance with her at weddings. Sadly, she no longer believes me when I say, “It’s against my religion.”

On the licentious side, there are churches that allow members to stay in their fellowship even as they **continue** in open sin - whether living with a boyfriend or girlfriend, practicing homosexuality, abusing alcohol or drugs, or even cheating on their spouse.

When it comes to licentiousness, in 1 Corinthians 5, Paul tells us that while sinners are welcome in the church, if someone claims to be a Christian but is living in unrepentant sin, **we’re not to have anything to do with them.**

As for legalism, in Romans 14, Paul explains what our perspective should be. He tells us that when Scripture is silent, **we should not force our conscience on others.**

As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. 2 One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. 3 Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. 4 Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

We must neither be like the libertine, taking advantage of our liberty to throw it in the face of weaker brothers, or the legalist, who elevates human traditions or ideas to the level of Scripture.

Instead, we are free, At LIBERTY, to act as our conscience dictates on matters where Scripture is silent. It would be wrong for us, to act against our conscience simply because someone else tells us that something is right or wrong - if Scripture is silent.

Honestly, brothers and sisters, we cannot say it any better than Galatians 5:1 does - **“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”**



Acts - Can I get a Witness?
Wk. 45 - Powerful Witnesses of the Christian Life
By Elder Candidate Onan Coca - 08/06/23

The reality of this liberty is why the church in Antioch exults when they hear the news from Jerusalem. Acts 15:31 - **31 And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.**

The FREE Christian is a Powerful Witness to the watching world because no man can enslave what God has freed. This truth is why Paul could be stoned nearly to death but then rise and walk right back into the city. It's why Christians could endure being torn apart by animals in the Roman Colosseum or being burned at the stake for preaching the Gospel. It's why Christians could march into the concentration camps of Germany with courage, or believers behind the iron curtain could risk life and limb just to worship together. It's why our brothers and sisters in China, North Korea, and the Muslim world today can sing for joy in underground churches, even as their government and their neighbors seek to destroy them.

Whether it is the slavery of culture, the slavery of government, the slavery of comfort, the slavery of idolatry, or the slavery of false religion, the free Christian needs none of it, and it is **shocking** and **attractive** for the world to see.

This brings us to our second

2. Powerful Witness of the Christian Life - Consideration

Let's look at the letter from Jerusalem again,

24 Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions,

25 it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth.

28 For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements:

29 that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell."

30 So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. 31 And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.

32 And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words.

Verse 24 is the second line of the letter to Antioch, and in it, we can see the heart of the Apostles and Elders in Jerusalem as they highlight the problem - "some persons have gone out from **us**, they troubled **you**, they unsettled **you**, but we didn't tell them to do that." It's a very personal



Acts - Can I get a Witness?
Wk. 45 - Powerful Witnesses of the Christian Life
By Elder Candidate Onan Coca - 08/06/23

conversation being had between these two churches, and we can see that Jerusalem is upset that this has happened. They choose to involve themselves in order to come alongside their brothers in Antioch, which is why they send help in the form of Judas and Silas. Judas and Silas will confirm the authenticity of the letter, but as we read in verse 32, that's not the only reason they are going. They are also going to encourage and strengthen the brothers in Antioch - which will lead to what we see in verse 34, the continuation and expansion of the Gospel mission.

This is consideration, family. This is the church in Jerusalem considering their brothers in Antioch as more important than themselves. They have shouldered some of the blame for the confusion and have sent Judas and Silas to help correct it. They are participating in the difficulties faced by the young church in Antioch, and it is a beautiful picture of the brotherhood of believers.

Highlands Community Church is endeavoring to do the same. We have been growing and building relationships with brothers and sisters at New Georgia Baptist. Our Pastors have befriended their Pastor, and our students and families have been building relationships with their students and families. Together we have engaged in mission through World Changers, and (along with other churches in the West Metro) we have been supporting the work of evangelism and church planting in Ecuador. This is the kind of work the church must be engaged in, supporting and strengthening our fellow believers.

Let me just dig into this a little further.

This past year, my wife and children studied church history in our homeschooling, and part of that curriculum had them read the stories of faithful Christians throughout the last 2000 years. One of those that our family studied was a man named Brother Andrew. Brother Andrew, also known as "God's Smuggler," was born in the Netherlands in 1928 and was forced to witness the Nazi destruction of his homeland as a young man. By the time he became a Christian, the iron curtain had fallen across Eastern Europe, and Christianity was in danger of being crushed under the Communist boot. Brother Andrew felt the call of God to smuggle Bibles to the people of Eastern Europe, and so that is what he did. For 40+ years, Brother Andrew risked life and limb to smuggle thousands upon thousands of illegal Bibles into Eastern European countries in their own languages! Some churches he visited had few or even NO COPIES of the Scripture, and receiving such a gift drove their people to tears of joy.

On his first visit to what was then known as Czechoslovakia, Brother Andrew spoke to a group of gathered Christians, bringing them "greetings from Holland" because preaching could have gotten them all in trouble. After, the group gifted him with a silver lapel pin shaped like a cup, they said it was the symbol of the Church of Czechoslovakia, and they called it the "Cup of Suffering." They told Brother Andrew to take it home to Holland, and whenever someone asked about it, he should remind them that the Church in Czechoslovakia is "part of the Body too, and that they are in pain." Over and over again, Brother Andrew would encounter new siblings in the faith who were



Acts – Can I get a Witness?
Wk. 45 – Powerful Witnesses of the Christian Life
By Elder Candidate Onan Coca – 08/06/23

overjoyed at his coming. Just knowing that someone in the outside Christian world remembered them gave them the joy and strength to persevere. Church, we can all be like Judas and Silas, and Brother Andrew. We should all be like them. We have brothers and sisters suffering across the globe right now. In China, Pastor Wang Yi still sits in prison, four years into a nine-year sentence. His crime? Preaching the Gospel. The Chinese government sees the Gospel as seditious, and so this faithful Pastor, Husband, and Father rots away in a Chinese prison. His congregation continues to suffer persecution – they have lost jobs, homes, and some have likewise been imprisoned. In Nigeria, a new report on Christian martyrdom found that more than **50,000 Christians** had been murdered since the Islamic Insurgency began in 2009. Stories like these can be found worldwide today – our brothers and sisters are suffering, and we must remember them. So the church at Jerusalem was showing consideration for the believers in Antioch, but they also expected the church in Antioch to show consideration for Jewish believers.

We see 4 “requirements” in verse 29:

1. Abstain from food offered to idols
2. Abstain from meat with blood in it
3. Abstain from meat that has been strangled (which would have blood in it)
4. Abstain from sexual immorality (something everyone must do but had particular importance here in connection to their former pagan practices)

I know, I know! But you just said they were “free” and they weren’t adding any other burdens to them. What is it that Uncle Ben told Spiderman so many years ago? “With great power comes great responsibility.” The Biblical analogy is “to whom much is given, much is required.” We have great freedom, but that liberty comes with responsibility.

Weeks ago, Pastor Jody explained that Antioch was about as sinful and pagan a place as you could find during the early church. Countless pagan religions and temples were operating in the city, and each tried to outdo the others in debauchery and sin. Into this gross place, the Gospel enters and begins changing lives.

As Brother Mike said last week, these four requirements were all connected to the pagan practices that the Antiochan church had been saved out of. **The practical implications were that by showing themselves to be different, the church in Antioch would stand out, and their witness would increase.** Theologian Martyn Lloyd-Jones said it like this, **“The glory of the gospel is that when the church is absolutely different from the world, she invariably attracts it.”** - Martyn Lloyd-Jones

With these requirements the Apostles and Elders at Jerusalem were also telling the church in Antioch to show the Jews the same consideration that they were shown.

Paul also talks about the need for Christian consideration.



Acts - Can I get a Witness?
Wk. 45 - Powerful Witnesses of the Christian Life
By Elder Candidate Onan Coca - 08/06/23

In 1 Corinthians 8, he begins by explaining that Christians have the liberty to eat meat offered to idols, **BUT** just because we have liberty does not mean we should use it. Why? For the good of weaker brothers and the unity of the church. Verses 7 - 13 say

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. 8 Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. 9 But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. 10 For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? 11 And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. 12 Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. 13 Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

Paul argues that his liberty is **not** as valuable as the eternal souls of others.

Back in Romans 14, Paul explains that liberty must be tempered by love, which leads us to consider others before we act, and instead of always pursuing our liberty, we **"pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding."** (Romans 14:19)

Can we make this practical for the folks of Highlands Community Church? Perhaps an example, weak as it may be. I've mentioned alcohol already today and explained that there is no biblical command to abstain from alcohol, but that does not mean we should drink whenever we have the opportunity. Alcoholism is a form of idolatry, and it has shipwrecked many lives. From time to time, the grace of God frees people from its grip, but as with all sin, the threat of relapse is always crouching in the shadows. If called to share a meal with a recovering alcoholic, who still struggles with the desire to drink, is the more loving thing for you to exercise your liberty or to abstain in consideration of them?

Notice the language Paul uses in 1 Corinthians speaks to the "destruction" of the weaker brother - doing something that would lead them to fall away, perhaps forever. But in Romans, he argues that we should use this principle of consideration to "pursue peace" and "mutual upbuilding."

Martin Luther explained it like this, **"A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone."** - Martin Luther

Beloved, we have liberty, but love is more important. When the world sees Christians put others before themselves, they take notice. In the Gospel of John, our Lord told us as much when in John 13:34-35 He said, **"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. 35 By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."**



Acts – Can I get a Witness?
Wk. 45 – Powerful Witnesses of the Christian Life
By Elder Candidate Onan Coca – 08/06/23

How did Jesus love us? He laid down His life for us. For most of us, loving our brothers and sisters won't be so costly, so do we have any reason to complain when loving someone is uncomfortable or inconvenient? Of course not. When the world watches us sacrifice our rights and privileges for other believers, they are amazed, and our opportunity to preach the Gospel increases. So, we have discussed **Liberty and Consideration**. Now we come to our third and final

3. Powerful Witness of the Christian Life - Unity

Unity is difficult today, even among those who claim to agree. It wasn't easy in the world of Acts 15, either.

This is why when the world sees unity, they immediately recognize that something strange is happening.

Look back at our text in Acts 15 where we actually witness unity throughout this section of Scripture –

For example, the words “brothers” and “beloved” can be found several times– ensuring that Antioch knows they are loved.

In verses 22 and 25, the church at Jerusalem was united.

And in verse 32, we have Judas and Silas working as an extension of the church in Jerusalem, encouraging and strengthening the church in Antioch.

But we see this unity most clearly when after receiving the letter with joy and hearing Judas and Silas preach, the church in Antioch beautifully sends the Jerusalem contingent **home in peace**.

33 And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them. 35 But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

What could have caused a disastrous schism between Jewish and Gentile believers had instead turned into the strengthening of the bonds of brotherhood and unity because of the liberty given us in Jesus and the consideration and love that both groups exhibited for each other.

In Ephesians chapter 4, verses 1-16, Paul explains why our unity is essential, arguing that when we are unified, our body **WILL GROW** because it will be building itself up in love.

How will it grow? **Unity in the church leads to the spread of the Gospel and the winning of converts**. Beginning in John 17:20, Jesus prays His High Priestly prayer and asks the Father for unity among the faithful, **“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me...”**



Acts - Can I get a Witness?
Wk. 45 - Powerful Witnesses of the Christian Life
By Elder Candidate Onan Coca - 08/06/23

Do you see the rationale? Our unity proclaims powerfully to the world around us that God truly sent Jesus to save us, and so the world might know that God loves us, just as He loves His Son. How beautiful is that?

Unity of the believers is about more than not fighting.

It's about showing the world our God is real and He loves us. When the world sees that God loves us, He becomes more glorious to them, and He is glorified! **Unity brings glory to our God!**

Two related things need to be said here before we close:

1. **Unity can never come at the expense of essential Gospel doctrines.** That's why the Jerusalem Council had to happen. The people were divided. On one side were the Judaizers who said that you had to become a Jew to be saved; on the other side was the bulk of the church who recognized that the Gospel had to be defended from the Judaizers' legalism. This was a serious attack on the Gospel and had to be answered, even if it meant losing some people from the church.
2. **When it comes to non-essentials and areas where the Bible is silent, Christians should obey Titus 3:9 and avoid foolish disagreements.** Ignore silly controversies. Do not engage in disputes that won't build up the body. They aren't worth it; on the contrary, arguments like these end up tearing down those involved in them.

Instead - **glorify God by tempering your liberty with love and consideration, for this is how we build unity.**

The famous hymn writer, John Newton, said about Paul, **"Paul was a reed in non-essentials, an iron pillar in essentials."** - John Newton The same can be said about the Jerusalem Council here in Acts 15. They remained firmly committed to the essential truth of the Gospel, that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, but on non-essentials, they were wonderful exemplars of Christian liberty, consideration, and unity.

Through these three POWERFUL WITNESSES, let us be like Paul and the church in Acts, and the Lord will give us great opportunity to preach the Gospel and glorify His Son. What could be more important?

Please pray with me.

CLOSING PRAYER

O Holy and Heavenly Father, we pray that you would so grasp our hearts today that we will never be loosed from your hand. Would you please light in us a passion for your church? Do not let us grow fat and lazy in our comfort, but stir us to do the good works you have prepared for us from time immemorial. Remind us that you have set us free from the things of this world, but our



Acts - Can I get a Witness?
Wk. 45 - Powerful Witnesses of the Christian Life
By Elder Candidate Onan Coca - 08/06/23

freedom is not an end in and of itself. No, our freedom is so that we can give ourselves as a servant to our God and to His people. Lord, may we consider every brother and sister more significant than ourselves. Fill our hearts with love for the body so that when the world looks at us, they might be awed by the unity of your church.

Lord, we pray these things not for ourselves but for your glory. Please, use our little church to glorify yourself. Use our fellowship to be a light in this darkened world and to speak truth in a culture that loves lies.

Amen.

[COMMUNION]

[BENEDICTION]