

Grace Alone

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 02 November 2025

Preacher: James Tang

[0:00] All right. Hello, everyone. My name is Jay. If I haven't met you before. I am going to be sharing on a testimony today. So James asked me about two weeks ago to share, you know, he preached on Acts 14 last week, and we saw how Paul and Barnabas responded to both praise and criticism and how it's so different from how we, I guess, respond to praise and criticism.

So I guess the motto of the sermon, James, if I remember correctly, was how you react shows where you're at. Right. Yeah. Okay. Got it. Yeah. Did my own work. So I guess the heart of it was James wanted to just invite me up and share a criticism that I've received in my life and how I reacted to it. And I guess how I grew closer to God through that experience.

So, yeah, the criticism, this criticism is, it was from someone who's very close in my life. And actually only my wife, Emily, and James knows about this. And I really struggled and wrestled with this, whether or not I should share with the wider community. But after praying through it, I felt convicted that this was the one to share.

And so this is a very important person in my life. I won't share exactly who it is, but this person said to me. So the context, sorry, before I share what she said to me was, was she was going, she's going through a very rough period in her life.

And she's been struggling a lot and she's kind of been lashing out at people. And, you know, when you're hurt, you kind of hurt people around you as well. Right. So she's been in this really rough season. And in this process, I was just trying to be there for her.

[1:23] And she said to me, while I was trying to preach, not preach, share the gospel, the good news with her. You know, she was going through a lot of rough things and I was trying to share the good news with her. And she said to me, Jay, you know, you're the, you're the precise reason why I would never be a Christian because you're a hypocrite.

And I see the way that you live your life and I would never want to come into faith. And that struck me that really it's, it was like a dagger to the heart because I guess my faith is one of the most important aspects of my life.

And hearing that was just, it crushed me. It really just, it was a really humbling moment. And I have to admit my initial response. My wife saw me that night and I came home till, what's it, till between my legs and just completely defeated.

And I remember saying to my wife, I don't think I can do this anymore. I don't think I can walk with this person. I don't think I can love this person. I'm so deeply hurt. And I just, I want to let go of this relationship. And my wife didn't say anything to me at the time, but I guess that was my initial response.

And I thought on it. I prayed about it for a few days. And I was thinking as all of us, the followers of Christ, we ask ourselves the question, when we find ourselves at a crossroads, what do I do now?

[2:34] What do I do from here? There are certain decisions that we make, obviously, like what job should I do? What job should I take? Or, you know, that we just, it's not really clear which direction we should take. But I think in situations like this, when you're stuck in a relationship like this, God's quite clear, you know.

In John 10, 10, it says, the thief came to steal, kill, and destroy, but I've come to give life and life abundantly, right? So the Holy Spirit is always about unifying, and it's about not breaking down relationships, and it's about bringing healing together, right?

And that's what the whole point of what Jesus did, right? So I guess I wrestled with that, and I thought about that, and there was this quote in a book that I read a while back that kind of came back to me.

It's a book called *Falling Upwards* by Richard Rohr, and there's a quote in it that I love a lot. It says, more suffering comes into the world from people taking offense than by people intending to give offense.

So I'll say that one more time. More suffering comes into the world by people taking offense than intending to give offense. And so to break down that quote, how I interpreted it was, a lot of people, a lot of us, you know, we've all been hurt before.

[3:38] We've also hurt people, all of us. I hope we all have the humility to acknowledge that. And when we do get hurt, I'm sure a lot of us aren't out here trying to hurt people, right?

I'm not going to go out and actively, intentionally try to hurt people, but it's usually when someone says something hurtful to us that we respond, right? It's our pride. Our pride gets handled, and we want to respond in a negative way.

We want to hurt back. We want to hold on to resentment. We hold on to unforgiveness. That's the natural response, right? But Jesus did it very differently, right? Jesus, his message was completely different.

And when I think about, so I asked myself the question, Jesus, what would you do in my situation now? I have been hurt by this person. Well, frankly, it's my pride. My pride has been handled, and I just, I don't want to walk with this person anymore.

And Jesus is very clear. He would love. He would forgive, right? So the what was really clear to me. I know I need to forgive. Now, the harder question was, how do I do this? How do I move forward with this? And I think that's the part I really wrestled with a lot.

[4:34] So we have to go back to Jesus. And when we look at the life of Jesus, he was ridiculed. He was mocked. He was offended multiple times.

He was called the prince of demons by the Pharisees. He was, yeah, he was nailed to the cross for us, right? And his message has always been forgive, right?

So as I was thinking about that, okay, Jesus, you forgave me. And if I really understood this in the depth of my heart, I would find it in my heart to be able to forgive this person.

So I think the focus became less about me and trying to forgive this person actively out of my strength. And my focus, I try to change my focus towards Jesus and what he did. And I think a lot of us who've experienced the Holy Spirit or have experienced Christ, we know that when we take the focus off of ourselves and we look to Jesus, that's when the very desires of our heart begins to change.

So it's not really about trying to actively change our behavior, but it's actively looking to something else, the source of life, and the source of life will begin to change our heart. So that's just a short testimony on, I guess, how I respond.

[5:42] Oh, sorry. Sorry. Quickly, James. I do have to admit this is still an ongoing thing. There are days where I want to give up. There are days where I don't want to walk with this person anymore. And I think it's what James recommended last week.

I've been, I've listened to your sermons, James. He said, when we respond, one of the best ways to respond to criticism is scripture and solitude. And I really can't agree more. I really think it is scripture and solitude.

If we respond to criticism by just receiving it and just internalizing it and trying to get through it ourselves, I just don't think it works like that. But I think there's power when we get to the word, the truth of God, and we separate ourselves from all the distractions.

And we say, okay, God, is this truth? And then letting, giving room to let the truth transform our hearts. I think that's so important. So I think, I guess, I don't know what criticisms you guys have received in your life, but I struggle with it.

I don't do it perfectly. But I found that when I go back to scripture and solitude, it always helps me reframe, I guess, lies that I've heard in my life or criticisms that I've received in my life.

[6:49] Can we give a round of applause? Stay, stay, stay, stay, stay. Thank you. Thank you. As you can see, as you can tell, Jay is just one of these incredibly reflective, incredibly sincere.

And just, I know Emily always receives him and helps him process a lot of these things. And so I just wanted to have him share with you. Actually, that's the journey. And it reminds me of just Jesus in his sermon, right?

He says, blessed are you when others utter all kinds of evil against you, vile things, falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad. And just to have, just to see him have the heart of Christ is just

something that's really encouraging.

Can we just stretch our hands and pray for him? Thank you, Lord, for Jay, for his heart, to love those around him. We know he's not perfect.

None of us are. And we still jump to pride and insecurity and being defensive too quickly. And yet we thank you.

[7:50] We thank you for your word. Thank you for the words that you speak over us, that you speak over him. That you love him. That you love us. And so we seek to simply live for that audience of one.

To continue to share the good news. To continue to pursue, even in the face of criticism, even persecution, whatever it may be. In your name we pray.

Amen. Thanks, Jay. Yeah, that quote last week from Tim Keller. Oh, dear. If you live for praise, you will die from criticism.

If you live for praise, you will die from criticism. And just this idea of actually, how are we reacting to things? When people say things to us, about us, how are we responding?

Because that will tell you where you're at. We've, in some ways, Jay has what he's done for us.

He's kind of wrapped up. Last week was kind of like a season finale. If you like watching shows, you'll see, you know, that they often finish on cliffhangers almost.

[8:51] Listen, last episode was pretty epic. You had Paul being seen as a god. And then you had him being stoned nearly to death. That's a really good place to kind of just finish the season.

And then it kind of stops here. And we actually move into Acts chapter 15, where it really jumpstarts a next season for both Paul, Barnabas, and the whole crew.

And actually, this is where their second missionary journey happens. And we're going to be jumping into that. It's an interesting one, as I was doing my research, not many people really like to speak on Acts 15.

Acts 8 is fun, because Philip gets zapped, meets an Ethiopian chariot, saves, baptizes. Acts 9, Saul gets zapped, blinded, converts. It's pretty cool.

Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10, exciting. Acts 11, Antioch, boom, the church explodes. Really exciting. Acts 13 was, of course, lots of drama. Acts 15 is about a theological discussion.

[9:50] And not only that, it's a theological discussion on the topic of circumcision. I mean, who's interested in that? Just a theological discussion on circumcision. Who's down, ready?

Juju is ready. Caleb is ready. All right. Okay. You guys stumped me, but we will talk about that. Well done. But here I am to try to hopefully convert you guys to have the same heart and mind as Juju and Caleb here.

To be passionate about circumcision and theology is what we're going to be doing. But before that, why don't we just jump into the Word of God? And Jay is great, but he is not the better half. The better half is actually Emily. So we're going to invite Emily to come and minister to us with the Word of God.

Can I invite you to stand for the Word of God? Acts chapter 15. Thank you. Yes, I'm reading from Acts chapter 15, 1 to 21.

But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved. And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and to the elders about this question.

[11:05] So being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers.

When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.

The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.

And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them by giving them to the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. And he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.

[12:18] And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. After they finished speaking, James replied, Brothers, listen to me.

Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles to take from them a people for his name. And with this, the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written. After this, I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen.

I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it. That remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord who makes these things known from old.

Therefore, my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled and from blood.

For from ancient generations, Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him. For he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues. This is the word of the Lord.

[13:28] Praise be to God. Please take a seat. Thank you. Thank you, Emily. I was actually blessed and ministered to this week by Emily. Emily, Jay, myself, and a few others are actually on a daily 7.30 in the morning call.

It's very Korean, early morning prayer. And actually, she chose this week to read scripture to us and over us before we prayed. And actually, that just reminded me. It was super, super blessed just to have her read.

So, confession. You read that passage. I don't know how you feel. I kind of know how I feel about it. It's kind of like, oh, it's one of those doozies that you kind of just read through. All right. Let's move on to the next chapter kind of thing.

But then I invite you actually today to do what I did. I had the privilege to do this week, which was to really lean in to this passage. And this passage is really interesting. So, I encourage you just to grab your popcorn. Imagine that you are actually sitting there in that council.

And actually hearing the people speak about different things. Because actually, one thing that's interesting about this chapter, about what's happened here, I think this moment defines the church. This moment defines the church to be basically a church that is following the way of Jesus and not end up being just a Jewish sect, which actually it could have done.

[14:35] And then actually, it would have stopped there. We might not even be sat here. We're not for this council. Because actually, this is where they decided what is a Christian. What is a Christian? And from there, we've gone to where we are now.

So, it's that really important. So, it's probably one of the most important crossroads in the annals of church history in the sense that actually, here is one of those moments where we find out how church politics works.

It's a good model of how church politics works. The moment you hear that, and I'm aware that we have some people on the deacons board here, church council. Sounds exciting, doesn't it? Sounds interesting.

Sounds fun. I can see a deacon shaking her head. It's not fun. It's not exciting. It's long. Church politics. You hear about this. And who likes church politics? We always talk down about church politics. Oh, I hate church.

There's so much politics. There's politics everywhere. There's politics where there are people, right? That's just what it is. But I'm going to say this. We always hear about church politics almost in a negative sense. But I'll also say this.

[15:31] Church politics are very, very necessary. You need to have these moments where people are talking about important matters and being open about them. And here is a really fascinating one.

So grab your popcorn because what here is trying to say is Christianity is not Judaism. And actually, Christianity can be placed on top of any and every culture.

But that was not the case right here. Context. Paul and Barnabas, they go to Antioch. They do lots of crazy things. They're treated as gods. They're thrown. The stones are being thrown at them. And then they continue to grow.

And the volunteer movement really grows here. He builds. He strengthens the souls of the disciples. This is the end of chapter 14, encourages them to continue. And then basically so many elders are appointed to basically lead the church.

So it's exciting. But what happens here is as the ministry is thriving, there are a group of people that head into the church. Imagine you've just come from Jerusalem, from a different town. And you come into the church and you insist on one thing.

[16:30] And this is verse 1. But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.

What they're saying is this. If you want to be a Christian, you must first be Jewish. That's what they're saying. Remember, the church is exploding right now. It's gone from the Jews and now to the Gentiles, where people have lived very different kinds of lives.

The Jewish people have kept those traditions for a very, very long time. And now you've got all these other people coming in who have lived very different lives. So actually, it's understandable that this group, actually, they're called the Judaizers, which is basically a group of people who are super enthusiastic.

Pharisees who are super enthusiastic about maybe the legalistic side of things, the traditional side of things, the law-abiding side of things. So you almost really understand where they're coming from. They're saying, hey, there's so many people coming into our church now.

We need standards. We need standards to keep these people basically living the way that they should be because out there in the world is messy. So why don't we do this? Why don't, if they care about what we're doing, they would get circumcised to become Jews and they would sacrifice what we sacrifice.

[17:39] That is kind of what they're saying, which is interesting because actually now we look at Christianity. If you think about Christianity, some people have said this. It's, oh, it's a Western religion. Well, it wasn't always a Western religion.

You see, Christianity, what it should be is one that goes into any culture and every culture and goes on top of it. I know that the Browns and a few other people were in Korea this last week.

And you go to Korea, I mean, 150 years ago, there were no Christians in Korea. A couple of Catholic missionaries there. But it really then exploded to the point now where there's churches everywhere. I think it's 20, 30% Christian, identify as Christians.

The biggest church in the world is in South Korea. I mean, what's the name of the church? Yoido, full gospel church. It's on an island apparently somewhere, right? 800,000 people. I don't even know how that works.

The fire hazards. And you see, they're so Christian. I mean, we were walking through the main town and we just saw just these people trying to share the gospel in their very own Korean way that I completely didn't understand.

[18:43] I mean, I'm looking at the words and I can't even guess what those words are. Just circles and smiley faces. But you can see that they love... Sorry, Jay. That was really dismissive. I'm really sorry.

But then I'm like, whoa. These are not Koreans trying to be Western Christians. These are Koreans being Christian. And you can see the gospel just permeating into every culture and above every culture.

And you also see they're embracing it. The problem is these guys are not wanting that. And it's funny. Verse 2. And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders about this question.

I think it's funny. Verse 2. Had no small dissension and debate with them. Kind of like me and my wife saying, yeah, we didn't really argue about it. We did. It was no small dissension.

What does that even mean? That means you really had a big argument about this. So basically the church ministry was thriving. But this group of people saying, hey, these new believers must be Jewish. And they must follow all the Jewish customs. And Paul and Barnabas would fight them and basically argue with them to the point where, okay, we're not going to solve it here.

[19:53] We're going to have to take it to Jerusalem. And that's when I think it gets really, really fascinating. So they go all the way to Jerusalem. And what we see is just the Avengers assembled.

Bear in mind, Saul was converted maybe 10 to 13 years ago by now. Okay. But he hasn't really hung out with Peter. Peter, the guy that hung out with Jesus for three years.

But this is the first time they all are in one place. This is why I'm saying grab the popcorn. Can you imagine being in that room? People arguing about whether new believers should get circumcised. And then just over there, look, that's Peter. Peter is there. The one that actually was with Jesus. And that's Paul.

You know, Saul, do you remember that guy that we heard that's killing people? Dragging people into prisons? He's here. That's James. The half-brother of Jesus.

[20:53] He would have seen Jesus as a child. What? James. Saul. Paul. Peter.

They're all in the room together doing church politics. Having a theological discussion. And as we keep going, this is what happens.

So they go on their way. And when they, verse 4, when they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders. And they declared all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, it is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.

Verse 6. The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. And after much debate. That is so interesting. That is so, so interesting.

Because what you have is the guys going, well, how do you get saved? How do we know that he's actually a Christian?

[21:52] He lived such a dodgy life before. I mean, he went to this dodgy school called HKIS. Completely just God forsaken land all the way out. And sadly, how do we know that this guy is actually Christian?

Well, there's only really one way. Let's make him follow some of the traditions. Let's get him circumcised. And it's not just circumcision. It's all these other laws that he has to follow.

Otherwise, how do we know? You see, Pharisees are actually put in a bad light all the time, right? These guys who are grumpy, who just look at Jesus and try and kill him and try and argue with him. But I don't know. I have a lot of sympathy for the Pharisees, actually.

Because if you think about what they've done in their whole lives to try and keep to the straight and narrow path, almost. All the laws that they had to abide. Look at all the Old Testament laws in Leviticus.

They've abided to all of them. They've memorized scripture. They're there. They're serious about God. And now you've got this random guy. You've got this John the Baptist who's out in the wilderness, just dressed in a funny way. And saying, look at that guy.

[22:50] And then the other guy comes and he's completely unorthodox and does things in a completely different way. Seemingly very progressive and liberal and open. I can almost imagine how I would be if I was a Pharisee.

I'm not sure. This isn't right. How do I maintain the standards of this congregation? How do I quality control this group of people here? Let's have them follow the laws.

It just makes sense. It's what we've all had to do. It's what we've all done. I can almost see it. And just when we go, hey, I mean, this church is, I guess in some ways it feels a little bit unorthodox. But you can see how they got there. Because there's different kinds of people who have worshipped all kinds of gods come in. How do you kind of bring it all back? And how do you keep everyone on the same page?

Let's follow the Jewish laws. And then, so there's lots of debate. People are arguing. And then Peter stands up. Peter. Peter, the rock that Christ will build the church on.

[23:44] Peter stands up and he says this. Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us.

And he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?

But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus just as they will. Verse 12. It's funny. And all the assembly fell silent. Peter shares what he has to say and then he drops the mic.

And no one dares to speak. Which is completely understandable. Because Peter just spoke. Peter, who actually was the one that actually shared the gospel to the Gentiles.

Remember in Acts 10, he has this dream, meets Cornelius. They have this gathering. And the Holy Spirit, before Peter even finishes speaking, he doesn't even land the plane for his sermon. He doesn't even jump into his application points.

[24 : 43] The Holy Spirit drops down on the people and they all start speaking in tongues. And he sees the Holy Spirit in the Greeks and in the Gentiles. And so he sees all this. So he appeals to it basically with his own personal experience.

He's like, I was there. Actually, it came through me. So I'm the one who's going to share about this first. And everyone just goes quiet. Because they do. Because it's Peter. And he's like, and I think it's interesting.

He says this. God doesn't make a distinction between us and them having cleansed their hearts by faith. Well, actually verse 8. And God who knows the heart bore witness to them. He's saying, hey, you're worried about where these people are at and whether they're going to hold the standards. Well, God knows their heart. Guess who else God knows? Us. He knows our hearts too. And then he says this fascinating line. Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?

He's like, look, guys, we haven't been able to follow the law properly. We haven't been able to succeed and be pure. That's why Jesus had to come. If we have failed, why are we asking them to do it?

[25 : 45] We're putting something around their neck to burn in them when actually we have struggled since the beginning of time as well. Why are we doing this? We're putting God to the test. What does that mean? That means he's saying you're daring God to judge them.

You're saying this is the only way that they can be saved. You're testing the love and the grace of God. You're testing the sacrifice of Jesus and what he did. Are you sure you want to do that?

Because if we go on that measuring stick, I don't know if any of us are going to survive.

And if Peter says that, no one else can really say anything else. That is why the assembly falls silent. After lots of debate, they are quiet. And then what happens after this?

Well, there is a guy who is maybe just as brave. So you can see Peter talking. He sits down.

Everyone's quiet. And then Paul and Barnabas stand up. My goodness. The popcorn. Please keep it coming. And so Paul and Barnabas stand up and they say, actually, we agree.

We've been there. We were in Antioch. We've seen the Holy Spirit move amongst these people. So what they do is actually they appeal a lot to just the experiences that they've had.

[26 : 51] They're like, we can't even deny this. One, myself, Paul, I was blinded and then was told to go out here. And so that's my job now. And I've been seeing God move everywhere. What's super, super interesting after that is then the senior pastor stands up.

Who is the senior pastor? It's not Peter anymore because Peter's done his thing and he's now moved on. And scripture says he just kind of carried on ministering in different places. The senior pastor of this church in Jerusalem stands up.

James. The brother of Jesus, James. The one who actually had said, actually, you guys are going crazy. He's saying Jesus is going crazy.

Because, of course, that would make complete sense, too. He watched this brother grow up with him. And now suddenly he's the son of God. So actually he was one of the most skeptical. But now he's the senior pastor of the church in Jerusalem.

And it's fascinating to watch. So he ends up going, okay, Peter, I've heard what Peter says. He's appealing to the theology. He's appealing to the fact that we are now saved only by grace.

[27 : 51] And that he was actually part of that spreading of the mission to the Gentiles. And now I've heard Paul and Barnabas speak and tell us all the things that are happening in Antioch. And so then he stands up and then he responds.

James replied, verse 13. Brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first. It's funny. He refers to Peter by his old name. Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles to take from them a people for his name.

And with this, the words of the prophets agree just as it is written. And then he quotes the book of Amos, 9, 11, and 12. After this, I will return and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen. I will rebuild its ruins and I will restore it.

That the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord who makes these things known from of old. He takes Peter's theology.

He takes his experience. He takes Paul and Barnabas' stories. And then he puts them back under the word of God. Isn't that cool? It's not like, oh, okay, he said this, let's just follow that. No, no, no. He brings it back to the word of God.

[28:53] Whether it's our own personal experiences, whether it's our own theology, whether it's our own preferences, whatever it is, he brings it and he submits it unto the word of God. And that's how he makes that final decision. And he basically appeals to the people and saying, actually, I think that they are right.

This is what scripture says. That God is going to rebuild the tent of David, the Jews, but then he is also going to basically stretch out and even the Gentiles he will call by name, which would have been mind-blowing for the Jews.

Because since the beginning, they would have been like, no, it's about us. We're the chosen people. But James looks into scripture and goes, no, I think this has always been the plan, guys. We just haven't been getting along with this part. And now we can see it's actually happening. Isn't that mind-blowing? He actually turns the whole talk, though, from one of theology, one of circumcision and following laws, and now into a realm of sociology because he says this.

And this is a sign of a good leader. This is a sign of good church politics. They listen to each other. They share their own thoughts and experiences. They submit it under the word of God.

[29:59] And they come to some kind of decision. And the decision isn't, all right, let the new people come in. They can do whatever they want. They can stay as they want. That's not what he says. What he says is this, verse 19.

Therefore, my judgment as the senior pastor of this church that my brother started and gave his life for and is now living again in heaven, is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but 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.

For from ancient generations, Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues. He turns the problem and goes, actually, I'm going to blow this wide open.

It can be for everyone, but I'm also going to raise the bar. The people who are coming in, we're going to let them come in, but actually we're going to have to call them higher because there are things that they are doing.

There are festivals they are going to. There are dinners and parties they are going to that actually are polluted by idols. Some of these places that they're going to, and maybe you and I have been part of some of these where you get invited to some of these things and once you're there, you're like, well, I'm not sure I actually should be here.

[31:09] And he's saying, okay, we're going to let you in. We're not going to force you to be a Jew because we don't believe that anymore because we believe that we are saved by grace and by believing in Jesus. But, but we will let you in, but we will also call you higher because you do have to separate yourself.

Isn't that a sign of a good leader? Isn't it amazing to see James, the brother of Jesus, go on this journey and now lead this church in the midst of some pretty strong characters?

I would not want to be pastoring a church where Peter is out there. No. And yet with authority that comes only from God, James says, hey, this is what I've decided.

Let's call these people higher. And it shows really an example of church leadership, church politics, church decision making done well.

I really do appreciate what we see here. And it's actually important, just before you think, well, is James just one of those lax leaders that says, hey, everyone in, we don't need to follow any laws. No. To be honest, when you're looking at this passage and you're looking at James here, I think you also have to actually open up the book of James and see what he writes, where he says, actually, you can't just believe.

[32:15] Even the devil, even the demons believe, but your faith has to have works. So what he's, he's actually, up until recently when my book is the same as, my favorite book in the Bible is

Philippians.

But before that, for the longest time, it was actually the book of James. And not just because he had a good name, but because he was a very practical person. I love James because he's like, he's such a practical guy.

It's very black and white for him. And so this is what he's saying. And so he's saying, actually, the only bar here is that you believe in Jesus.

And then he calls it higher and says, actually, but you need to change the way you live. You need to surrender some of those idols. There are some parties, admittedly, that you can't go to. There are some things that you cannot eat anymore, not because you are free to do whatever you want, but because those things are part of idol worship.

And you don't want idol worship in your life. Because there's only one God, is what he's saying. So he makes this decision. And actually, it's interesting here, he says, verse 21, which sounds a little bit confusing.

[33:17] For from ancient generations, Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he has read every Sabbath in the synagogues. What he's actually saying is, hey, actually, those, even the people outside the synagogues, outside the church, they know the holiness of God.

They know he's different. Let's not scoop down to that level. Let's not do the things that they're doing. Because actually, everyone else, they know who God is. It's just whether they choose to follow him or not.

But our job is to actually maintain that high bar. And to stay there, because actually, people know. And then they write this letter, verse 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 Barnabas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, with the following letter. I love those words in verse 22. Peter, the rock. Paul, the persecutor, the murderer, now the convertor, now the biggest church planter.

Well, he doesn't know this quite yet, but that's what he's going to be. And then James, the senior pastor of the Jerusalem church. It seemed good to the apostles. There's just this humility that comes when they make a decision together.

[34:26] It wasn't they are completely certain, but it was actually it seemed good to them. Church politics sometimes is bad, but it is always necessary because decisions need to be made together amongst apostles and elders, people who have different perspectives, who counterbalance one another, who talk about these things.

And at the end of the day, the decision is made. They stack hands and they go, it seems good to do this. That's all we can say because we are not God. We can only discern together what the heart of God is and go, it seems good.

And it's funny, in the letter that they write, verse 28, for it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit, not just to them. That's how every decision should be made as a church leadership.

Where they get together, they discuss topics, where they talk about these things, and they go, well, actually, it seems like this is where the Holy Spirit is leading us. And actually, they pen this letter, which is actually a really beautifully written letter, where it actually is filled with truth, but it's also filled with love and grace.

And it's just so well written. The brothers, both the apostles and elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Sicilia, here, greetings. 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, they are from us, but we didn't send them.

[35:44] 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, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. He's saying to the church, Antioch, hey, we know that you guys saw Paul and Barnabas arguing with a group of people.

We want you to know that they've come to Jerusalem. We've had a meeting, and it's been a very long meeting. It took all of our weekend. But now it seems good to us to share with you.

And actually, we're not just going to send Paul and Barnabas back. We're going to send the whole crew back to come and support you together. And here it is. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth.

Verse 28, for it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements, 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. Okay, bye. I mean, a really nice letter. And this is verse 30.

[36 : 45] And when they were so sent off, they went down to the Antioch, and having gathered the congregation, they delivered the letter. Verse 31, and when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. Of course, they found out that they don't have to get circumcised, so there's definitely got to be a party there.

So they're like, yes! That doesn't have to happen anymore. Just this letter just shows me what it really means for churches to really make decisions together.

Church leadership. So if you're in a leadership position in church, whether you are on the deacon's board here for Gong Fu Thong, or whether you're just anywhere, that's how you do it. You listen.

You discern together.

You take it to the Word of God. And you go, does this sit under the Word of God? And if it does, you stack hands. And those who actually disagreed are now together. They are of one accord.

They are unified in their decision-making. And, of course, the church, in turn, has been blessed. It reminds me of the quote from a Lutheran theologian which says this, In essentials, unity.

[37 : 45] In non-essentials, liberty. And in all things, charity. In essentials, the things that you cannot let go of. That Jesus is the Son of God.

That He came and He lived and He died and then He rose again for us. And that by doing so, we are now freed from all the debts of our sin. And now He has risen to heaven and He will come back again and He will restore this whole world in Revelation 21.

Those things you cannot, those are non-negotiables. In those essentials, unity. We have to be united on those core things. But in the non-essentials, liberty.

In the things that aren't of the most importance. They're not core doctrine. Those things, liberty.

Let's be free. And in all things, charity. Charity.

And another version is love. In all things, can we deliver it in love? Can we be that kind of gathering? Can we be that kind of church where we look at these debates and we go, actually, these are important things.

[38 : 44] Why is it important? John Stott says this. The decision of the Jerusalem Council was a landmark in the history of the early church. It affirmed that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

The yoke of the law was a burden neither they nor their fathers had been able to bear. But now they have the yoke of Christ. You and I, before we look at these Judaizers and these Pharisees, we have to ask ourselves one question.

How do we think we're going to get into heaven? Is it because of something that we've done? Or how we are? And look, God, what we're doing for you. How I'm trying to love you.

Before we point the finger at these Pharisees and go, well, these guys are a bit silly. It's only Jesus. We have to ask ourselves that same question. Because it's really interesting.

There's something about us in our hearts where we add legalism to our faith so, so easily. We get to a point where we go, yeah, I'm saved because of Jesus and also because I'm a good person.

[39 : 50] I'm a Christian because Jesus died for me. But it's also because I do charity work. I'm a good follower of Christ because I go to church on Sundays and I do BSF on Tuesdays.

We have to actually examine our own hearts and go, actually, how do we think we're actually saved? It is so easy because we are just so selfish. We are so self-centered.

Everything we have the ability to add us onto that. It's funny. This is the council. And then, of course, the church continues to progress. And maybe a few Sundays ago, I talked about the progression of the church.

Every 500 years, something happens. The Catholic church continues to grow. And then, of course, by 1080, that's when the Great Schism and the church splits. And then in 1500 is when we, well, I say we, none of us were actually there at that time.

But we protested, right? And we say, oh, actually, we've gone too far. We think we're saved by all these things. But no, we're only saved by one thing. We're only saved by the blood of Jesus, by his grace.

[40:55] And that's it. And so Martin Luther actually then basically starts a whole new. And we're all Protestants. We're all evangelical Christians because of that. It's fascinating. Even Martin Luther, there's reports, if you study his life, and you see actually later in his life, even though he was the key person to protest and start this whole arm of Christianity, somewhere along the line, he's faced with people that he's looking after and shepherding.

And he's seeing the moral standards of the church slip. And he starts putting things into place to go, how can we make sure that we keep our standards? It's fascinating. Tertullian is another example of a pastor who actually just, the theologian who actually went that way.

It's so easy for legalism to seep back into our mindset. That's why every time you think and you assess yourself, am I a good Christian? Well, there is no such thing.

And I want you to keep remembering that. Am I being a good Christian? No, there is no such thing as being a good Christian. Christians are people who recognize that they are bad and that they are saved by the only one who is good.

And I say this and it kind of comes through, yeah, that makes sense. But it's so easy. It's so easy. After a few days of kind of living in this world, I'm back to wondering, actually, what do I need to do to earn God's approval? What do I need to do to become that good Christian again?

[42:09] So I can, maybe I need to sit with my Bible again five minutes a day and that will make me a good Christian again. You see, straight away, that legalism just seeps in once again. That's why I think Paul and Barnabas felt it was so important to tackle this straight away.

To even pause their ministry in Antioch going, we need to make sure this is right. Because this is the only thing that matters. Because they knew of the idols that we have. And one of the idols is actually just simply even religion.

How do you think you can get to heaven? Oh, because I've been a religious person. No, no, no. That is definitely not. It's what Charles Spurgeon said. It's dangerous. It's not the difference between right and wrong. It's the difference between right and almost right.

As you look at your life, are you right? And the only right is that you only trust in the name of Jesus. Or are you almost right in that you trust in Jesus plus how you're going to live your life?

When you meet Jesus, your creator, are you going to think about everything that you've done? Or are you going to think about the one thing that he did for you? That's the difference.

[43:19] And I think that's something that we have to remind ourselves every day. Because I think I would be tempted if I meet my creator now. I'd be like, God, I think I've done well. I think Christina and I have really tried to just be faithful to you and follow you and obey you and sacrifice.

Those things even sound good, right? But when you meet the creator, the only thing is, thank you, Jesus. Just you.

Only you. Nothing more. I think we all need to have to come to terms with that. Martin Lloyd-Jones says this. The whole case of the Jerusalem Council rested on this.

What is the basis of salvation? Is it Christ plus something else? The moment you add anything to Christ, you have denied the faith. Paul, Peter, and Barnabas all testified that God had accepted the Gentiles by faith alone on the same basis as the Jews.

The grace of the Lord Jesus is entirely sufficient. That's it. Do you recognize that you're sat here because of the grace of Jesus and nothing else?

[44:30] Or do you think you're sat here because you're a good person and you're trying to be a good person and you've been working hard to be a good person? I'll tell you one thing that does. Actually, I've been hearing stories about people just feeling courage in sharing the gospel.

I heard this incredible story from just Kelly just living out her faith this last week. And I realize it's much easier to live out your faith when you react to the gospel appropriately, which is that we are nothing.

We are dead. We are blind. We are lost. But now we are free. We are alive, made alive together. We can see. We are found. When you do that, then there's nothing left to lose. So when you meet people and you realize, actually, the fact that I'm saved has nothing to do with me anyway.

It's God who did it all. I'm actually free to then share it with you and go, hey, you can get some of this too. You don't have to try and be a good person like me. I recognize I'm a bad person and I got saved and swooped up. You can have the same.

It frees you. It frees you to talk to those colleagues and go, hey, actually, I want to share with you some good news. I know you're stressed about your work. I know you're stressed about the

markets. But can I share with you some good news?

[45:34] The things that you're stressed about, they will all pass away at some point. But there's one thing that won't, that you are deeply loved. And there's nothing you can do to cause God to love you more or less. He just loves you that much to the point where he gave his son to die for you.

Can we get to a place where we are so selfless, where we're able to share that without any concern or worry? Even when it leads to suffering. Even when it leads to persecution. Even when it leads to those who we love the most trying to hurt us.

Can we be in that place where we are immune to both praise and criticism? I've shared many times before, my favorite quote of humility is just being as close to the truth as possible.

It's not anything, as C.S. Lewis says, to not think less of yourself, but just think of yourself less. To not really care what others think. Why? Because you know that you are saved by grace. And that's it. And you hope the same for other people.

So, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of one accord, being of one mind and spirit and one love.

[46:46] Do nothing from selfish ambition and conceit. But in humility, consider others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus. Who, though it was the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.

But emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And he humbled himself to the point of being obedient, to the point of death.

Even death. On the cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him. To have the name above every name.

So that every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. What if that was the only thing we cared about? Not our name. Not what we can do.

[47:44] But we are a group of people who were sat here, standing on the work of Jesus and his work alone. And that's it. Ellen mentioned at the beginning, these last few weeks, we've been looking at just these giants of the faith.

Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and how they've lived. There's just this piercing conviction that comes through all of them that is not about them at all. They just don't care.

Because it's about Jesus. And about his grace. Can we be in that place? I'll finish with a final quote. Francis Chan says this, And I finish with what Jay started.

What would Jesus do? I mean, I, as I said, I grew up in the 90s, the late 1900s, with those really cool wristbands that said WWJD. Does anyone still have them? 90s fashion has come back around. Surely they're making a comeback also. What would Jesus do? Just this beautiful reminder that that's how we should react.

[49:06] Every time we're faced with someone or something, we go, Lord, how would you react here? Or maybe just to go a step further, it's actually what would love have me do?

What's the most loving response I can give right now as this person is trying to stab me in the heart? What if I didn't care about myself?

What if I didn't take offense at what you're saying because I know that Jesus already took the biggest offense for me? What would that look like? What if I don't have to defend myself anymore? Because someone was put on a cross for me.

I think that's freeing. I think that's freeing. But I think it's a daily reminder every day of asking ourselves, what would Jesus do? And the answer is so simple.

He just went on the cross. That's what he did. We're going to take communion now. And I want to ask you that question. Hooray, we don't have to be circumcised.

[50:11] Hooray, we don't have to be Jewish. We are saved without needing to be bound by the law. Yet we are bound by love.

Of course, I said, as you look at what James is doing here, you have to really open up his book to kind of get an idea of what he's thinking.

As we're following Paul's stories, then you have to follow the epistles. You have to open up the epistles and go, OK, so this is what he really meant. And later in the letter to the church in Corinth, just before he jumps into love, he notices something about the way they commune.

He notices something that's kind of gone wrong with the table. The people are divided. That the poor are eating with the poor and the rich are eating with the rich.

And that's when he jumps into the passage in 1 Corinthians 11. And this is where our leaders and will end here. He's looking and he sees the different factions that are existing within the church around the table.

[51:30] And then he leads them in. In this.

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you. That the Lord Jesus, on the night that when he was betrayed, took bread. And when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, this is my body, which is for you.

But before we take this bread, I just want to jump to a few verses later. Whereas from 27 to 32, it talks about the need to examine our own hearts.

And I want to give us a time now to examine our hearts. How you react tells you where you're at. How about we spend a moment just to scan this last week that we've had.

How have we reacted to people? How have we reacted to circumstances? How have we reacted to things? Maybe that tells us a little bit about where our hearts are at.

[52:45] And lest we drink judgment on ourselves. Let us repent of those things. Any moments we've taken offense. Any moments we've reacted out of fear.

Out of insecurity. Legalism. Judgment. How have we reacted?

And is it how Jesus would have reacted? Let's just spend a moment now. Jesus, search our hearts, test our thoughts.

Our anxious thoughts, if there is anything offensive in us. We repent. We repent. Would you lead us on the way everlasting?

The only way. The way that leads to you. When there are others that seek to break our hearts, our backs, our egos, our careers.

[54:20] We turn to you right now. We turn to you right now. In response to all of those. And we remember that you, your body was broken for us. And we do this in remembrance of you.

Let us take the bread. Let us eat the bread. Let us eat the bread and drink the cup in remembrance of him.

Lord, we backslide so easily. Lord, we thank you. Lord, would your spirit move this afternoon.

And you allow us to be able to say from the bottom of our hearts, in one voice, in one spirit. Your grace. Your work. Your work.

Your work. Is sufficient and enough. We thank you, Lord. When we get our who am I questions right, the what should I do tend to take care of themselves.

[56:00] When we get our who am I question right, the what should I do tend to take care of themselves. So much of how we respond to praise and criticism is we forget who we are.

Holy Spirit, may you remind us in this moment as we process, dwell, meditate on the things that hurt us most. May we remember who we are. We are your children.

You bled and broke your body on the cross for us. May we not be numb to this truth. Your body bled and broke for us, for all of us in this room. That is how much worth we have.

So when someone tells us that we're not enough, that we have to do better, you will never be enough. These are all lies. Because only your truth stands in our life, God. So we proclaim it in the moments that we fail to see it, Holy Spirit.

In the moments we don't feel it. May you overwhelm our hearts with your truth. Thank you, Lord, that your grace is enough. Your grace is sufficient. Even when we don't see it, Lord, your faithfulness is true.

[57:07] So we thank you. In your precious name we pray. Amen. Thank you.