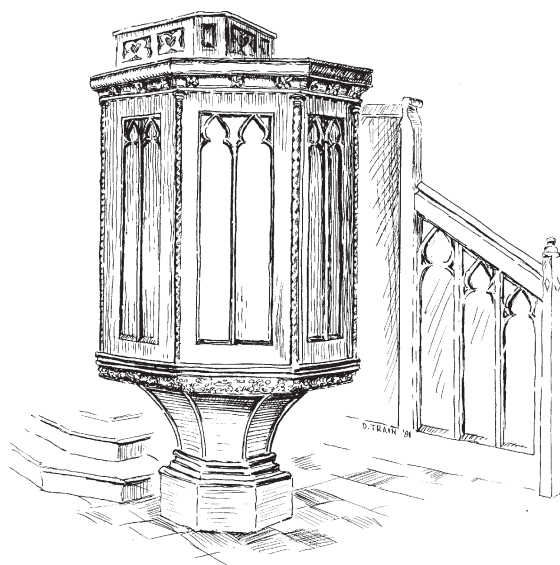


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Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

God Knows the Human Heart

By Dr. Jack Rogers

Professor of Theology Emeritus, San Francisco Theological Seminary

Moderator, 213th General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

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Leviticus 20: 22-26

You shall keep all my statutes and all my ordinances, and observe them, so that the land to which I bring you to settle in may not vomit you out. You shall not follow the practices of the nation that I am driving out before you. Because they did all these things, I abhorred them. But I have said to you: You shall inherit their land, and I will give it to you to possess, a land flowing with milk and honey. I am the LORD your God; I have separated you from the peoples. You shall therefore make a distinction between the clean animal and the unclean, and between the unclean bird and the clean; you shall not bring abomination on yourselves by animal or by bird or by anything with which the ground teems, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean. You shall be holy to me; for I the LORD am holy, and I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine.

Acts 15: 1-21

Then certain individuals 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 discuss this question with the apostles and the elders. So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, "It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses."

The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. After they finished speaking, James replied, "My brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written,

After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, [which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up,] so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called. Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things known from long ago.

Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from those things polluted by idols and from sexual immorality and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every Sabbath in the synagogues."

Acts 15 is one of the most amazing stories in the Bible. But to understand just how incredible a story it is, we have to go way back in Jewish history to the time of the Holiness Code in Leviticus.

Leviticus is usually the sort of chapter that preachers are expected to stay away from. It's full of all sorts of harsh advice about who should be stoned to death. It's not exactly the sort of text around which one builds a feel-good sermon.

But I think we need to understand Leviticus if we are to understand the miracle of Jesus. As you know, the Israelites had been slaves in Egypt. Moses led his people out of Egypt and across the Red Sea. But then they wandered in the desert for 40 years—subject to attacks from other tribes, vulnerable to starvation and infectious diseases. Years later, after becoming a proud and prosperous people, Israel suffered defeat by Babylon and many of its people were taken into captivity.

Leviticus was a response to the trauma of these defining events. Leviticus contains a “Holiness Code” and was used to define Hebrew religious, civic, and cultural identity. Its underlying theme was that the Jews must be pure, separate, different from the Egyptians from whom they had escaped, unmixed with the Canaanites into whose land they had now come, and distinct from the Babylonians who had conquered them.

Like Leviticus, the time period captured in the book of Acts was a time of transition. Jesus had been crucified and had risen from the dead. The Apostles were out preaching the Gospel, but they feared being arrested, beaten, perhaps killed by the Romans, as their Lord had been. There was confusion and internal struggles for leadership within the movement.

But something startling was happening. *Gentiles*, non-Jews, were being touched by the Holy Spirit. At the time, Gentiles were considered “by nature” unclean, and “by practice,” polluted by idolatry. Yet, Acts 15 says that as Paul and Barnabas passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported that Gentiles were being converted to Christianity. This was a BIG deal!

It was wonderful. And it presented the Apostles with a problem. Leviticus, the Holiness Code, *Jewish identity* for centuries had been defined as being *separate* from those dirty, idol worshipping, Gentiles. And now these Gentiles were being touched by the Holy Spirit.

So the early church separated into different factions. The text says, “Some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, “It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the Law of Moses.” The Pharisees held fast to the traditionalist position. They wanted to define Jewish identity in the way it had always been defined since the exodus from Egypt.

Change is difficult. I spent a sabbatical year at the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research in Collegeville, Minnesota. It is about where Lake Wobegone would be if it really existed. The Institute was founded by Father Killian McDonnell, a Benedictine monk, and a sort of Vatican Diplomat. I've

always felt that if you had to go to a monastery, the best way was with your wife and children, which is what I got to do. We were guests of St. John's Benedictine Abby and University. Since one of the rules of St. Benedict is that you are to treat every guest as if it were Christ himself, you can't get better hospitality than that. One day I was chatting with Father Killian and he told me the story of visiting his sister, a Cloistered nun in upstate New York. A cloistered nun isn't supposed to leave the nunnery and she can't speak with anyone outside it. However, they gave her a special dispensation to speak to her famous Benedictine brother, Killian.

In this rare meeting, the first question she asked him was: "Is it true that the Second Vatican Council said that my sister, who is married and has four children, is just as good a Christian as I am?" Killian paused and then replied: "Yes, that is what the Council said." "The hell she is!" came his sister's reply.

That was roughly the Pharisees' point of view. They had gone through the rigors of keeping the Jewish law and they felt anyone first had to be a good Jew before they could become a Christian. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed to go to Jerusalem to sort out this conflict. In the midst of what must have been a fierce debate, the text says Peter stood up. And he said, "My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers." Peter was asserting his rank. He had lived and worked with Jesus, and he had standing to settle disputes in the movement. And he continued, "And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

Now you can imagine the hush that would have fallen over the group. The text says, "The whole assembly kept silence." This was radical stuff. Peter was saying that there was to be no distinction between Gentiles and Jews. The entire Jewish identity was built around separateness and now Peter was saying, "No, this thing is bigger than us. If the Spirit of Jesus wants to touch the lives of Gentiles, that's good enough for me."

So Paul and Barnabas gave their testimony, backing up what Peter had said. Then, James spoke up. As Jesus' brother, James probably had the highest standing of anyone in the group. He was the closest to Jesus of any of them. His opinion was going to matter a lot. And James said, "My brothers, listen to me." And James proceeded to declare that the words of Peter agreed with the words of the prophets—that God had always intended to convert the Gentiles. Quoting from the prophets he said, "After this I will return and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, and I will set it up so that all other people may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called. Thus says, the Lord, who has been making these things known from long ago." Notice! James is pointing out that God's intention to accept the Gentiles had always been there in the Scriptures, but even the apostles hadn't

seen it until they experienced real Gentile people who manifested the Spirit of God.

Therefore James announced that from then onward, Gentiles who manifested the Spirit of God should be accepted into the church without having to keep any of the Jewish laws.

It's a decision that changed history. Paul and Barnabas and Peter and James and the whole rag-tag bunch, in the midst of confusion and internal struggles, changed their minds, and changed the rules, and decided to let everyone on the planet participate in the miracle of Christianity. We are the descendants of that decision. If Paul, and Barnabas and Peter and James had said, "Nope, if you're not a Jew you can't join this religion!" we wouldn't all be sitting here today. If Paul and Barnabas and Peter and James had decided to be gate-keepers, rather than simply testifying to the miracle of Jesus—the good news of Christ might never have traveled to every corner of the planet as it has.

But how did it happen? How could the Jews go from the Holiness Code of Leviticus to the transformation that happened in Acts 15? Well, to put it simply, Jesus happened.

Jesus clearly knew the rabbinical law. But Jesus was not concerned with outward appearances of holy purity. Jesus was concerned with purity of heart. In Matthew 15 he said to a crowd: "Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles" (Matt. 15:10). Later he explained to his disciples: "What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles" (Matt. 15:18).

Notice the language that Peter uses in Acts 15. Peter had clearly listened to Jesus because he followed Jesus' lead, and put the emphasis on purity of heart rather than Hebrew ritual purity. In Acts 15, Peter said, "And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us."

The apostles' new way of being in the world caused disagreement, conflict, discord. It threatened to tear apart this fledgling faith. But in the midst of this crisis, by the grace of God, they found a new way forward.

I've been out on the road for the past year and a half in support of my new book *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*. And along the way I've met some really amazing people who have shared their stories with me. Let me tell you just one.

I was in Richmond, Virginia teaching an adult church school class. During the discussion after my speech, a very well dressed woman of middle age with dark hair sitting in the second row raised her hand. She asked if she could tell her story before she asked a question. She explained that she was

a psychiatrist and a lesbian who had been with her partner for 21 years. She had grown up in a different faith, but had stopped practicing long ago. Her partner was raised in a rigid Southern Baptist home and had likewise turned away from her faith.

This couple decided to move out to the country for more peace and quiet. Their nearest neighbor was a young Southern Baptist minister with a small, rural church. As good neighbors do, this minister paid them a visit. He just wanted to get to know them as people. And, over time, these neighbors became friends.

Something amazing happens when you really get to know someone. We drop our categories and our preconceived notions. Peter and Paul and Barnabas discovered it out in the Roman world. And this young Southern Baptist minister discovered it in rural Virginia.

Over time, this minister came to realize that this lesbian couple was okay just as they were. In turn, they became interested in his Gospel message. The result was that this woman asked to be baptized and she and her partner joined the little church. She said she had been a Christian for a year. That is evangelism. Accepting all people as children of God, as Jesus did, enables us to share the life-transforming good news of the Gospel.

When we see Jesus as the fulfillment of the law (Mt. 5:17), we understand that our challenge is not meticulously to maintain culturally conditioned laws, but rather, with Jesus, to love God and love our neighbor (Mt. 22:36-40).

The good news is that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, is still at work in the church. The Holy Spirit will not leave us alone until we get out of our own way and let God be in charge. Like the Apostles, we are called to welcome into God's church all who are touched by the Holy Spirit knowing that we ALL can be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus. Amen? Hallelujah!