



The "Prime Directive"

Acts 15:19–21



When I read the Bible I become acutely aware that I am encountering a culture very different from mine. When we moved to Kenya I had no idea how different we were from the people who lived there. But the longer we lived with them the more different we realized we were. Like, "Why are there steel bars on all the windows?"



The same happens when I read the Bible.

As a child I just accepted its stories as stories.

You know, little David destroyed the giant.

But as an adult I can sense that it's very alien to my mid-American Christian culture!

"So, really? God ordered the mass genocide of everyone in Palestine?"



That difference is like driving in a deep fog at night.

We have to work hard to see through it to understand clearly what we are reading, and even then I'm sure we misunderstand a lot of what we think we know.

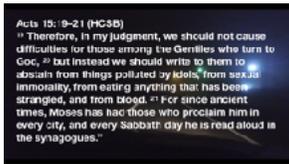


Fortunately the Lord has made his Prime Directive clear in many different ways.

His sacrificial love for humans stands out from the fog like a porch light on a foggy night.

He reveals it in his "Prime Directive" for Christians, "Love one another!"

So they may be saved.



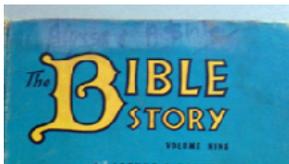
Our text today is one of those foggy passages.

When we read it quickly, we can wonder what on earth James is talking about.

What he suggests sounds so random!

Last week we looked at how he taught from the prophets that Gentiles are already being selected by God has his people, just as he chose the Jews long ago. So, in the text today he continues, but adds some requirements that, to me, made no sense at all.

That is, until I learned about them.

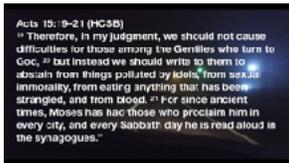


Listen, the Bible is not like a novel you can just read and take at face value

as if it's a series of stories written by a white middle class American.

At least, we need to think about what it means.

So, let's try to understand what James is advocating in our text today.



Acts 15:19–21 (HCSB)

¹⁹ Therefore, in my judgment, we should not cause difficulties for those among the Gentiles who turn to God, ²⁰ but instead we should write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from eating anything that has been strangled, and from blood. ²¹ For since ancient times, Moses has had those who proclaim him in every city, and every Sabbath day he is read aloud in the synagogues."

What did James say there?

"Abstain from food offered to idols"

"Abstain from sexual immorality."

"Abstain from meat of strangled animals."

"Abstain from blood."

"Abstain from food offered to idols"

"Abstain from sexual immorality."

"Abstain from meat of strangled animals."

"Abstain from blood."

Let's take each one at a time, although I think we'll find they are all related to one set of laws already familiar to James' Jewish audience at the Jerusalem Council. Most of the restrictions come from the law in Leviticus 18-19, although some go back to Genesis as well. So what do they mean?

First, "Abstain from food offered to idols."

What does that mean?

Back when the Law was given, the Israelites were among people who offered their sacrifices to idols, which were statues of demons. So Leviticus 17:7 (HCSB), commands, "They must no longer offer their sacrifices to the goat-demons that they have prostituted themselves with. This will be a permanent statute for them throughout their generations." That's the Law for the Jews.

Also what I have learned from Greek/Roman history is that the pagans offered some of their slaughtered meat to their idols too. Not all of the meat in the market place was offered to idols, but one just didn't know. So, as our Muslim neighbors would say none of it was "halal" or as Jews would say, none of it is "kosher." We just don't know, so don't eat any meat unless you know it's kosher; you might break the Levitical Law.

The next restriction seems pretty straight forward to us, "Abstain from sexual immorality." But what did James mean? Again it's from the Law. Leviticus 18:6–20 (HCSB), It starts out with an introduction that it then elaborates on in detail. I'll just read the introduction in verse 6, "You are not to come near any close relative for sexual intercourse..." That was considered to be immoral.

This Law doesn't address much of what we might call immoral. In this instance it's only prohibiting marriage with close relatives. God forbids the Israelites from copying the practice they saw in Egyptian families that brings out otherwise latent deformities.

Third of the four restrictions is, "Abstain from meat of strangled animals."

Where did that come from?

Was that in the Law too?

No. So what was wrong with it?

It's connected to the last requirement, "Abstain from blood."

That *is* in the Law, in Leviticus 17:10–12 (HCSB): "Anyone from the house of Israel or from the foreigners who live among them who eats any blood, I will turn against that person who eats blood and cut him off from his people. For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have appointed it to you to make atonement on the altar for your lives, since it is the lifeblood that makes atonement. Therefore I say to the Israelites: None of you and no foreigner who lives among you may eat blood."

How is strangled animals connected to not eating blood?

Well, a strangled animal still has its blood in it, so you can't drain it out. If you eat meat of a strangled animal, you will almost certainly also be eating its blood.

What's the big deal about blood?

Why would God forbid eating blood?

I mean blood sausage can be pretty good, right?

It's because of the major theme in the Bible, atonement for sin.

There is nothing particularly evil about eating blood in itself. Eating it is forbidden because of what God said about blood in verse 11 "...the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have appointed it to you to make atonement on the altar for your lives, since it is the lifeblood that makes atonement."

God appointed blood as the instrument of atonement for sin since it symbolized the life of any animal. It also symbolizes our lives. It becomes important for Christians when we think of Christ's blood shed on the cross for the removal of our sin. His blood is what made it possible to atone for the sins of humanity against God. God appointed blood for that purpose.

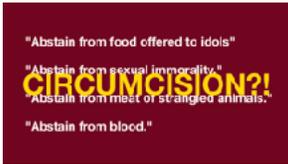
So James, said, "Abstain from meat of strangled animals." and "Abstain from blood."

Now that we understand a little about those four requirements,
a big ol' question popped into my mind,

"Why not circumcision?"

That's what the argument was about, right?

Circumcision of males was also in the law, why is that no longer being required for men?
Why are all these other laws being required for Gentiles but not that one?



It's because the requirements James stipulates are not for salvation
as they thought circumcision was.

We have already learned why they thought circumcision was necessary for Christians.;
They thought God only saved Jews.

That was God's Old Covenant with Moses for his new nation of Israel.

And according to the even older Covenant God had given to Abraham,

to become a Jew the men had to be circumcised.

But Jesus gave us his New Covenant in his blood.

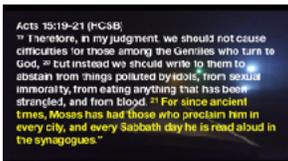
It is by Jesus that we are saved;

Humans are no longer saved under the Old Covenant of being Jewish.

So, James' requirements are accommodations for Gentiles in the churches.

Accommodations to what?

Why would they be needed?



That ties into James last comment in verse 21 of our text, Acts 15:21 (HCSB), "For since ancient times, Moses has had those who proclaim him in every city, and every Sabbath day he is read aloud in the synagogues."

James knew that these Laws were read every Sabbath in the synagogues, so, many of the God-fearing Gentiles knew them too. They were acceptable normal behavior for the people of God because of being read over and over.

So, if Gentiles wanted to get along with the Jews or even with God fearing Gentiles, they would need to conform to those cultural norms or they would still be suspected of being pagans, and no Jew or Jewish Christian would associate with them.

James wants people to get along and live in love with one another,
so these requirements will help mollify the circumcision crowd.

These requirements were a compromise to keep peace in the congregation of believers!

But what does Paul say about it?

He writes for the same reason as James, to maintain unity and love in the church.

But the shoe is now on the other foot because he's not writing to Jews;

Paul is writing to Christian Greeks in Corinth.

In 1 Corinthians 10:23–33 (HCSB), he quoted a saying that those Gentile Christians have been passing around saying in verse 23, “Everything is permissible,”

Sure, he admits, Gentiles do not have to follow the Jewish laws. But he continues with the same principle that motivated James, “but not everything is helpful. “Everything is permissible,” but not everything builds up.”

No one should seek his own good, but the good of the other person. Eat everything that is sold in the meat market, asking no questions for conscience’ sake, for the earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it. If one of the unbelievers invites you over and you want to go, eat everything that is set before you, without raising questions of conscience.”

Sure it's permissible to eat meat that might have offered to idols or still has the blood in it, but Paul says our freedom to do so is not the point. The point is God's Prime Directive to love one another, creating unity in the church.

So, in verse 28, Paul continues talking about living with Jews or God-fearing Gentiles, But if someone says to you, “This is food offered to an idol,” do not eat it, out of consideration for the one who told you, and for conscience’ sake. I do not mean your own conscience, but the other person’s.”

Then he asks a question that no doubt had been asked of him more than once.

...“why is my freedom judged by another person’s conscience? If I partake with thanks, why am I slandered because of something I give thanks for?”

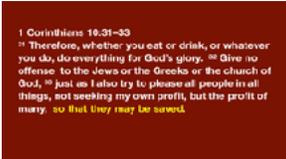
Paul's answer in verse 31 would be the same as James and for the same reason.

1 Corinthians 10:31–33 (HCSB), “Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for God’s glory. Give no offense to the Jews or the Greeks or the church of God, just as I also try to please all people in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of many, so that they may be saved.”

Why restrict ourselves over something we know is perfectly acceptable?

It's because of God's Prime Directive.

Like when I was growing up my parents didn't take us to movies in our home town because some people there thought it was a sin and and my parents didn't want an unnecessary controversy to cause disunity in the church.





And when we lived in Kenya and were going up to rural areas, the girls were told to not wear shorts! It was not what a Christian would do there. But a visitor from America wore shorts anyway. Sure enough she sat on a hill in such a way you could see all the way up her shorts and my host admonished me that she needed to change her ways in his town.

Why would she have to restrict herself to patriarchal morality against her own will? Because of God's Prime Directive to us.

My host would certainly have agreed with Paul's reason in verse 33,

"so that they may be saved."

You see that was the reason for the restrictions by James and Paul.

It was God's Prime Directive, "So they may be saved."

For James, the Gentiles must conform to a minimum of Jewish expectations for the Jews to have no reason to disregard the gospel.

For Paul, if you are eating with people who know nothing about Jewish restrictions, don't bring it up because they may be turned off from the gospel because it may seem overly restrictive and offensive. But if they do reveal that they expect a Jew, or even a Jewish Christian to follow kosher, then it's better not to eat that meat. So, the host will continue to respect the person telling them the gospel.

It's all about what Star Trek would call the "prime directive."

They weren't supposed to interfere with other life forms.

But what Paul and the rest are doing is kind of opposite to Star Trek.

Rather than not interfere with people's lives, they tell us to do whatever we can to save people to the glory of God.

That's God's Prime Directive: He came to save people.

We do it by acting in love toward them.

Every other behavior or restriction we might want to do is secondary or useless in comparison to knowing God. So, let's allow ourselves to be restricted in our behavior if we need to be, not because we think it's wrong, but not to offend others who may then think Jesus' offer of salvation is a sham because of "all the hypocrites in the church."

The prime directive that Jesus gave his disciples,

and that Barnabas, Paul, Peter and James are trying to obey, is Jesus' command, "Love one another, so all people will know you are my disciples."

So they may be saved.

Let's be careful out there.

Tell people the gospel gently and considerately.

Do everything out of love so they may be saved.

That's our prime directive from God.

Let's do that.

