



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

April 6, 2014

"Christ Plus" (Book of Acts Series)

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Acts 15:1 Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

Acts 15:2 And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders.

Acts 15:3 So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers.

Acts 15:4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.

Acts 15:5 But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, "It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses."

Acts 15:6 The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter.

Acts 15:7 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.

Acts 15:8 And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us;

Acts 15:9 and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us.

Acts 15:10 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?

Acts 15:11 On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

Acts 15:22 Then the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided to choose men from among their members and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leaders among the brothers,

Acts 15:23 with the following letter: "The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the believers of Gentile origin in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings.

Acts 15:24 Since we have heard that certain persons who have gone out from us, though with no instructions from us, have said things to

disturb you and have unsettled your minds,

Acts 15:25 we have decided unanimously to choose representatives and send them to you, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,

Acts 15:26 who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Acts 15:27 We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth.

Acts 15:28 For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials:

Acts 15:29 that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell."

I suppose you've always wanted to hear a sermon on circumcision. Let's see if I can bring about some practical points from it today.

Heresy is defined as a belief or opinion that goes against the official belief of a particular religion or faith. In the passage of Scripture we just read, the heresy is in what I call "Christ PLUS"—a belief in Christ but then something is added that makes it all wrong.

Christ PLUS is saying that in order to be saved or in order to go to heaven, you need to follow Christ, plus something else. So it becomes Jesus Christ, PLUS circumcision ... just as we read in verses 1 and 5. For us today, there are people who push for Christ, PLUS no dancing. Christ, PLUS you gotta speak in tongues in order to be saved, or Christ PLUS working hard to win God's love. Much of the religiosity of faith has to do with these added rules and regulations that were never mandated in the Bible. (I'm glad the Bible didn't say Jesus wore blue, or we will all be wearing blue today.)

Jesus hated religion. Religion is about humankind trying to earn their way to heaven, but the Christian faith is about God reaching down to us. Christianity should never be about religion because following rules or regulations, or performance will never get us to heaven. It's about a relationship with Jesus. It's all grace, undeserved grace. As verse 11 says, "... we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus."

Spiritual practices and disciplines, like prayer, are good, but even prayer should never be a requirement for salvation. We should not be thinking that praying for an hour each day makes us spiritual. It might, or it can just be a prideful act. Jesus didn't like the Pharisees because they were promoters of religion. They were into the rules and the regulations, and not a relationship with God.

But here is a hard one. When there is a regulation or a rule that is steeped in how we have ALWAYS done things, steeped in culture, steeped in ethnicity, then it is really hard to determine what is culture and what is of Christ.

I have always said to myself that I don't think I would ever want to be a pastor of a predominantly one-race church because I would fear that I

would cave into the culture of that ethnicity. It would be hard to speak of a faith where Christ transforms and transcends the culture. Be it a Chinese church, a Japanese Church, a Hawaiian church, or an African American Church, it might be hard for the purity of the gospel to be articulated in a way that would challenge the very essence of our culture. That's why the Jerusalem Council's decision to disregard Jewish tradition for the sake of the gospel is stunning.

Imagine now, in first century A.D. Jesus Christ came to this earth as a Jew. The first church was birthed in the Jewish community. And in the Jewish community it is not kind of important but very important for males to be circumcised. It was a way to say they were part of the family. They were part of a long heritage of Jewish faith. Since many in the Jewish community became Christian and the fact that Jesus was a Jew (strange how many think Jesus and His church is anti-Semitic, forgetting that our Lord was indeed a Jew!) and all of the first disciples were Jews, it would seem logical to make it mandatory that all male Christians be circumcised.

So our Scripture passage today shows the big debate in Jerusalem: Does one have to be circumcised in order to be a follower of Jesus? Jesus was, so shouldn't all Christian males, too?

Fortunately, the apostles and the Jerusalem Council decided that circumcision was NOT mandatory for new believers. Circumcision did not have to happen for all races and cultures. Had they decided it was mandatory, then it would have been a heresy. It would be saying that to be a follower of Jesus it was belief in Christ PLUS circumcision.

By the way, if there are kids here wondering what that word means, ask your parents or your legal guardians about it later. It was

something done for health and religious reasons. And if you are a girl, praise God! Don't worry; you were cut out from that ceremony, so to speak.

So how does this all apply to us today? The challenge for us is big. It is really important that we get acquainted with what the Bible really says. If you don't read it, you are actually liable to fall into heresy. You might make up things that you require in your own life or in the lives of others. You might make up things that the Bible doesn't even say, like "God helps those who help themselves." That's one of the most quoted lines ever, but it's not even in the Bible. Actually God helps more those who realize they can't help themselves.

The Gospel, the true Gospel of Jesus is very freeing. The so-called Gospel of humans is not freeing. We tend to make more rules and regulations than needed.

Now this is not to say there shouldn't be any guidelines in life. After all, our Scripture passage says that though circumcision is not required, there are some principles we should follow. These are not principles that lead to salvation and heaven, but are principles that define whether you are a Christian or not. It is wise to follow them so we can have a healthy and safe life.

The principle in verse 29, for instance, is a good one. The first one is: we should abstain from fornication – meaning sex outside of marriage. The second is abstaining from eating food sacrificed to idols (which back then had to do with demonic, idolatrous worship). And third, abstaining from eating blood and eating strangled animals (for health reasons, especially in a time of no refrigeration).

But what I really want to talk about is this:

When we get into saying to people you need Christ PLUS something else, it can lead to heresy and into a different form of idol worship. It can lead to idol worship where the idol is finding things wrong in other people.

When we add a PLUS to Christ and require it of other people, it's putting a burden or judgment on them that even Jesus didn't put on them. For example, as I said earlier, for some the Christ PLUS is you need to follow Jesus PLUS you can never drink alcohol. Now we Presbyterians can drink. It's not a sin. We choose not to drink at our church events, not because it's a sin, but because we don't want to interfere with, or obscure the Gospel.

It is not a sin to drink, but the Bible says getting drunk is. We would agree. But we would say drinking is okay because Jesus changed water into wine. He wanted everyone at the wedding reception in Cana to not only have wine, but to have the best wine. You can read the story in the Gospel of John, chapter two.

Do we respect others who do not drink? Yes. But if they were to say that if you drink you will not be saved, then we would say that is a heresy.

Now everyone has boundaries and guidelines. When my English Anglican friends in London have Alpha Courses at their church, they have open bars on opening night. No wonder Alpha swept England! But for us, having open bars would be going too far. It would be a stretch for us. Though we do not judge the Anglicans for offering open bars, we would all agree that whether you drink or not, it is not a salvation matter. So everyone has to draw a line in the sand somewhere.

I don't normally drink alcohol unless it's a glass of wine or a virgin mojito. Now some don't know if what I'm drinking is virgin mojito or not, and if they judge me on that, shame on

them for stealing my joy! They then become kind of a MOJITO BANDITO. Muy loco!

Now if someone were to say to you that you are not really a Christian unless you speak in tongues, that too would be a heresy.

But notice that all of these examples come from a good place, so we should not judge those who judge us. We should always assume that people are "well meaning" unless we know definitely otherwise. That's grace. Speaking in tongues is fine, people did it in the Bible and they do it now. It's okay, but it is not for everyone.

Not wanting to be drunk is a good thing, so be careful about drinking. And if you are alcoholic, please do NOT drink.

But let's got a bit deeper on these idols we can have in our lives. We all might have blind spots where we have passionately invested ourselves in something that is not of God and is actually an idol.

First a definition. An idol is something that, instead of Jesus, has taken over our heart and our hopes and passion. We live for it. It may have the seeds of a good thing, but we can become obsessed with it. How would we know? Here's one possible test for idols in your life. Is there something in our lives that, in the pursuit of it, or the thought of living without it gets us depressed, anxious, worried, burned out, or angry?

Whatever that is, it is an idol. Are you on a high performance track in your job where your family is being neglected? That career might be an idol. Are you burned out on your job? Maybe that specific job is an idol because you are serving it at the expense of your health.

Are you always worrying about not accumulating enough wealth? Again, saving money is the seed of a good thing, but when we get obsessed with making money to the point of trusting money, instead of God, as our source of security, then we might be worshipping an idol.

Can our own body be an idol? We can be devoting most of our free time to exercise to make us look good and to make us to feel good, but we don't use our body to help others. Do we find our budgets off balance because we're into buying too many clothes or food or entertainment? These might be idols. Do we find our budgets off balance because we're into buying too many clothes or food or entertainment? Can a belief in science with God be an idol?

How is that like circumcision in our story? Circumcision is the cultural norm. Is our materialism the cultural norm? Circumcision helped a Jewish boy feel accepted in a community. Is our false god of materialism just a way of being accepted in a community because of what we buy or the status we are chasing to be accepted? Subtle but it becomes a Christ PLUS lifestyle if we think Christ is not enough for our self-esteem.

Let's go a bit deeper now. When we get angry at something, how does that indicate an idol? Angry at traffic and you engage in road rage? Are you thinking that somehow the norm is that everyone is supposed to be polite to you on the road? That there is kind of a lord of the highway who is supposed to cater to you and, like a presidential motorcade, block out all rude people who might cut you off from your route? Who do you think you are? False god.

When we get angry we have to ask ourselves what is it that I can't have that I think I am entitled to?

Do you think you are entitled to perfect health, the perfect job, and the continual stream of a salary that makes you happy? But if you think you are entitled, then you will never be grateful because you will always think you deserve it. You are awfully self-centered. It's not all about you.

Our lives should be all about God. Our bodies, our money, our time should be for Him and not for us and our entertainment. I've mentioned before that when I see that People Magazine names the sexiest man of the year or the sexiest woman of the year, I think "What do you do with that sexiness for society? How does your sexiness help humanity? Of course, many people ask me that question, and that is so bothersome. I'm constantly being asked!

If you are the strongest person of the world, how does that help people, do you run around helping people carry their groceries, or is it for your own glory? Who is your god?

But to go deeper, here is the truth for us. No matter if you are a non-Christian or a Christian or a new Christian or a long-time Christian, all of us battle with false gods. We all battle with the flesh, meaning our own worldly ways. Unless you are in la-la land, you should be aware that we all fight with selfishness, pride, anger, and worry. You should be aware that we are always fighting the Christ pluses in our selves.

If we are honest with ourselves, we would admit that we don't have pure motives. We get frustrated that we always seem so insecure, and have such a lack of confidence, such a battle over anger, addictions, and lack of forgiveness.

And I say, that is great! It's great that you know that. That is healthy! If you really are in touch with your own pride and selfishness and

insecurity, then the battle is half won because if we don't recognize that, then we will be judgmental of others. If we don't recognize our inadequacy in ourselves, then we will never be thankful for what we have. We will never be affirming of others. We will never really get help.

False gods demand that we are blind to our own lack of character. We think that if we could finally attain the power of the false idols, we will then get the self-esteem we have always wanted. And that is why we are on this constant treadmill of working longer hours, trying to impress people, dressing for success, spending more and more on entertainment so we won't have to deal with the fact that we are lonely and we are running from some issues we need to face.

So here is the good news: God sends His son Jesus Christ to tell us....that I am not a religion but an everlasting relationship. God sent His son Jesus to say to us, "Put away the false gods, the idols for I am the real thing. I will help you with your sin, your pride, your selfishness, and your obedience to false gods. I will help you deal with the anger and worry. The more you trust me and the less you rely only purely on your own strength, the more you will find health and wholeness for you will have found Me."

You say you have nothing to work on? You say to me, "I'm not critical or negative. I'm not addicted to such behavior. I always see the good in people. And I never gossip. I don't judge other people." Then I would say you are lying to yourself, and here's the test. Since Lent is not over, add to your list of things to fast from—from today until Easter, April 20—being negative and engaging in gossip. And instead, affirm people! Fast from gossip and from being negative for two weeks and see how well you do.

There should be nothing negative, not even one critical comment, not one gossip. And instead, you should always be affirming of others, always thankful for every person and every situation. Let's all do that until Easter!

I think for most of us, we will find that we will have to repent. Some won't even last an hour. Some might walk out of here and say, "Boy, that sermon sucked," and then you will have already blown it.

The more we are in touch with the fact that there are false idols in our lives, the more we will experience the abundant life that Jesus talks about. Let's allow Jesus to help us, lead us, and loves us unconditionally so we don't need to tear down others, or honk the horn out of frustration, or criticize others or gossip about them.

And isn't it great that this Sunday is Communion Sunday? It means we remember Christ and remember that He died for our sins. He knows we have false idols. He even forgives us for that and leads us away from them to the real thing—Himself.

And then we are so thankful for we will say, as the old hymn says, "amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me." Amen? Amen!

And as I go to the Communion table, let us remember that we all have our own story. And more importantly, when we give our lives to Christ, then our souls are circumcised and we can truly live as part of the Lord's community.