

## 3.14.21

## Listening to Guidance

## Acts 15.6-21

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I was blessed to know Richard and Ruth Ross for many years. Not only was I their pastor, but in January of 2005 we moved into the house right across the street from them and we were neighbors. Dick enlisted in the United States Marine Corps at the age of 17 in March of 1944 and served with the 6<sup>th</sup> US Marine division receiving the Purple Heart for his service during the battle of Okinawa in 1945. Dick and Ruth were married for 62 years. Dick died ten years ago, and Ruth passed in 2019. As with many newlyweds, they spent the first years of their marriage establishing their careers saving and working hard for the future. They acquired a lot of land and with the help of family and friends, and physically built their first home together in Sudbury Massachusetts where they raised their five children. One of the fun stories their children told me was that Dick's brother had a lot of tools and was instrumental in the building of their house. The kids remembered being able to let go of a marble or a car on one side of the house and that it would roll all the way to the other side. Why would that happen? Shouldn't the floor of a house be flat and level? Unfortunately, the level used in building the house was not perfectly level, so the entire house was slightly off!

That story illustrates **the importance of receiving good guidance**, if our source of guidance isn't giving us accurate information, that can lead to problems. Today I'm going to be talking about **the spiritual discipline of guidance**. Where do you turn when you need guidance? How do you know that you're receiving or listening to accurate, truthful, helpful information? How do you know the source you turn to for guidance has your best interest at heart and not some other motive?

As we continue to talk about tools to build our spiritual lives, **the physical tool for today, is a level, as a reminder that good guidance enables us to establish a solid foundation on which to build our life not only as individuals, but our life together as the people of God.**

**If you want to be guided by God, then you need to believe God exists and that God desires for you to have a purposeful, contented, and joyful life. You need to be open to hearing God's voice, obeying God's word, and following the leading of**

**the Holy Spirit.** The goal of guidance is more than just receiving direction about a particular decision, although that's often what we're seeking, **it's also about being guided more fully into living in the image of Christ.** The Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the church in Rome (**Romans 8:29**), *"those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family."* The more we learn about God and God's ways, the more we will know what to do in any situation as an individual and as a church. As your friendship with God grows, you'll know more and more instinctively what actions would please God, what decisions would be in accord with God's way, or to put it another way, what Jesus would do in your place. However, it's not always immediately clear or evident what the right thing is to do or what God would most want you to do. This is what happened in a significant moment in the history of the early church.

In Acts 15 the church calls a meeting to seek God's guidance on a very important issue. What led to the church meeting was Paul and Barnabas were on their first missionary journey and some fellow Jews showed up saying that non-Jews must be circumcised to be saved. The scriptures say circumcision was the sign of the covenant with Abraham. Paul and Barnabas disagreed with them. The gentiles are saved by faith alone. They don't need to be circumcised to be saved. They don't have to become Jews first to become part of the Way of Christ. They say, *"We've seen it happen over and over. They've believed the good news and received the Holy Spirit."* The debate leads to a meeting in Jerusalem to seek the guidance of the most respected voices in the church - the apostles, elders, Peter, and James.

**Acts 15:6-21**, <sup>6</sup> **The apostles and the elders** met together to consider this matter. <sup>7</sup> After there had been much debate, **Peter** stood up and said to them, *"My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. <sup>8</sup> And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; <sup>9</sup> and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. <sup>10</sup> Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we*

have been able to bear? <sup>11</sup> ***On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.***

<sup>12</sup> **The whole assembly kept silence, and listened** to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. <sup>13</sup> After they finished speaking, James replied, “My brothers, listen to me. <sup>14</sup> Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. <sup>15</sup> **This agrees with the words of the prophets**, as it is written (Amos 9.11-12; Jeremiah 12.15; Isaiah 45.21), <sup>16</sup>*After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up,* <sup>17</sup> ***so that all other peoples may seek the Lord— even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called.*** Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things <sup>18</sup> known from long ago. <sup>19</sup> Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, <sup>20</sup> but we should write to them to **abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood.** <sup>21</sup> For in every city, for generations past, **Moses** has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues.”

In this meeting, we see the church using several sources of guidance including **the scriptures, the witness of the Christian community, the active leading of the Holy Spirit, reason, experience, and the integrity of the individuals involved.** All these factors are part of God’s guidance. **Peter** stands up and says he has witnessed the Gentiles coming to faith by grace and that they do not need the yoke of the law for **salvation.** God initiated salvation and gave the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles before circumcision. Peter says in v.11, ***“On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”*** These are the last words spoken by Peter in the Book of Acts. **Paul and Barnabas** then share what has happened among the Gentiles on their journey and describe how God’s saving of the Gentiles has been accompanied by miraculous activity just as in Jerusalem, confirming Peter’s statement.

**James, Jesus’ brother**, declares that the testimony of Peter, Paul, and Barnabas fits with the prophecy of the Hebrew scriptures, specifically **Amos 9.11-12;**

**Jeremiah 12.15; and Isaiah 45.21**, that the Gentiles would be brought into God's kingdom. James says the Gentiles don't need to become obedient to all the Old Testament laws to be included in the church, but he does suggest they write them to do four things: ***“abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood.”***

You may wonder what difference this makes to you. Why should you care about a theological debate about obeying the Torah, the law of God that happened almost 2,000 years ago? We care because we can learn a great deal from how the early church dealt with conflict around a sensitive and difficult issue involving salvation and inclusion in the faith community and the family of God. The church has always had challenging and divisive issues like race, politics, and sexuality just to name a few that people have difficulty talking about in a respectful and spiritually mature way.

The Book of Acts tells the story of how the early church dealt with and prevailed against external adversaries and how it can prevail against perhaps the toughest foe of all – disagreement with fellow Christians about church policy! How do we respond to conflicts, issues, and disagreements that threaten the unity and fellowship of the church? **How we handle conflict should reflect the unity we have in Christ and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.** The Jerusalem Council is a model for seeking God's guidance in handling disputes. Both sides voiced concerns. The Church stood firm on the gospel of grace but demonstrated a cultural sensitivity that was necessary to maintain fellowship. Although the Council's decision and guidance was clear, everyone was not ready to accept it. Paul dealt with tension in the cities of Corinth and Thessalonica around the issue of the inclusion of Gentiles.

So, when you're in need of guidance about something or when the church needs guidance we can turn as the early church did to **the scriptures** – do they have anything to say that would shed light on this decision or issue? **We can seek the witness of the Christian community** – what do we see in the larger church? There may be people like Paul and Barnabas who are sharing the good news and seeing results with people that others find surprising. We pray for **the active leading of the Holy Spirit** to show us the right path to take. **We use our minds and reason** – Jesus said to we're to love the

Lord our God with all our mind – which means we need to learn to think well and deeply so we're not easily misled or deceived. **Our experience and the experience of other people of faith who may be quite different than ourselves can also be instructive and enlightening.** Christ followers in and of different cultures and in various countries can be our guides. We also need to consider **the integrity and trustworthiness of the individuals involved.** I'm far less likely to trust the guidance of someone who isn't a person of integrity. I'm far more likely to listen to and prayerfully consider the guidance of someone who has proven to be trustworthy and a person of character who has demonstrated he or she genuinely cares about me.

There are also some **other means of guidance we read about in the Bible and may experience ourselves.** They occur less frequently but can be significant. **Fleeces** - see the story of **Gideon** in **Judges 6:36-40** where he **seeks confirmation from the Lord about the guidance he was receiving.** **Dreams** (think of **Joseph** in (**Genesis 37:5-11, 40:1-41:36**) who has dreams about his future and the ability to interpret dreams as well. **Four times Joseph the father of Jesus has an angel of the Lord appear to him in a dream and give him specific guidance (Matthew 1:20-25, don't dismiss Mary, 2:13-15, get up and flee to Egypt, verse 19, go back to Israel, 22, go to Galilee. The magi or wise men in Matthew 2:12, "having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road."** **Visions** – Peter in **Acts 10:9-17, 17a "Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision he had seen, suddenly the men from Cornelius appeared."** In **Acts 16:9-10,** "During the night **Paul had a vision** of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." 10 After Paul had seen **the vision,** we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them." **Fleeces, dreams, visions, signs, and angels have been used by God to provide guidance and direction so we need to be open to God's guidance coming to us in ways that may surprise us that we may not expect.**

Finally, one of the things that strikes me about the church meeting in Acts 15 is the deep listening and silence that characterize how people listened to one another. Did you notice that in verse 12? **"The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God**

***had done through them among the Gentiles.***” Perhaps it isn’t a surprising that a church meeting in which everyone is listening so deeply and respectfully to one another is able to reach a decision that is acceptable. **Keeping silence and listening deeply is sorely needed in our time.** There is too little of it. There is too much shallow, mean, arrogant and ignorant speech and far too little deep and respectful listening.

Acts 15 ends with the church in Jerusalem sending Paul and Barnabas and a few others off to the Gentile believers in Antioch with the letter explaining their decision. When the letter is read to the church in Antioch there is much rejoicing because it’s clear to everyone that Jews and Gentiles can fellowship and worship together in Christ, because he has saved them all through grace. This is a huge event in the early church.

I hope you and I can deal with all people and all disagreements and controversies in the same loving, charitable way **as we humbly seek God’s guidance.** As a German Lutheran theologian of the early seventeenth century, Rupertus Meldenius, wrote, **“In Essentials Unity, In Non-Essentials Liberty, In All Things Charity.”** My prayer is that we can be united in sharing a gospel as simple as Peter’s: **“You can be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus.”**

If you want to have the Lord’s guidance in your life, the first step is letting him in.

**Prayer:** God of wisdom, grant us the insight, knowledge, and guidance we need for the decisions we’re facing. We thank you for your Spirit and your Word, for the wise counsel of trustworthy people as well as for signs and visions, and divine messengers who help to order and guide our steps in Your way.

**Blessing:** Romans 15:5-6, *“May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

### **Questions for Discussion or Reflection**

1. Where do you turn when you need guidance? How do you know that you’re receiving or listening to accurate, truthful, helpful information? How do you know the source you turn to for guidance has your best interest at heart and not some

other motive? Why is receiving good guidance important not only to our spiritual life but in all aspects of our life?

2. The sermon states, ***“If you want to be guided by God, then you need to believe God exists and that God desires for you to have a purposeful, contented, and joyful life. You need to be open to hearing God’s voice, obeying God’s word, and following the leading of the Holy Spirit.”*** Why is each component of that statement important?
3. In the meeting in Acts 15, the church uses several sources of guidance including the scriptures, the witness of the Christian community, the active leading of the Holy Spirit, reason, experience, and the integrity of the individuals involved. How do these sources help us when we’re seeking guidance?
4. What stands out to you about the church meeting in Acts 15? What can we learn from it for our own lives and our church?
5. Have you had any experience with some of the more exceptional forms of spiritual guidance – fleeces, dreams, visions, signs or even angels? If you have, would you be comfortable sharing one example with your group?
6. Why is the ability to keep silence and to listen deeply and respectfully so important in our relationships and in the age in which we’re living? How is it related to guidance?