

The Jerusalem Council: Applying the Torah to Gentiles

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MAIN VERSES

[Acts 15](#) · [Matthew 28:20](#) · [Matthew 5:17-20](#) · [Ephesians 6](#) · [Romans 13](#) · [Romans 8](#) · [Exodus 12:48](#) · [Leviticus 12:3](#) · [Leviticus 17](#) · [Leviticus 18](#)

Oh, okay. Well, as always, it's a blessing to be with you all today. I'm excited to get into the Word and talk about one of my favorite passages in the New Testament. It's also a controversial passage, which are always the best kind. So before we dive in, let's go ahead and start in prayer. Heavenly Father, thank you so much for this Sabbath day, this day of rest. Lord, it's such a blessing to come together as your people to worship you. Thank you, Lord, for being among us during worship earlier. It was such a sweet time in your presence, Father. And I just pray that this time of worship, Lord, that it would extend into the message that I will give today and throughout the rest of the day, Lord, that it would just be a day of worship. And we are so thankful for your word. And I pray, Lord, that you speak through me, that you help me to not say anything that is wrong, but that what I say would be from you and that your people would receive it and be edified. In your son Yeshua's name, amen.

The Jerusalem Council

All right, so we are going to be going through Acts chapter 15 today. So what is this chapter all about? Well, [Acts 15](#) recounts the events of what is called the Jerusalem Council. And to give a very quick summary of the Jerusalem Council, this council was convened by the Jewish apostles and elders in Jerusalem, hence the Jerusalem Council. And this council addressed a very important question. What was that question? That question was, is it necessary to circumcise the Gentile believers and order them to keep the law of Moses? We see that in verse 5. Is it necessary to circumcise the Gentile believers and order them to keep the law of Moses? Some members of this council, particularly from the Pharisees, said that it was necessary. But what did the apostles say? What was their answer to this question? Well, as we keep reading, we see that the apostles decide that the Gentile believers must follow four commandments. We see this

in verse 20. The apostles conclude that Gentile believers must, one, abstain from things polluted by idols, so don't eat meat that has been offered to an idol. Two, abstain from sexual immorality. Three, abstain from strangled things. And four, to abstain from blood.

Okay, what's all that about? What do these four commandments have to do with the original question about circumcision and the Torah for Gentiles? Well, we're going to talk about all of that today. We are going to nerd out with the Word. I'm going to hit you guys with a ton of information, and we're going to go through all of [Acts 15](#) to try to understand what this dispute was all about. What is this decision that was made by the apostles? What does that mean? And what does that decision imply regarding the Gentile believer's relationship with the Torah? So we're going to talk about all of that, and depending on how you may have heard [Acts 15](#) explained in the past, what we discover may surprise you.

What do I mean? Well, a very common interpretation of [Acts 15](#) that you may have heard is that the Jerusalem Council in [Acts 15](#) represents the apostles' rejection of the law of Moses. It represents their rejection of the law of Moses, at least for Gentile believers. According to this common interpretation, [Acts 15](#) proves that the Torah has nothing to say to Gentile followers of Yeshua, and instead of keeping the Torah, Gentile believers are to keep a separate, smaller set of commandments, namely, the four commandments that I mentioned earlier in verse 20.

So, in this message, I want to challenge that common interpretation. I will argue that the Apostles' decision in [Acts 15](#) does not imply that the Torah is done away with or irrelevant to Gentile believers. Actually, it implies precisely the opposite. What I hope to demonstrate is that the Jerusalem Council provided Gentile believers a starting point for Torah observance, and they expected that the Gentile believers would continue to grow in Torah observance over time.

So, by the way, I want to give a quick shout-out to my boy, Benjamin Frostad. He's a PhD candidate at McMaster University, and his master's thesis was actually on this chapter in [Acts 15](#). And so I'm drawing heavily from his work, but if you want to get really detailed and into the scholarship on this passage, I highly recommend checking out his master's thesis. I made a website called TorahMatters.com and I posted his master's thesis there along with a ton of other scholarly resources. So you can check that out if you want to get more information.

Three Problems With the Common Interpretation

But in any case, as I've already mentioned, my interpretation of this passage is quite different than the common interpretation, right? It's quite different than what you commonly hear this passage means. And if you've never heard a pronomian or a pro-law approach to [Acts 15](#) before,

you might be thinking that it's kind of a stretch. After all, I get it. That seems like kind of a straightforward conclusion. However, there are good reasons to question that common interpretation. So, before we jump into [Acts 15](#), there are a few problems that I want to mention at the outset here. And perhaps these things that I'm going to mention will, at the very least, cause us to pause before automatically accepting that common view that we've heard, and maybe it will invite us to consider an alternative, okay?

So first, as I mentioned, it is often assumed that [Acts 15](#) represents the apostles' rejection of the Torah. Instead of the law of Moses, the apostles gave the Gentiles four rules to obey. This quote comes from R.L. Solberg, and he's representative of this position. He says, quote, End quote. So that's representative of this common view. Solberg is convinced that the apostles did not apply the law of Moses to Gentile believers. Instead, they gave Gentile believers a smaller, separate set of rules that I guess they made up or whatever. All right? The problem with this interpretation is that the apostles did not make up these rules. They did not pull these four commandments out of thin air. Where did they come from? Well, we find these four commandments that the apostles impose upon the Gentile believers right in the Law of Moses, specifically in [Leviticus 17-18](#). In other words, the apostles derived these four commandments for Gentile believers from the Torah. Why is this significant? Because this fact refutes the claim that the law of Moses is not binding on Gentile believers. [Acts 15](#) verse 20 proves that the apostles did require Gentile believers to obey the law of Moses. In particular, they imposed four Torah commandments upon the Gentiles. Three of them pertaining to food, by the way. Three of the laws they gave are food laws. So that kind of is problematic for the common idea that God doesn't care about what we eat. So if the apostles wanted to say that the Torah does not apply to Gentiles, why did they apply it to Gentiles? That's like saying, instead of keeping the Torah, keep the Torah. Obviously, that doesn't make any sense. And so it's a big problem for the common interpretation.

A second problem is the next verse in verse 21. That verse reads, quote, End quote. All right, so I'll have more to say about this verse later on in this message, but already we can see that there is a problem here. There is a problem in claiming that [Acts 15](#) makes the Torah irrelevant to Gentiles. Why? Well, verse 21 starts with the word for, which in Greek is gar. And what this is is an explanatory conjunction. Basically, that means that verse 21 is intended to offer clarification or justification for what James just said in verse 20. And in verse 20, where he gives the four commandments, okay? So James says that Gentiles are to keep these four Torah commandments, for the Torah is proclaimed every Sabbath in the synagogues. All right? I'll address this verse in more detail later, but here we see that the Gentiles walking out their faith,

doing these four commandments, somehow, in some way, it involves hearing the law of Moses proclaimed every Sabbath in the synagogues. All right?

So... the law of Moses is relevant to these Gentiles.

Evidence Beyond Acts 15

A third problem is that beyond [Acts 15](#), we see evidence that both the Messiah and the apostles expected Gentiles to obey the law of Moses. For instance, in [Matthew 28](#) verse 20, this is part of the Great Commission, right? When Yeshua, he's about to ascend to heaven, and he tells his disciples, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations." Well, part of that great commission was to teach all nations to obey all that I have commanded you. That's part of the commission that he gave his disciples. Well, what does all Yeshua commanded entail? That would entail his teachings, right? Including his Sermon on the Mount several chapters earlier. Well, what does the Sermon on the Mount say? It includes [Matthew 5](#), 17 through 20, where Yeshua urges his followers to do and teach the law of Moses, even the least of the commandments. So all that Yeshua commanded includes [Matthew 5](#), 17 through 20, where he affirms the ongoing relevance of the law of Moses and tells his followers to do and teach it. And this was to be passed on to his future Gentile disciples of the nations when the disciples went out in obedience to the Great Commission.

Additionally, Paul repeatedly instructs his Gentile readers to obey the law of Moses. In [Ephesians 6](#), he explicitly tells them to obey the fifth commandment. He says to honor your father and mother, and then he quotes it directly. He quotes it straight from Exodus. In [Romans 13](#), he requires Gentiles to, quote, fulfill the law. And he directly quotes [Leviticus 19](#), 18, love your neighbor as yourself, and then four of the Ten Commandments. And after that, he says, quote, and any other commandment. So he quotes Leviticus, quotes four of the Ten Commandments, and says to fulfill the law, and then he adds, and any other commandment, you're to do that too. So not just the ones he specifically quotes, but also any other commandment.

In [Romans 8](#), verse 4, he taught that spirit-led believers, whether Jew or Gentile, will fulfill the Torah's righteous requirements.

So both the immediate context of [Acts 15](#) and the broader biblical context in the New Testament indicate that the apostles did not consider the Torah irrelevant to Gentiles. Quite the opposite. As we've seen, even within [Acts 15](#) itself, the apostles directly applied Torah commandments to Gentile believers. So the idea that [Acts 15](#) represents the apostles' rejection

of the Torah for Gentiles runs into several problems. Therefore, rather than accepting the common view, I think that these issues and this context push us to consider an alternative position—an alternative interpretation.

The Context of the Jerusalem Council

After that very long introduction, let's now turn to [Acts 15](#). What is the context here? Well, in the lead-up to the Jerusalem Council, we see that the early Messianic Jewish movement was experiencing rapid growth. The Spirit was poured out upon the disciples in Acts chapter 2 on the day of Pentecost. Thousands of people are being saved. This movement that started was originally made up of solely Jewish followers of Jesus. After a while, as we keep reading in the book of Acts, we see that many Gentile believers were joining as well. This was largely due to the missionary work of Paul and Barnabas.

Luke writes that after preaching the gospel throughout Asia Minor, Paul and Barnabas, after ministering to Jewish and Gentile believers throughout the region, returned to Antioch. Luke then writes that certain men from Judea came to Antioch and began teaching that circumcision was necessary for salvation. [Acts 15](#) verse 1 says: "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." In verse 1, we see the issue. Men from Judea came down and they were teaching that circumcision is necessary for salvation.

The teaching brought by these men from Judea obviously had a pretty big impact on these Gentile believers that Paul and Barnabas were ministering to. Unlike Jews who were circumcised on the eighth day of birth, as commanded in the Torah in [Leviticus 12](#) verse 3, Gentiles were uncircumcised. So requiring circumcision for salvation placed a heavy burden upon these Gentile believers who were coming to faith. They'd say, "You want me to do what now? I already agreed to accept your Jewish Messiah, and I'm trying to walk this out—and what?"

The Debate at the Council

As we would expect, Luke writes that this issue sparked intense debate between these men from Judea and Paul and Barnabas. They're arguing amongst each other. To resolve this matter, Paul and Barnabas are appointed to go to Jerusalem to consult with the apostles and elders. When they arrived in Jerusalem—this is verses 2 through 4—they were warmly welcomed by the apostles and other believers. Then when they get to the council, we see another group who

proposes something similar to what the men from Judea were teaching. [Acts 15](#) verse 5 says some Pharisees stood up and said Gentile believers must get circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.

You have the men from Judea in verse 1, and this group of Pharisees in verse 5 saying Gentile believers must get circumcised. We should note also that the Pharisees, in addition to circumcision, insisted that Gentiles must be ordered to keep the law of Moses.

Let's focus on the Pharisees first. Since they're at the council making this proposal, what does this tell us about their position? It tells us that for these Pharisees, circumcision and Torah observance are inseparable. They go together. You can't keep the law of Moses as a Gentile without circumcision. You have to get circumcised first—it's necessary. You can't keep these commandments without circumcision. They have to go together.

The Real Point of Disagreement

I want to suggest that the real point of disagreement between the apostles and these Pharisees at the council is not really about keeping the law of Moses—it is about circumcision. As we saw earlier, the apostles required uncircumcised Gentiles to keep various commandments from the Torah. So I would argue that what the apostles rejected is the Pharisees' position that circumcision and keeping the law of Moses are inseparable. The apostles believed that uncircumcised Gentiles could join God's people and obey the Torah as it applies to them.

Now, before we go further, we need to talk about circumcision because I know some of you are already thinking, "David, the Torah commands circumcision. So if the apostles expected Gentiles to keep Torah, that would require them to get circumcised, right?" Well, yes, the Torah does have commandments concerning circumcision, and we'll talk about that in a moment. But before we get there, let me note that many might be surprised to learn that this dispute in [Acts 15](#) is not really all that unique in early Judaism.

You guys are familiar with Josephus, right? He's a first century Jewish historian. His writings describe a similar situation involving two Jews who had different views on circumcision for Gentiles. In his book, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Josephus recounts a story set during the apostles' lifetime about a king named Azates. Azates was a Gentile. According to Josephus, a Jew named Ananias convinced King Azates to worship the God of Israel and to adopt Jewish practices and keep Torah commandments.

The Historical Parallel: Ananias and Eleazar

Josephus goes on to say that King Azates became a devoted follower of Judaism. He started keeping the commandments and studying the word. And eventually, King Azates expressed a desire to get circumcised. So what does Ananias do? Ananias advises the king that circumcision was unnecessary. He says it was more important that the king worship God and keep the Torah. Listen to what Josephus writes in *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 20, Line 41: "Ananias said the king could worship God even without circumcision if he had fully decided to be zealous for the ancestral laws of the Jews."

So what's going on here? Ananias thought it was unnecessary for this Gentile king to get circumcised as long as the king fully decided to be zealous for the ancestral laws of the Jews. Now, as we continue reading, immediately after Ananias says this, Josephus introduces another Jewish advisor named Eleazar. Eleazar rebukes Azates for not being circumcised and urges him to do so immediately. Eleazar approaches King Azates. He sees that he's studying the Torah and says, "What are you doing? This is hypocritical. You can't be doing this and remain uncircumcised. You have to do that immediately." According to Josephus, King Azates is convinced by Eleazar, and then he calls for a surgeon and gets circumcised.

But what do we learn from this account? Well, this account shows us that although some early Jews, like Eleazar, believed that circumcision was necessary for adult Gentiles, other Jews did not believe it was necessary. Other Jews, like Ananias, believed that a Gentile could worship the God of Israel and keep the law of Moses as it applies to him while remaining uncircumcised. So in [Acts 15](#), we see something similar. It appears that the Pharisees aligned more closely with Eleazar's position—that it's hypocritical to study the law of Moses while being uncircumcised. Whereas the apostles took a position that aligned more with Ananias.

What Does the Torah Actually Say?

Now, to be fair, the accounts in Josephus and [Acts 15](#) are not entirely analogous. Ananias believed that if King Azates got circumcised and the citizens found out about it, it could cause him political problems. So there are other factors at play. But at the very least, this account shows us that not all Jews agreed with the Pharisees that circumcision and keeping the Torah are inseparable. Some Jews believed that a Gentile could keep the Torah while remaining uncircumcised.

Okay, but what about the Torah itself? Because that's the real question. What does the Law of Moses actually say about this issue? Does the Torah teach that it is necessary for Gentiles to get

circumcised? Or can Gentiles be part of the community of Israel and keep the Torah while remaining uncircumcised?

So there are three passages in the Torah that give instructions for circumcision, and two of those passages are irrelevant to what's going on here in [Acts 15](#). Why do I say that? Because two of those passages have nothing to do with grown adult Gentiles. For instance, [Leviticus 12](#) verse 3 says, "On the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised." This is talking about an eight-day-old baby Israelite. The commandment is for Israelite parents to circumcise their male infants on the eighth day. Obviously, the baby isn't going to do it himself. He's eight days old. So his parents do it. Nothing about adult Gentiles in that commandment. The commandment says nothing about whether an adult Gentile should get circumcised. The commandment is for an Israelite parent to circumcise their son on the eighth day.

We see the same thing, by the way, in [Genesis 17](#), which provides the basis for the command in Leviticus that we just read. Here too, the law applies to the sons of Abraham who became the Israelites, and it must be carried out by the parents on the eighth day, starting with Isaac. Once again, the commandment is not for adult Gentiles to get circumcised but for parents to circumcise their infants—so not really relevant to what we see going on in [Acts 15](#).

Now someone might ask, "Well, don't these commandments imply that a Gentile needed to get circumcised in order to join God's people? Because God's people were circumcised on the eighth day. So if you want to be part of that, you need to get circumcised, right?"

Well, some Jews apparently did think that. Some Jews apparently did take that position. You have the men from Judea, right, that we see in [Acts 15](#) verse 1. They said, you can't even be saved unless you're circumcised. And we also see that with Eliezer in the account with Josephus. So there were some Jews that believed that your salvation depended upon getting circumcised and that if a Gentile wanted to join the people of Israel, if he wanted to join God's people, he had to do that. That's also what Paul is countering in the book of Galatians, right? However, as we will see, the Torah itself assumes that uncircumcised Gentiles who follow the God of Israel should be welcomed into the community without being circumcised. Contrary to the opinions of some Jews in the first century, in the Torah itself uncircumcised Gentiles who follow the God of Israel should be welcomed into the community without being circumcised.

Exodus 12:48 and the Stranger

And that brings us to [Exodus 12](#), verse 48. So unlike the other two commandments about circumcision that we talked about, this passage does address the matter of circumcision for

adults who are not physical sons of Abraham. This commandment appears within the context of eating the lamb that is sacrificed at Passover. And this is what it says in chapter 12, verse 48.

What's going on? Well, here we are told that a stranger can eat the Passover, and specifically it's talking about the sacrificial lamb here. It's talking about the meat of the sacrifice. We are told that a stranger can eat the Passover only if he gets circumcised. What is a stranger? A stranger is a non-Israelite. A non-Israelite who has joined the Israelite community and has decided to worship the God of Israel. In other words, he is a Gentile. So once again, this is the only time when the Torah gives any instructions regarding circumcision for grown adult Gentiles. So what exactly does this commandment in [Exodus 12](#) require? Does it require adult Gentiles to get circumcised? Well, yes and no. A stranger does need to get circumcised if he wishes to be allowed to eat the Passover lamb. Okay?

We could think about ritual washing. Passover is a sacrifice, right? And so if you wanted to worship at the tabernacle or a temple, there was a proper protocol for being able to do that. You'd have to go through certain rituals and washings to enter a state of ritual purity in order to be able to participate. Perhaps the same logic is going on here. You have to be circumcised in order to partake of this sacrifice. However—and this is important—yes, a stranger does need to get circumcised to eat the Passover lamb. However, there is no general commandment for adult Gentiles to get circumcised.

Proof That Uncircumcised Strangers Belonged

In fact, this verse proves that uncircumcised strangers were welcomed among the people of Israel. Notice that this stranger is uncircumcised, hence the command to get circumcised, which means he wasn't, all right? So he's uncircumcised, hence the command to get circumcised in order to eat the sacrificial meat. Why is that significant? Because the Torah itself repeatedly includes uncircumcised strangers in the community and requires them to obey God's commandments. For instance, they can't eat the Passover lamb, okay? But earlier in the same chapter in [Exodus 12](#), verse 19, we see that strangers are still required to keep the other aspects of Passover, such as abstaining from leaven for seven days. The command specifically says, whether you are an Israelite or a stranger, you shall abstain from leaven for seven days. And it even comes with the threat of being cut off if you don't do so. If you can be cut off, that assumes that you are part of something. So uncircumcised strangers are part of the congregation of Israel, and they have to keep the days of unleavened bread.

Elsewhere in the Torah, we see these uncircumcised strangers are expected to do things like keep the Sabbath and the festivals and many other laws, even laws regarding purity and offerings. So according to the Torah itself, the Pharisees in [Acts 15](#) are wrong. Circumcision and keeping the law of Moses are not inseparable. This is important because, again, like I said at the beginning, many people approach this text and they just assume that the apostles were rejecting or ignoring the law of Moses.

The Apostles Did Not Reject the Torah

No, they did not reject the Torah. They did not think it was necessary for these Gentiles to get circumcised. Why? Because the Torah does not say that it is necessary. It was only necessary to eat the Passover lamb. Presumably, a stranger, an uncircumcised stranger, could be part of the people of Israel and participate in every other aspect of Torah life while remaining uncircumcised. He just can't eat the lamb. So with that, let's get back to [Acts 15](#). I'm going to summarize the rest of this because I want to get down to verse 20. And I know we've already been going kind of long here. But okay, so we read in verse 5, right, the Pharisees, they insist that Gentiles must get circumcised.

Peter's Argument

And then Peter goes on to give a speech. He talks about how he saw with his own eyes that these uncircumcised Gentiles were being saved and they were receiving the Spirit. We read about this in [Acts 10](#) and 11, right? Okay. And so Peter's argument is simple. He's like, listen guys, God already received these Gentiles even though they are uncircumcised, so we should receive them too. If God received them, we should receive them. After all, we're all saved by grace through faith. We're all saved by the grace of the Messiah. None of us are saved by circumcision or Torah observance. So we should not put that burden on the Gentiles.

James's Four Commandments

Following Peter's speech, James then gives biblical support for Peter's argument. He cites [Amos 9](#), verses 11 through 12, which James sees as a prophecy that predicts the nations turning to the God of Israel and keeping his commandments. So all of this leads James to reject the Pharisees' proposal, and he goes on to give his conclusion. He's like, okay, what's to be done with these Gentiles? And he concludes that instead of circumcision, they must follow these four commandments. And so this is what it says starting in verse 19 of [Acts 15](#). James is speaking.

So he gives these four commandments. And what does he say? By the way, just really quick, things polluted by idols refers to food offered to idols, right? Strangled things refers to meat that was improperly slaughtered so that it wasn't properly drained of blood. We see this in Philo. He talks about strangled meat, and he uses that word to refer to meat that still contains the blood. And of course, blood refers to not eating blood.

Where These Commandments Come From

So where did these commandments come from and what was their purpose? Well, as I mentioned at the beginning, all four of these commandments come straight out of the law of Moses. They come from [Leviticus 17](#) through 18. So again, contrary to popular belief, the apostles were not rejecting the Torah. They explicitly imposed four commandments from the Torah onto Gentile believers. Okay, so but why did the apostles choose these specific commandments for Gentiles? Seems kind of random. Why these four?

Well, remember, according to the Torah, uncircumcised strangers, that is Gentiles, they could be welcomed into the community and they could belong to the people of Israel and keep the commandments that applied to them. They can't eat the Passover lamb, but they were expected to keep many other laws. So I would suggest that it seems that the apostles chose these four commandments because these four commandments are what the Torah applies to not only Israel, but also the stranger. When you look at these laws in Leviticus, in chapters 17 and 18, the stranger is explicitly mentioned. It says, not only are you Israel to do this, but also the stranger among you. So it would seem that the apostles chose these in the context of the Jerusalem Council.

The Purpose of These Commandments

What was their purpose in this context? Well, we know what their purpose was not. They were not a comprehensive set of commandments for Gentiles. In other words, the apostles did not think that Gentiles were restricted to only these four commandments for all time. This should be obvious because nobody thinks that Gentile believers are permitted to murder, steal, or lie despite the fact that those are not mentioned in [Acts 15](#) verse 20.

Elsewhere in the New Testament, as well as in the Torah itself, Gentiles are given many other commandments beyond these four prohibitions. Many other times throughout the Torah it says, not only are you to keep this law, Israel, but also the stranger who sojourns among you. So if these four prohibitions are not meant as a comprehensive set of commandments, then what is

their purpose? What is the purpose of these four commandments? The simplest explanation, in my opinion, is that they provide a starting point for fellowship in place of circumcision.

Again, the apostles are just agreeing with the law of Moses. They're looking at the law of Moses, they're seeing what applies to the Gentiles, and they see that Gentiles do not need to get circumcised to sojourn with Israel, but they do need to do these four things.

Gradual Growth in Torah Observance

So I would suggest that the four commandments are the minimum starting point for fellowship with Messianic Jews. They are not a substitute for Torah observance, but they are an introduction to Torah observance. Okay? So instead of requiring immediate adherence to all the laws in the Torah that apply to Gentiles, the apostles expected that Gentile believers would gradually grow in their Torah observance over time.

The Weekly Reading of Moses

And that leads to the next verse, verse 21. Verse 21 says, For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he has read every Sabbath in the synagogues. So the law of Moses is read every Sabbath in the synagogues. All right, as I explained at the beginning, this verse explains why the four prohibitions are given to Gentile believers. I would argue, and I'm just repeating what other scholars have said, but I would argue that James views the weekly proclamation of Moses in the synagogues as a resource for Gentile discipleship.

Hearing Moses in the Synagogues

He looks at the preaching of Moses in the synagogues on the Sabbath as a resource for Gentile discipleship. According to the apostles, the four commandments are the minimum requirements to sojourn among Israel. And the apostles expected Gentiles to pick up more commandments that applied to them over time as they hear Moses proclaimed every Sabbath in the synagogues. Here's how Dr. Eyal Regev puts it. He's a New Testament scholar. He writes, quote, The implications of verse 21 are that since the Torah is proclaimed and studied in the synagogue on a regular basis, the God-fearing Christians would gain further knowledge and adhere to Jewish law after being accepted into the Jewish Christian community. The legal obligations of the apostolic decree may have been an invitation to observe Jewish law. End quote. All right.

So the apostles essentially give a two-fold response to the Pharisees' two-fold proposal. What was the Pharisees' two-fold proposal in verse 5? They said it is necessary, one, to circumcise them, and two, order them to keep the law of Moses. So how did the apostles respond? What did the apostles decide? The apostles decided that instead of circumcision, Gentile believers must keep the four commandments required to sojourn among Israel. And instead of ordering them to keep the law of Moses, the apostles expected Gentiles to hear the law of Moses proclaimed in the synagogues every Sabbath. Okay? So the apostles did not reject the law of Moses. They applied it correctly and graciously. Okay? The Gentiles were to be included in the community without circumcision, just like the sojourner in the Hebrew Scriptures. They were to learn all the commandments that applied to them over time as they were discipled through hearing the Scriptures.

One natural consequence of the disciples' decision is that Gentile believers would automatically start to align their lives with the Jewish calendar. They would be fellowshipping with Messianic Jews in the synagogues when? On the Sabbath. Okay? So it should be noted that the Sabbath and festivals are also among the laws that the Torah explicitly applies to the stranger who sojourns among Israel. So to sum up: the apostles reject the Pharisees' proposal. They say, no, instead of circumcision, Gentiles, you need to keep four commandments as a starting point for fellowship. And verse 21 shows that through hearing Moses proclaimed in the synagogues, Gentiles would gradually and naturally grow in their observance over time. Far from rejecting the Torah or exempting Gentiles from keeping the Torah, the apostles impose four Torah commandments upon them, and they expect them to learn and obey more Torah over time.

The Apostles' Decree

Now, I know that some of you might be thinking, what does any of this have to do with me? Well, much in every way. First, we should avoid sexual immorality. We should avoid eating food offered to idols, blood, and strangled things. That's a direct commandment from the apostles. Verse 20 of [Acts 15](#) is called the Apostles' Decree. I think these are four things we need to make sure we're doing. These are like the Torah basics, and the apostles directly imposed these laws upon all believers as a mandatory minimum.

Surprisingly, many Christians don't even think that these four laws continue to be relevant. Forget about the rest of the Torah that we always talk about, the Sabbath and the festivals and all of that. I've encountered Christians recently, to my astonishment, who argue that even these four laws are irrelevant now, and we don't have to worry about these four laws. I'm like, what are you talking about? It's literally called the Apostles' Decree.

But I recently posted on X something I thought was uncontroversial—that we should be following the apostles' decree in [Acts 15:20](#). And I was literally getting called satanic. I'm not kidding you. People called me satanic for saying that we should follow the apostles' decree. Other people called me a Judaizing heretic and all of this stuff. I'm like, it's the apostles' decree, guys. It's agreeing with the apostles. What are you talking about?

So I think too many Christians have such an aversion to rules, right? This aversion to rules means even the four commandments the apostles gave as the basic minimum requirements seem too much. You don't want to be a legalist, right? And there's such an aversion to rules that I think it accounts for a lot of the problems we see in the church. We see problems with sexual immorality and scandals among church leaders. It's because people are not following the apostolic decree. They're not following [Acts 15:20](#) that explicitly commands us not to engage in sexual immorality.

A Biblical Standard

The second thing we learn is that the apostles had a biblical standard. Contrary to popular belief, they did not throw out the law of Moses. They applied it. Okay? So we should ask ourselves, am I applying the law of Moses? Yes. Do I live by the biblical standard that the apostles lived by, or do I try to find ways to get out of what the Bible says?

I was playing Sorry with my son recently. It's a board game. During the game, he kept disregarding rules that didn't benefit him. He's six, so of course all six-year-olds do that. But I was trying to explain to him. I'm like, "Ezra, the game doesn't really work if you ignore the rules. There has to be a standard, otherwise it's not Sorry anymore. You can't even call the game Sorry. You have to change the name to something—my apologies or my pardon or something. But it's not Sorry. There are rules to the game, and there's a standard to playing it."

And similarly, can you really call it Christianity if you ignore the rules and the standard that the apostles lived by and that God gave us in the Torah? You can't call it biblical Christianity. The apostles had a biblical standard, and we need to make sure that we are also upholding that biblical standard.

Inclusion Before Perfection

A third point I want to mention: inclusion must come before expecting someone to have everything right. Now, to be clear, this does not mean that we throw out the standard. Again, the apostles still held to Scripture as the standard. But they differed from the Pharisees in two

ways. First, the apostles' standard was biblical. They had the correct interpretation of the Torah, as I explained. The Pharisees, they were misreading the Torah. Second, they were willing to meet people where they were. They said, "You don't have to have it all together all at once. Here are a few things to start with. Come to synagogue on the Sabbath; you'll hear Moses preached and you'll learn more."

So the Pharisees' approach is like if a porn star got saved. People immediately told her that she can't come to church unless she quit smoking and stopped downloading movies illegally from the internet and changed all of these parts of her life. You have to do all of this stuff. You can't be part of our community unless you fix all of these things in your life first.

Now, some of those things are a good idea, obviously, and one would hope that over time she might feel convicted to start doing these other things that go against biblical teaching. But talk about misplaced priorities. The first thing she should do is quit the porn industry, right? That's the first thing. One of the four prohibitions is to abstain from sexual immorality. So start there. And then the other things will come over time. It would be dumb to exclude such a person just because she doesn't yet realize that she shouldn't eat pork or something. That will come naturally as she hears Moses proclaimed every Sabbath in the synagogue.

The priority is meeting people where they are and giving them a place to start. The priority is to include people so that they can be disciplined.

Closing

All right, worship team, you could come back up if you're ready.

So I hope this message was encouraging to you guys. I know it was a lot of information. But if there is anything that I hope we can take away from [Acts 15](#), it's that God's word remains relevant and applicable. It's not done away with, and our job is not to add to it or take away from it. Our job is to study it, to know what it says, and to apply it correctly.

Heavenly Father, thank you so much for this day. Thank you so much for your word, Lord. And I pray that whatever I said today that was true and that was biblical, Lord, that it would impact your people, that they would be blessed and edified, that this would be part of their discipleship to move forward and to grow in your ways. If anything that I said today was unbiblical, Lord, I pray that it will not have an impact. Lord, we just want to be faithful to your word. We just want to be faithful to your biblical standard, and we just want to understand it and apply it. Lord, we love you. We thank you. We praise all these things in your son Yeshua's name. Amen.

Let's sing the Shema together. Shema Yisrael Adonai Echad Baruch She'er Kevor Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one. Blessed is the name of his glorious kingdom for all eternity. And may the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you.

Closing Blessing

May the Lord lift up his countenance toward you and give you his peace. In the name of our Tsar Shalom, our Prince of Peace, Yeshua HaMashiach, we pray. Amen and amen. Shabbat Shalom, family.

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