



LIFE GROUP CURRICULUM

**WHATEVER IT TAKES**  
*for the gospel*

COTTONWOOD CREEK CHURCH

## **Lesson 7: Whatever It Takes To Reach People**

**Main Passage: Acts 15:1–21**

**Focus Verse: Acts 15:19**

*It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.*

**Big Idea: We need to share that salvation is readily available to all who believe.**

This lesson appropriately serves as a summary of everything we have discussed the past seven weeks. We will look at our call to do “whatever it takes” to reach people from Acts 15. We want to be the kind of people who do whatever it takes to reach that next family, that next person, that next coworker, friend, neighbor, family member, waiter/waitress, uber driver, etc. We want to reach people with the Gospel because we know Jesus is the only way back to God, and without Him, people will never have a relationship with their Creator.

### **Three Keys To Reaching People With the Gospel:**

#### **1) Realize the Enemy Is Always WORKING TO DISTRACT US**

**Acts 15:4**, *When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. <sup>5</sup> Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.” <sup>6</sup> The apostles and elders met to consider this question.*

Even in the early church, people got distracted from the mission before them. God had clearly worked to bring about the salvation of all people through Jesus. God shows no favoritism, rather He saves everyone who calls upon His name to be saved. But some among them took their eyes off their mission and began focusing on behavior management and legalism. They got distracted.

The enemy wants to distract the church from their central mission: to make much of the name of Jesus. Many times we end up fighting about unimportant things while neglecting to share the eternal things. This has been the case since the early church and there is no doubt this is the case in our culture. When it comes to the things of God, what do we spend most of our time addressing? Are they primary issues or secondary (or tertiary!) issues?

If we want to reach people with the Gospel then we can’t get distracted. God doesn’t want to **only** reach people who share your same opinions and preferences. He wants to reach everyone.

### **Discussion Questions:**

- In what ways do we get distracted from the mission that God has given us?
- How can you and your group identify when the enemy is trying to distract us?

## 2) Remember the CORE OF THE GOSPEL

**Acts 15:7**, *After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the Gospel and believe. <sup>8</sup> God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. <sup>9</sup> He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. <sup>10</sup> Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? <sup>11</sup> No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.” <sup>12</sup> The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.*

Peter reminds them who they are and what they are about. What is central to the Gospel? God created the world, it was perfect, and sin entered the world and broke humanity’s relationship with God. But God has been working since the beginning to fix the problem. He showed us that He alone could bring salvation and sent His son Jesus to defeat sin and death on the cross, by raising to life on the third day. Anyone and everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved and our responsibility as God’s people is live a life that makes much of this Jesus until He returns!

We can’t get distracted. Every person you come in contact with needs Jesus. Other teachings are important, and our knowledge of God is vital as it becomes the fuel for our worship. But these things should never come at the detriment of the core of the Gospel.

### Discussion Questions:

- How does focusing on the message of the Gospel help us to push through those distractions to fulfill the calling on our lives?
- In your own words, how would you explain the core message of the Gospel?
- How is the Gospel easily distorted in our day?

## 3) Live Out the Gospel With SIMPLICITY AND CLARITY

**Acts 15:13**, *When they finished, James spoke up. “Brothers,” he said, “listen to me. <sup>14</sup> Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. <sup>15</sup> The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: <sup>16</sup> “‘After this I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, <sup>17</sup> that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things’ — <sup>18</sup> things known from long ago. <sup>19</sup> **“It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.** <sup>20</sup> Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. <sup>21</sup> For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.”*

Acts 15:19 is the key to this whole section: Don’t make it hard for people to come to faith! Tell them of their sin. Tell them of their need for Jesus. And ask the question: Do you believe this? In

this situation in Acts 15, there were a group of people who got distracted and tried to make it hard for the Gentiles (another translation: *nations*) to come to faith. They required them to be circumcised and follow the law. But those things are not the good news of Jesus. The good news is that you can't do anything to earn your salvation, but Jesus has done everything! There are no prerequisites for salvation apart from repentance and belief.

We need to be careful about holding unbelievers to Gospel standards apart from the transforming work of Jesus. Further, we need to make sure we don't preach, teach and live out a Gospel that has strings attached. The Gospel, in its purity and simplicity, is salvation to all who believe. Of course, we need discipleship and growth after salvation. But we can't grow in sanctification if we haven't been saved.

This whole "Whatever It Takes" series has been challenging as we have looked at the early church. We saw that they often did whatever it took to reach people with the Gospel. May we be people who don't get distracted as we remember the core of the Gospel. May we keep the mission of God before us with simplicity and clarity. God wants to use us to make His name known to the nations. Don't make it hard for the nations to see Jesus, don't be an obstacle. Instead, may we be a guiding light that points people straight to Christ.

**Discussion Questions:**

- In what ways do we make it difficult for nonbelievers to turn to God today? How can we change that?
- What does a "Whatever It Takes" attitude look like in fulfilling the Great Commission?

## **Lesson 7 Additional Commentary (Acts 15:1–21)**<sup>7</sup>

### **Debate in Jerusalem Over Acceptance of the Gentiles**

Acts 15:1–35 stands at the very center of the book. Not only is this true of its position halfway through the text, but it is also central in the development of the total plot of the book. The first half of Acts has focused on the Jewish Christian community, particularly on the influential Jerusalem church. The Christian witness had begun there (chaps. 1–5). Through the Hellenists especially it had spread to Samaria and all of the land of the Jews (chaps. 6–9). Through the witness of Peter to Cornelius, the outreach of the Antioch church, and especially through the first major mission completed by Paul and Barnabas, the gospel had broken through to the Gentiles (chaps. 10–14). All the preliminary steps had been taken for a major effort to reach the Gentile world. The precedents had been established; the first major successes among the Gentiles had been witnessed. The stage was set for Paul’s mission to the heart of the Greco-Roman world as *the* missionary to the Gentiles.

There remained only one final hurdle, and that was the agreement of the whole church on the Gentile mission. There were still those among the Jewish Christians who had serious reservations about the way the outreach to Gentiles had been conducted. These reservations and the final solution to them worked out in a major conference in Jerusalem are the subject of 15:1–35. There the whole church agreed on the Gentile mission. The way was now open for the mission of Paul, and that will be the subject of the rest of Acts. Hereafter the Jerusalem church fades into the background. When it does reappear, as in chap. 21, it will be wholly in connection with Paul’s Gentile ministry. The focus is entirely on him.

The debate in Jerusalem revolved around the issue of *how* Gentiles were to be accepted into the Christian fellowship. The more conservative Jewish Christians felt that they should be received on the same basis that Jews had always accepted Gentiles into the covenant community—through proselyte initiation. This involved circumcision of the males and all proselytes taking upon themselves the total provisions of the Mosaic law. For all intents and purposes, a Gentile proselyte to Judaism *became a Jew*, not only in religious conviction but in lifestyle as well. That was the question the conservative group of Jewish Christians raised: Should not Gentiles be required to become Jews in order to share in the Christian community? It was a natural question. The first Christians were all Jews. Jesus was a Jew and the Jewish Messiah. God had only one covenant people—the Jews. Christianity was a messianic movement within Judaism. Jews had always demanded of all Gentile converts the requirements of circumcision and rituals of the Torah. Why should that change?

Evidently the requirements *had* changed. There was no indication that Peter had laid such requirements on Cornelius, or the Antioch church on the Gentiles who became a part of their fellowship, or Paul and Barnabas on the Gentiles converted in their mission. This was a cause for serious concern from the more conservative elements. Not only was it a departure from normal proselyte procedure; it also raised serious problems of fellowship. How could law-abiding Jewish Christians who seriously observed all the ritual laws have interaction with Gentile Christians who did not observe those laws? The Jewish Christians would run the risk of defilement from the Gentiles. These were the two issues that were faced and resolved in Jerusalem: (1) whether Gentile

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<sup>7</sup> John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 320–332.

converts should submit to Jewish proselyte requirements, especially to circumcision and (2) how fellowship could be maintained between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

In Gal 2 Paul told of a conference in Jerusalem that had many similarities to Acts 15:1–35. Although the two accounts contain significant differences, the similarities seem to outweigh these, and it is probable that they relate to the same event. Both dealt with the issue of circumcision, Paul and Barnabas defended their views against the more conservative Jewish Christians in both accounts, and the final agreement was reached in both that the Gentiles would not be required to submit to Jewish proselyte circumcision. In Gal 2:1–10 Paul did not go into the question of table fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians (though Gal 2:11–14 clearly concerns table fellowship between Gentile and Jewish Christians), but that issue was a natural outgrowth of the decision not to require Gentiles to live by the Torah. That it comprised part of the agenda at the Jerusalem Conference is highly plausible. In any event, it will be assumed in the commentary that follows that Paul and Luke were referring to the same conference, and where appropriate Paul's account will be cited to supplement that of Acts.

Acts 15:1–35 falls into four natural parts. The first comprises an *introduction* and relates how the debate arose in Antioch and led to the conference in Jerusalem to attempt some resolution (vv. 1–5). The second part focuses on the *debate* in Jerusalem (vv. 6–21) and primarily centers on the witness of Peter (vv. 6–11) and of James (vv. 12–21). The third part deals with the final *solution*, which takes the form of an official letter sent to Antioch (vv. 22–29). The narrative *concludes* where it began—in Antioch—with the delivering of the letter by two delegates of the Jerusalem church (vv. 30–35).

### ***(1) The Criticism from the Circumcision Party (15:1–5)***

**15:1–2** There were many Gentiles in the church at Antioch (cf. 11:20f.). There is no indication that they had been circumcised when they joined the Christian fellowship. This was disturbing to some Jewish Christians who came from Judea and insisted that circumcision in strict obedience to the Jewish law was necessary for salvation (v. 1). Evidently they shared the views and perhaps were even some of the same persons as the “circumcision party,” who are identified in the Western text as belonging to the sect of the Pharisees and who challenged Peter for having table fellowship with Cornelius (11:2). The group evidently represented the strict Jewish viewpoint that there was no salvation apart from belonging to the covenant community, the people of Israel. To be a part of that community a Gentile must take on the physical sign of the covenant, the mark of circumcision, and live by all the precepts of the law of Moses, ritual as well as moral. In the sharp debate that this demand provoked, Paul and Barnabas were the main opponents to this Judaizing perspective (v. 2). They had laid no such requirements on the Gentiles converted in their recent mission. It is altogether likely that the large number of such converts in their successful mission had attracted the attention of this Judaizing group in the first place.

The group soon realized that such a basic issue could not be settled in Antioch. It needed the attention of the whole church, since all Christians, Jew and Gentile, would be affected by its resolution. An “ecumenical conference” was arranged in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the “mother church.” The apostles were there. It was the suitable site to debate such an important issue. It is unclear who appointed Paul and Barnabas and “some other believers” to represent Antioch in Jerusalem. The Western text has the Judaizing group summoning Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem “to be judged.” More likely the Antioch church appointed them as its official delegates to the meeting. Paul mentioned that Titus accompanied him and Barnabas to Jerusalem (Gal 2:1), so he may well have been one of the “others” of Acts 15:2.

**15:3–4** The distance between Antioch and Jerusalem was in excess of 250 miles, and the apostles may well have spent a month or so on their journey. They used the opportunity to visit congregations along the way. It could almost be described as a “campaign trip,” since most of these congregations would likely be sympathetic with their viewpoint that Gentiles should not be burdened with circumcision and the Torah. This would be especially true of the Christians of Phoenicia whose congregations were likely established by the same Hellenists who reached out to the Gentiles in Antioch (11:19–20). The congregations along their route rejoiced at the news of Paul and Barnabas’s success among the Gentiles. Evidently they did not share the misgivings of the Judaizing Christians. When the Antioch delegation arrived in Jerusalem, they were well received by the “apostles and elders” (v. 4). These would be the central groups in the deliberation. Peter would be the spokesperson for the apostles, and James would represent the elders. Just as Paul and Barnabas had reported the success of their mission to the sponsoring church at Antioch (14:27) and to the congregations on their way (15:3), so now they shared with the leaders in Jerusalem what *God* had done through them. The emphasis on God’s blessing was essential. That God’s *leading* was so evident in accepting the Gentiles apart from the law would determine the final outcome of the conference.

**15:5** The reception was somewhat cooler from a group of believers “who belonged to the party of the Pharisees” (v. 5). It was perhaps some of their group who had first stirred up the controversy in Antioch. They at least shared the same viewpoint: Gentiles who become Christians must undergo Jewish proselyte procedure. They must be circumcised. They must live by the entire Jewish law. It was not the moral aspects of the law that presented the problem but its ritual provisions. The moral law, such as embodied in the Ten Commandments, was never in question. Paul, for instance, constantly reminded his churches of God’s moral standards in his letters. The ritual aspects of the law presented a problem. These were the provisions that marked Jews off from other people—circumcision, the food laws, scrupulous ritual purity. They were what made the Jews Jews and seemed strange and arbitrary to most Gentiles. To have required these of Gentiles would in essence have made them into Jews and cut them off from the rest of the Gentiles. It would have severely restricted, perhaps even killed, any effective Gentile mission. The stakes were high in the Jerusalem Conference.

It should come as no surprise that some of the Pharisees had become Christians. Pharisees believed in resurrection, life after death, and the coming Messiah. They shared the basic convictions of the Christians. Because of this they are sometimes in Acts found defending the Christians against the Sadducees, who had much less in common with Christian views (cf. 5:17; 23:8f.). A major barrier between Christians and Pharisees was the extensive use of oral tradition by the Pharisees, which Jesus and Paul both rejected as human tradition. It is not surprising that some Pharisees came to embrace Christ as the Messiah in whom they had hoped. For all their emphasis on law, it is also not surprising that they would be reticent to receive anyone into the fellowship in a manner not in accordance with tradition. That tradition was well-established for proselytes—circumcision and the whole yoke of the law.

## ***(2) The Debate in Jerusalem (15:6–21)***

The central section of Acts 15:1–35 relates the debate in Jerusalem over the circumcision issue. There were two major witnesses, both in defense of the view that the Gentiles should not be burdened by circumcision and the law. Peter spoke first (vv. 7–11), followed by James (vv. 13–

21). Both speeches are preceded by brief summary notices that set the larger context of the conference (vv. 6, 12).

#### PETER'S WITNESS (15:6–11)

**15:6** Verse 6 relates the gathering for the conference. Since it mentions only the apostles and elders, many interpreters see this as a reference to the private conference Paul mentioned in Gal 2:2 with “those who seemed to be leaders.” These interpreters would see the full church being first gathered together for the “discussion” in v. 7 or even later—with the mention of the whole assembly in v. 12. If Luke mentioned Paul’s private conference at all, it would more likely be the initial meeting with the apostles and elders in v. 4. Verses 6–29 are a continuous narrative, and one would assume the whole group was gathered together for the discussion—the apostles and elders, other members of the Jerusalem church (including the Pharisaic Christians), Paul and Barnabas, and the other members of the Antioch delegation. The apostles and elders were singled out as the leaders of the assembly. They initiated the formal inquiry.

**15:7–9** The meeting began with a lively discussion (v. 7). After the various viewpoints had been aired, Peter rose to speak. He began by reminding the assembly of his own experience in the household of Cornelius (v. 7b). Even though it was “some time ago,” possibly as much as ten years before, the experience had made an indelible impression on Peter. God had chosen him to witness to the Gentiles (cf. 10:5, 20, 32). Peter could expect the Jerusalem Christians, including the circumcisers, to remember this because he had given them a full report following the incident (cf. 11:1–18). What he had learned on that occasion was that God looks on the heart, not on external matters. God is no respecter of persons (10:34). Perhaps Peter had in mind the distinction made by the prophets that God does not look to the external circumcision of the flesh but the internal circumcision of the heart (Jer 4:4; 9:26; cf. Rom 2:29). God had convicted Cornelius, looked to the inner circumcision of his heart, and accepted him on that basis. God had proved his acceptance of Cornelius and the Gentiles at his home by granting them the gift of his Spirit. God only grants his Spirit to those he has accepted (cf. 10:44, 47; 11:17). The fact that they had received the Spirit just as Peter and the Jewish Christians had was proof that God had accepted Cornelius and his fellow Gentiles on an equal footing (v. 9). He “purified their hearts” by faith. Peter undoubtedly was thinking of his vision: “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean” (10:15). For the Jew circumcision was a mark of sanctity and purity, of belonging to God’s people and being acceptable to him. But in Cornelius God had shown Peter that true purity comes not by an external mark but by faith. In the account of Cornelius in chap. 10, his faith is never explicitly mentioned but is certainly evidenced in his following without question every direction God gave him. Here Peter made explicit what was implicit there: Cornelius had been accepted by God on the basis of his faith.

**15:10–11** In v. 10 Peter gave his conclusion drawn from the experience with Cornelius. It was an emphatic no to the question of Gentile circumcision and the “yoke” of the law. God had accepted the Gentiles at Cornelius’s house without either of these. How could Jewish Christians demand anything more than the faith already shown? To demand more would be to put God to the test, to act against God’s declared will, to see if God really meant what he had already shown in accepting Gentiles apart from the law. Peter’s statement in v. 10 is strong but should not be misconstrued. By speaking of the “yoke” of the law, he did not mean that the law was an intolerable burden that Jewish Christians should abandon. Peter was using a common Jewish metaphor for the law that had the same positive meaning Jesus had given it (Matt 11:29f.). Peter did not urge *Jewish*



*Christians* to abandon the law, nor did they cease to live by it. Peter's meaning was that the law was something the Jews had not been able to fulfill. It had proven an inadequate basis of salvation for them. Neither they nor their fathers had been able to fully keep the law and so win acceptance with God (cf. Rom 2:17–24). For the Jewish Christians the law would remain a mark of God's covenant with them, a cherished heritage. It could not save them. Only one thing could—faith, believing in the saving grace of the Lord Jesus (v. 11).

Faith alone, grace alone—one could hardly sound more like Paul. Paul had said much the same thing at Pisidian Antioch (13:38f.). It is something of an irony that Paul had to remind Peter of this same truth just a short time later in Antioch when his actions went counter to his convictions (Gal 2:14–17). It is interesting to observe Peter's progression throughout his speech. He began by pointing out how God had accepted the Gentiles “just like he accepted us” (v. 8). Now the shoe was on the other foot. The Gentiles had become the example for the Jews—“we are saved, just as they are” (v. 11). God's acceptance of the Gentiles had drawn a basic lesson for the Jews as well. There is only *one* way of salvation—“through the grace of our Lord Jesus.” The emphasis on grace in 15:11 fits well with the emphasis on God's sovereign activity in the salvation of the Gentiles. Peter's ultimate point was that God is free to save whomever and however he pleases.

#### JAMES'S TESTIMONY (15:12–21)

**15:12** At the end of Peter's speech the entire assembly sat in silence. The hubbub with which the conference began (v. 7) now ceased. Paul and Barnabas had already shared their missionary experience with the leaders (v. 4). Now they gave their testimony before the entire congregation (v. 12). Their emphasis was again on *God's* initiative in the mission, his work through them, the signs and wonders that had attested to his presence and affirmation of their ministry. This missionary report was the entire role that Paul and Barnabas had in the conference. The main arguments were offered by Peter and James, the leaders of the apostles and elders. Paul and Barnabas evidently offered no defense of their position on the Gentile question other than the implicit argument that God had endorsed it. This was wise procedure. Often those who are most involved in an issue cannot be heard objectively by their opponents. A third party can address the issue with less passion and more authority. This was the role filled by Peter and James, who were in essence the spokespersons for the two missionaries.

**15:13** When Paul and Barnabas had completed their testimony, James rose to speak (v. 13). It was James the brother of Jesus. Paul also mentioned James's role at the Jerusalem Conference (Gal 2:9; cf. 1:19) and called him one of the “pillars” of the church, along with Peter and John. James had evidently become the leading elder of the Jerusalem congregation. His leadership of the church has already been indicated in 12:17. Upon Paul's final visit to Jerusalem he appears to have been the sole leader of the congregation, and the apostles no longer seem to have been present in the city (21:18–25). Here James continued the defense of Peter's position that the Gentiles should not be required to be circumcised or embrace the Jewish law. Peter's argument had been based primarily on his personal experience, which had shown that God had accepted the Gentiles by sending his Spirit on them solely on the basis of their faith. James furthered Peter's position by giving it scriptural grounding (vv. 14–18). Then, realizing that such a solution would create real problems for Jewish Christians in their fellowship with Gentile Christians, he offered a suggestion for alleviating that situation (vv. 19–21).

**15:14–18** James began by referring to Peter's just-completed witness to God's acceptance of the Gentiles at Cornelius's home and described it as God's “taking from the Gentiles a people for

himself” (v. 14). James used the word *laos* to describe the Gentiles, a term usually applied to Israel. In Zech 2:11 (LXX 2:15), the Septuagint also applies the term *laos* to the Gentiles who will in the final days come to dwell in the renewed Zion and be a part of God’s people. Something like this seems to be the meaning here. In Christ God brings Jew and Gentile together into a single *laos*, a single people “for his name.”

James now showed how the coming of the Gentiles into the people of God was grounded in the Old Testament prophets. Basically he quoted from the Septuagint text of Amos 9:11–12, with possible allusions from Jer 12:15 and Isa 45:21. In the Hebrew text of Amos 9:11–12, the prophet spoke of the coming restoration of Israel, which God would bring about. The house of David would be rebuilt and the kingdom restored to its former glory. Edom and all the nations over which David ruled would once again be gathered into Israel. The Greek text differs significantly and speaks of the remnant of humankind and all the nations seeking the Lord. In both traditions there is the concept of “the nations which are called by my name,” which links directly with “a people for his name” (“for himself,” NIV) in v. 14. This is the main concept James wished to develop. In the Gentiles, God was choosing a people for himself, a new *restored* people of God, Jew and Gentile in Christ, the true Israel. In the total message of Acts it is clear that the rebuilt house of David occurred in the Messiah. Christ was the scion of David who fulfilled the covenant of David and established a kingdom that would last forever (2 Sam 7:12f.; cf. Acts 13:32–34). From the beginning the Jewish Christians had realized that the promises to David were fulfilled in Christ. What they were now beginning to see, and what James saw foretold in Amos, was that these promises included the Gentiles.

**15:19–20** Having established from Scripture the inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God, James drew his conclusion to the question of *requirements* for Gentile membership (v. 19). Gentiles should not be given undue difficulties; no unnecessary obstacles should be placed in their way. Though somewhat more restrained in expression, his conclusion was basically that of Peter (v. 10): Gentiles should not be burdened with the law and circumcision. The leading apostle and the leading elder were in agreement. The issue was all but settled. Resolving it, however, raised another problem. If Gentiles were not being required to observe the Jewish ritual laws, how would Jewish Christians who maintained strict Torah observance be able to fellowship with them without running the risk of being ritually defiled themselves? James saw the question coming and addressed it in his next remark (v. 20). Gentiles should be directed to abstain from four things: from food offered to idols, from sexual immorality (*porneia*), from the meat of strangled animals (*pnikton*), and from blood (*haima*).

When looked at closely, all four of these belong to the ritual sphere. Meat offered to idols was an abomination to Jews, who avoided any and everything associated with idolatry. “Strangled meat” referred to animals that had been slaughtered in a manner that left the blood in it. Blood was considered sacred to the Jews, and all meat was to be drained of blood before consuming it. The prohibition of “blood” came under the same requirement, referring to the consumption of the blood of animals in any form. These three requirements were thus all ritual, dealing with matters of clean and unclean foods. The fourth category seems somewhat less ritual and more moral: sexual immorality (*porneia*). It is possible that this category was also originally intended in a mainly ritual sense, referring to those “defiling” sexual relationships the Old Testament condemns, such as incest, marriage outside the covenant community, marriage with a close relative, bestiality, homosexuality, and the like. It is also possible that a broader meaning was intended including all illicit “natural” relationships as well, such as fornication, concubinage, and adultery. Gentile

sexual mores were lax compared to Jewish standards, and it was one of the areas where Jews saw themselves most radically differentiated from Gentiles. The boundary between ritual and ethical law is not always distinct, and sexual morality is one of those areas where it is most blurred. For the Jew sexual misbehavior was both immoral *and* impure. A Jew would find it difficult indeed to consort with a Gentile who did not live by his own standards of sexual morality.

The four requirements suggested by James were thus all basically ritual requirements aimed at making fellowship possible between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Often referred to as “the apostolic decrees,” they belonged to a period in the life of the church when there was close contact between Jewish and Gentile Christians, when table fellowship especially was common between them. In a later day, by the end of the first century, Jewish Christianity became isolated into small sects and separated from Gentile Christianity. There no longer existed any real fellowship between them. The original function of the decrees no longer had any force, and they tended to be viewed in wholly moral terms. This tendency is very much reflected in the textual tradition of Acts 15:20, 29 and 21:25, particularly in the Western text, which omits “strangled meat,” adds the negative form of the golden rule, and reads “idolatry” rather than idol meat. There are thus four moral prohibitions: no idolatry, no sexual immorality, no murder (“blood” now viewed as the shedding—not consuming—of blood), and “do not do to another what you wouldn’t wish done to yourself.”

**15:21** The question might be raised: Why were the original decrees ritual rather than moral in the first place? The answer quite simply is that the moral rules, such as the Ten Commandments, were already assumed. *All* Christians, Jew and Gentile, lived by them. The Gentiles needed no reminder of such basic marks of Christian behavior. Morality was not the issue at the Jerusalem Conference. Fellowship was, and the decrees were a sort of minimum requirement placed on the Gentile Christians in deference to the scruples of their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ. They were really not something radically new. The Old Testament lays down similar rules for the resident alien dwelling in Israel and for much the same purpose: to assure the purity of the Jewish community and to allow for social interaction between the Jews and the non-Jews in their midst. In fact, all four of the “apostolic decrees” are found in Lev 17 and 18 as requirements expected of resident aliens: abstinence from pagan sacrifices (17:8), blood (17:10–14), strangled meat (17:13), and illicit sexual relationships (18:6–23). Perhaps this is what James meant in his rather obscure concluding remark (v. 21): the law of Moses is read in every synagogue everywhere; so these requirements should come as no shock to the Gentiles. They are in the Old Testament and have been required of Gentiles associating with Jews from the earliest times. James’s remark could also be taken in another sense, which would fit the context well: there are Jews in every city who cherish the Torah. Gentile Christians should be sensitive to their scruples and not give them offense in these ritual matters, for they too may be reached with the gospel.

## **Lesson 7: Whatever It Takes To Reach People – Missionary Story**

### **Fred and Effie Donnelson**

**(Fred: November 16, 1897 – February 9, 1974)**

**(Effie: December 22, 1898 – January 6, 1994)**

Both Fred and Effie Donnelson were from Marshalltown, Iowa and both from solid Christian families. Fred accepted Christ as a young boy and Effie accepted Christ in her teen years. As young people they were active in church and it was no surprise to anyone when Fred said that God wanted him in full-time ministry. They married during their college years. Shortly before Fred's graduation, he became the pastor of Messiah Baptist Church in Chicago which proved to be a wonderful training ground for their future work in China. It was at Messiah Baptist Church that the Donnelsons met Mrs. Josephine Sweet, a missionary to China. God used Mrs. Sweet's testimony of the missionary work she and her husband had done in China to burden the Donnelsons' hearts to go to China as missionaries. (Mr. Sweet had died a few months earlier.)

Early in Fred Donnelson's Christian life, Genesis 14:13-15 became the passage that carried him through his entire ministry. He believed that when God told the Children of Israel to go forward that it was also a command to every Christian. He saw every "challenge" (other people might view it as an "obstacle") that came his way as an opportunity to trust God and to "Go Forward" in faith and determination. It was this faith, this determination to always trust God and go forward that carried he and his family through many challenging times in China.

On February 25, 1933, the Donnelson family which now included two small children, Paul and Lois, boarded The Empress of Canada headed for China. The family sold their possessions and with no promise of financial support, they were going forward to take the Gospel to China.

They arrived in Shanghai and were met by their friend, Mrs. Sweet, who was a great help to them in their early days in China. After a few weeks, the family took a train to Hangchow which would be their home and base of operations. When the train arrived in Hangchow, the Donnelson family and their belongings were loaded onto rickshaws. (It took several to carry the family of four, Mrs. Sweet and all the baggage.) The rickshaw coolies rushed them through the streets, shouting all the way. The Donnelsons thought they were telling people to get out of the way. In reality, they were shouting "Get out of the way; the foreign devils are coming!" Little did the people of Hangchow know that these strange looking people were not foreign devils, rather they were people who loved them and had come to give them the good news of Jesus.

A group of young men who had accepted Christ through Mr. Sweet's ministry and wanted to be trained for ministry were waiting for Mr. Donnelson to arrive and begin to teach them. Mr. Donnelson was immediately thrust into both learning the Chinese language and training these young men for ministry. This was a daunting challenge for Mr. Donnelson; however, he was not overwhelmed. He saw it as an opportunity to "Go Forward" to do whatever it took to take the Gospel to the Chinese people. After six months of study, Donnelson was able to preach his first sermon in Chinese. As his language skills improved, he began to travel to neighboring villages and establish new preaching stations always taking a group of the young men with him.

One of the tools that was very effective in the early years of the Donnelsons' ministry in China was a large tent which they would take into the villages and set up in an open space. The tent was easily seen and a bit of a curiosity as well, so people were drawn to it. In the mornings, Mr. Donnelson and his helpers would teach Bible lessons. In the afternoon, they would go out into the village visiting as many homes as they could to share the Gospel, inviting people to attend the evening service, which included

music and preaching. Countless people were brought to Christ in the early years because of the meetings under the tent where the core of the Gospel was presented.

The Donnelsons' ministry was flourishing in the midst of the enemy's distractions. The Sino-Japanese War broke out in 1937 creating great danger for the Donnelsons and everyone in the area. Often while they were conducting services or having prayer meetings bombers were flying overhead, dropping bombs on nearby transportation and military centers. Soon the Donnelson family was forced to escape Hangchow under the cover of darkness. They made their way to Shanghai and soon returned to the United States. As they reflected on their five years' work in China, they were thankful for 20 churches established in surrounding villages, scores of Chinese believers trained as workers in the ministry and hundreds had accepted Christ. Their hearts rejoiced over God's goodness and desire burned in their hearts to return to China as soon as possible.

They did return to China after only eight months in the United States. They located in Shanghai and established a Bible School with a program for both young men and young women. This school was conducted much like the tent ministry always presenting the core message of the Gospel – Jesus lived, died and rose again so that they might have eternal life. In the mornings, the students were in classes taught by Mr. Donnelson, the afternoons were spent visiting homes and sharing the Gospel with people and evangelistic services were held in the evenings. Mr. Donnelson also continued to oversee the “country works” that had been established during their first journey to China. Young Chinese ministers were teaching and preaching in the country churches. The country church ministry, the Bible School ministry and a church in Shanghai were all flourishing. And then came Pearl Harbor.

On Monday, December 8, 1941, the Donnelsons along with other American missionaries were ordered to appear in downtown Shanghai to register and to receive an armband that had to be worn at all times. It was not long before Japanese soldiers came to the Donnelson home and marked their furniture and personal items with an “X” Sticker. Under the threat of being shot, they were instructed to not move or remove any of the marked items. Soon Mr. and Mrs. Donnelson and Lois were taken as prisoners and put in an internment camp. (Their son, Paul, had returned to the United States only a month before to attend college.) In the few moments they were given to pack a few belongings when the soldiers came for them, Mrs. Donnelson noticed that her yellow curtains and a yellow bedspread had not been marked, she grabbed them and put them in her suitcase.

Approximately 1,100 people were confined at an internment camp where multiple families were forced to live together in one room. The room that was assigned to the Donnelsons was about 45 feet by 12 feet and they shared the space with five other families. There was no heat, only cots for sleeping and little food. The Donnelsons were fortunate to have a corner space with a window and Mrs. Donnelson found a way to use her yellow spread and matching curtains to create some privacy for their family. The Donnelsons appreciated the privacy and the others in their room appreciated the “cheeriness” that the yellow curtains brought to the room and deemed it the “sunshine corner”. Yet, it was more than the yellow curtains that brought the warmth – it was the warmth of the Gospel that the Donnelsons shared with the others confined in the camp. The sunshine corner was a place where anyone was welcomed and given an encouraging word and a time of prayer. Their lives, even in these dire circumstances, reflected Christ in a clear and simple manner. This small corner of that large room was “home” for the Donnelsons for two years and during that time they saw a number of people come to Christ.

Early in December 1943, word came that some of the women and children were going to be released from the internment. When Mr. Donnelson told his wife that her name and their daughter's name was on the list of those to be released, Mrs. Donnelson insisted to him that he would be released as well. She said that she knew that God was going to answer her prayers of keeping their family together. Two days later, Mr. Donnelson saw that a “supplemental” list had been posted and his name was on it!

It was a long and difficult trip back to the states. Mrs. Donnelson was so ill and weak that she had to be carried on a stretcher when they boarded the boat to leave Shanghai. However, it was great relief and joy that filled their hearts as they finally sailed by the Statue of Liberty. They were in America for two years before being allowed to return to China.

Early in December of 1945, Fred and Effie Donnelson again boarded a ship headed back to China for their third term and were welcomed “home” by a small band of Christian believers. Unfortunately, the Donnelsons were in China not quite three years before being forced to leave again due to the Communist invasion. However, the work remained, and the Chinese believers trained by the Donnelsons continued the work of reaching the people of China with the Gospel.

Leaving China did not end the Donnelsons’ efforts to take the Gospel to China and around the world. When they returned to the states after their third journey, they joined the faculty of a Bible College in Missouri where Mr. Donnelson was the head of the Missions Department and Mrs. Donnelson was Dean of Women. Countless young people surrendered their lives to Christ to take the Gospel around the world under the ministry of Mr. and Mrs. Donnelson.

**Fred and Effie Donnelson’s lives are examples of doing whatever it takes to reach people with the Gospel.**