

*Memory Verse*

“For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.” (Acts 15:28–29)

Knowledge of God’s Will [God’s Word]	Knowledge of God [God’s Divine Nature]	Good Work [Behavior]
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Jews and Gentiles alike are saved by the grace of God, not by observing the laws of Moses.</li> <li>2. The Jerusalem council decision was made by the guidance of the Holy Spirit.</li> </ol>	<p>God is the only God we should worship. He is a jealous God.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Seek the truth with discernment, boldness, and the Holy Spirit.</li> <li>2. Strengthen the unity of the church through submission to the Holy Spirit.</li> <li>3. Abstain from sexual immorality.</li> </ol>

*Overview*

**Events and Spiritual Teachings**

- A. The Dispute over Circumcision
- B. Understanding Circumcision
- C. The Meeting of the Jerusalem Council
- D. The Decision of the Jerusalem Council

**Life Application**

1. Seek the Truth with Discernment, Boldness, and the Holy Spirit
2. Submission to the Holy Spirit Leads to Unity
3. Abstain from Sexual Immorality

**Memory Verse**

**Conclusion:** The council concluded that God had already included Gentiles in His salvation plan, but it would be burdensome to the Gentiles to keep the law of Moses. This decision was made jointly between the Holy Spirit and the church.

### **A. The Dispute over Circumcision**

In its earliest days, the church was comprised mostly of Jews until God revealed through Peter that the Gentiles were also included in God's salvation plan. However, certain men from Judea came to Antioch and insisted that the Gentile believers needed to be circumcised in order to be saved. It was not simply a matter of circumcision, however. They were bringing into question whether faith alone was sufficient for salvation, or whether the laws of Moses also had to be followed. The resulting disagreement was no small matter, so Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem to settle the dispute. In this lesson, we'll learn how the apostles handled the conflict, and how the council came to a decision at the end.

### **B. Understanding Circumcision**

First, let's examine the reason behind the conflict: circumcision. Circumcision is a minor operation where the foreskin of the male organ is removed. According to Scripture, it was an important sign of God's covenant with Abraham. Let's read its origins in Genesis 17:10–14:

*This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. [...] He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.*

According to this passage, Abraham had to circumcise himself, his household, and his slaves as an everlasting covenant in their flesh. Any descendant of Abraham who was not circumcised was outside of God's covenant. Much later, when Isaac was born, "Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him" (Gen 21:4).

From that point, God repeatedly commanded His people to be circumcised as a sign of their covenant with Him. Hundreds of years after the patriarchs, when the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, God re-established this sign when He commanded that all who partake in the Passover must be circumcised, Israelite and Gentile alike (Ex 12:43–49). This sign was later formalized when the Mosaic laws were established (Lev 12:3), and before the Israelites enter the promised land, God commanded Joshua to circumcise the sons of Israel, "For all the people who came out had been circumcised, but all the people born in the wilderness, on the way as they came out of Egypt, had not been circumcised" (Josh 5:5).

As we can see, from the time of the patriarchs to the promised land, God commanded His people to perform circumcision. However, its importance was not physical in nature, but spiritual. In the wilderness, God said, "And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer" (Deut 10:12, 16). Circumcision was a physical sign of a spiritual transformation and dedication to God.

### **C. The Meeting of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1–31)**

For generations, Jewish law demanded that to receive salvation, circumcision was necessary. It was clearly of great historical and spiritual importance for the Jewish people. Resolving the question of its necessity was no easy task. So, Paul, Barnabas, and certain others traveled to Jerusalem to present the question to the elders and apostles of the church. Let us examine how they dealt with the dispute.

**1. The dispute is presented before the apostles and elders (vv. 1–6)**

Upon their arrival in Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas first gave a report of the work God had done with them. They likely included a report of the Gentile believers, as it was then that some of the sect of the Pharisees stood and presented the conflict in clear terms, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise [the Gentiles], and to command them to keep the law of Moses” (v. 5). Then, the apostles and elders came together to consider the matter.

**2. The opposing argument is stated (vv. 7–11)**

After some time spent in debate, Peter rose to speak. He was an important witness as the first apostle sent by God to preach to the Gentiles, and he reminded his listeners of this. After establishing his authority, Peter then presented his argument. Let’s read Acts 15:7–11.

Peter made two very important points: first, that God purified the Gentiles’ hearts by faith (v. 9), and second, that all are saved through the grace of Jesus Christ, not by the law (v. 11).

**3. Supporting facts are presented by eyewitnesses (v. 12)**

Peter’s words changed the nature of the debate; it was no longer a matter of whether they had to follow the law, but how God had already transformed the lives of the Gentiles. Peter’s argument was supported by Paul and Barnabas. As apostles who were closely involved with the growth of the Antioch church and its Gentile believers, they would have been important witnesses in the dispute. The multitude “kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles” (v. 12).

**4. Conclusion and resolution drawn by a third party (vv. 13–21)**

Last to speak was James, the half-brother of Jesus. As one of the pillars of the church, he served as a neutral third party to resolve the conflict. It is important to note that James drew from the Scriptures to help resolve the conflict. Personal testimony alone was not enough – their resolution had to be in agreement with God’s word. He quoted from the prophet Amos concerning Gentiles who are called by God’s name, and pointed out that the words of the prophet agreed with Peter’s personal experience (*BSG: Acts, 262*)<sup>1</sup>.

James then moved to make a proposal before the council. The Gentile believers should not be troubled by Jewish laws, but rather should only abstain from these four things: (1) from things polluted by idols; (2) from sexual immorality; (3) from things strangled; and (4) from blood. These were common practices among the Gentiles of the time, and as such, believers would have needed to be extra vigilant against these specific sins so that they would not be polluted by the idolatrous and immoral practices around them (*BSG: Acts, 263*)<sup>2</sup>.

**5. The decision is made in unity (vv. 22–29)**

The members were willing to seek and submit to God’s will and were able to do so with the help of the Holy Spirit. In the end, their conclusion, based on testimony and study of the Scriptures, was made with the support of the whole church, not just the apostles and elders. The church

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<sup>1</sup> TJC Department of Literary Ministry, “Segment Analysis 7”, *Bible Study Guide: Acts* (U.S.A.: True Jesus Church, 2004), 262

<sup>2</sup> “Segment Analysis 10a”, *Bible Study Guide: Acts, 263*

continued to show its unity by resolving the conflict and agreeing on a decision together.

**6. The decision is presented and supported (vv. 30–31)**

Upon reaching a resolution, the Jerusalem council sent Paul and Barnabas with their conclusions for the Antioch church. They also sent along two others, namely Judas and Silas, who would make a verbal report of the resolution. Sending the additional apostles would help to remove any doubt that skeptics might have had about the authenticity of the letter (*BSG: Acts, 264*)<sup>3</sup>, as well as the reasoning behind the conclusions reached by the church. Upon receiving the letter, the members “rejoiced over its encouragement” (v. 31).

**D. The Decision of the Jerusalem Council**

The four prohibitions that James suggested were all common practices among non-believers. As such, the members of the apostolic church would have needed to be extra wary of them. Let’s examine the guidelines set by the Jerusalem council in closer detail.

**1. Abstain from things offered to idols.**

It was common practice for people to worship many different gods, and in New Testament times, it was equally common for pagan temples to sell food that had been offered to idols or used for their festivals. As a result, it was normal for Gentiles to eat food offered to idols, making it a difficult – and important – practice for believers of Christ to guard against. Let’s read Leviticus 17:7. “They shall no more offer their sacrifices to demons, after whom they have played the harlot. This shall be a statute forever for them throughout their generations.” As followers of Christ, we must have no part with demons, as our God is a jealous God (1 Cor 10:19–22).

**2. Abstain from blood.**

When meat was first given to mankind for food, God commanded Noah, “Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. [...] But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood” (Gen 9:3–4). Hundreds of years later, Moses gave the same command to the Israelites. Let’s read Leviticus 17:10–12.

God gave blood the power to atone for our sins because blood represents life, and only through life can our sins be cleansed. The sanctity of blood is such that to eat the blood of a creature is a serious sin in God’s eyes.

**3. Abstain from things strangled.**

An animal that dies by strangulation has not had its blood drained out of the meat. The importance of avoiding blood is reiterated in the third prohibition set by the Jerusalem council. Let’s read Leviticus 17:13–14.

In addition to its power to atone for our sins, blood also sustains life itself, and therefore must be drained out of any creature that we eat.

**4. Abstain from sexual immorality.**

Sexual immorality was rampant in Greek society. Sexual immorality includes adultery (extra-marital sex), fornication (pre-marital sex), and homosexuality (sex between members of the

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<sup>3</sup> “Segment Analysis 12, 14”, *Bible Study Guide: Acts, 264*

same gender), among others. Leviticus, chapter 18, describes what is abominable in the eyes of God (*BSG: Acts*, 263)<sup>4</sup>, but the main reasons He wants us to abstain from sexual immorality are:

- a. It defiles our bodies. Paul clearly warns us that sexual immorality is a sin against our own bodies, for our own body is the temple of the Holy Spirit and was bought at a price by Jesus Christ (1 Cor 6:13–20).
- b. It destroys the sacred institution of marriage (Gen 2:24). The marriage bed must be kept pure (Heb 13:4). Jesus also reminds us that in a marriage, “they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate” (Mat 19:6).
- c. Those who commit sexual immorality cannot enter the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9–10; Gal 5:19–21).

Our body is not for our pleasure, but for the Lord’s purpose. Therefore, we must flee sexual immorality and glorify God with our body, which belongs to God. God instructs us in 1 Corinthians 7:2 that to avoid sexual immorality, “let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband,” and “if [the unmarried] cannot exercise self-control, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion” (1 Cor 7:8–9).

Like the believers of the apostolic church, we also need to be aware of and avoid the sinful practices of non-believers around us. As God’s chosen workers, we have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ, and are now citizens of heaven (Phil 3:20). Therefore, we no longer follow the laws of the world, but of God, and should not walk in darkness, but in light (2 Cor 6:14).

### Check for Understanding

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1. **In the Old Testament, in order to uphold his covenant with God, what did Abraham have to do?** Abraham had to circumcise himself, his household, and his slaves as an everlasting covenant in their flesh. Any descendant of Abraham who was not circumcised was outside of God’s covenant.
2. **What points did Peter make during the dispute?** First, that God purified the Gentiles’ hearts by faith (v. 9), and second, that all are saved through the grace of Jesus Christ, not by the law (v. 11).
3. **What was important about the conclusion that James made?** James drew from the Scriptures to help resolve the conflict; personal testimony alone was not enough – their resolution had to be in agreement with God’s word.
4. **Why can we not eat blood or anything strangled?** Blood sustains life, and therefore must be drained out of any creature that we eat. Blood also represents life, and only through life can we receive atonement for our sins. Therefore, in addition to sustaining life, God gave blood the power to atone for our sins. The sanctity of blood is such that to eat the blood of a creature is a serious sin in God’s eyes.
5. **What are the main reasons we must abstain from sexual immorality?** It defiles our bodies, which are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:13–20); it destroys the sacred institution of marriage (Gen 2:24; Heb 13:4; Mat 19:6); and those who commit sexual immorality cannot enter the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9–10; Gal 5:19–21).

### Life Application

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#### 1. Seek the Truth with Discernment, Boldness, and the Holy Spirit

The Jerusalem council followed logical steps, but unlike worldly debates, there were several additional factors involved in the decision-making process:

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<sup>4</sup> “Segment Analysis 10b”, *Bible Study Guide: Acts*, 263

- a. The presence, power, and leadership of the Holy Spirit
- b. Peter's personal testimony, and eyewitness accounts from Paul and Barnabas
- c. The wisdom and discernment of James
- d. An understanding of God's word

From studying this event, we can see that when seeking out the truth, we cannot follow the world's logic. We must find the truth through the works of the Holy Spirit and the guidance of God through testimonies and understanding of the Scriptures. God is involved in every step. Then, we can overcome our different views when we truly allow the Holy Spirit to lead us.

Have you ever experienced, witnessed, or heard of a time when you or someone you know was unsure of how to proceed according to God's will? This can be anything from a personal issue, such as whether to accept a job, or a church-wide issue, such as how to expand or conduct Sabbath services. Let's look again at how the Jerusalem Council resolved the dispute:

- a. The church in Antioch sent workers to find help in seeking a solution
- b. All involved workers gave their reports (Peter, Paul, and Barnabas)
- c. James affirmed the reports and made the decision
- d. Everyone followed the guidance of the Holy Spirit and abided with the decision
- e. The church council sent a letter with delegates back to Antioch to report the decision

Let's now go back to our own experiences. What issue did you experience or see? Share what happened with the class. (*Teachers: You may want to prepare an example beforehand in case students cannot think of anything to share. Be prepared to mediate discussions and offer suggestions and guidance.*) Then, form a "J1 Council" and discuss how you would approach this issue as a class. What are some possible solutions, and what problems may accompany those solutions? How would they affect those involved? What does the Bible say about making such decisions? Do you have any closely related or similar personal examples that can help resolve the situation? Discuss, and try to come to a conclusion by following the same methods that the Jerusalem council used to resolve their dispute.

In reality, any disputes or disagreements in church need to be resolved. But all sides of the argument must be given a fair hearing. The final decision should be given to ministers and church workers who are filled with the Holy Spirit, wisdom, and have the spiritual discernment to make such decisions. Then, after that, each member should abide by the conclusion.

### **Seek the Guidance of the Holy Spirit**

Based on this discussion, when you make decisions in your life, do you easily submit to the leadership of the Holy Spirit? Or do you seek what you want? Why or why not? If we aren't sure where to start when making decisions, here are some guidelines that we can follow:

- a. Search the Bible to see what God has to say.
- b. Follow the teachings/principles in the Bible and submit to God's word.
- c. Pray over the matter for a period of time; avoid making hasty decisions.
- d. Seek God's guidance and keep your eyes and heart open to the Holy Spirit's direction.

### **Testimony #1:**

*A brother was laid off from his job. He was really anxious to find a new job, as he was financially desperate, and he needed to support his family. He came across a job offer, but the manager told*

*him he must work every Saturday. Upon hearing this, his heart sank. He knew God would not be pleased if he took this job. So even though he wanted the income, he returned home and sought after God's will through earnest prayer. He prayed and asked God to open another way for him. After, in submission to God's way, he let go of the job offer. Almost immediately, God then provided him with another job opportunity, and this time, the company did not require him to work on Saturdays. He knew that this was God's provision, and he praised God for His care. The guidance of the Holy Spirit was so evident that he gladly accepted the job's offer. May all the glory be unto God.*

– Anonymous

## **2. Submission to the Holy Spirit Leads to Unity**

An equally important application to learn from this event is what followed. When Peter, Paul, and Barnabas spoke up, they risked offending the converted Pharisees who believed that circumcision was necessary. For their part, the converted Pharisees could have continued arguing their case or become resentful. But the matter ended in unified agreement. As a result, the dispute, defense, and final decision strengthened the unity of the church through everyone's submission to the Holy Spirit.

The conclusion to this event teaches us that we not only have to stand up for the truth, but also submit to the truth. We should seek to please God instead of pleasing men or following tradition. Unlike human nature, God's truth and His moral standards will never change over time. So instead of being influenced, we need to become influencers by having the boldness to speak the truth, the wisdom and understanding to discern right and wrong, and the humility to submit to the Holy Spirit.

**Discussion:** When presenting the truth, we must never compromise it. What are some things that the world accepts but the Bible explicitly says are sinful and wrong?

## **3. Abstain from Sexual Immorality**

One of the conclusions that the Jerusalem council included in their letter was a warning against sexual immorality, which may very well be one of the most difficult sins to avoid (1 Cor 6:18). In a world where sexual freedom is not only permissible but also strongly encouraged, it can be a struggle for us as God's children to keep ourselves separate and pure. But with the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit, as long as we determine to do so, we can remain pure and live in the light according to His word.

### **Testimony #2**

*When I was in high school, one of the growing trends was that many of my friends were becoming physically close, or even sleeping with the person they were attracted to. I am really thankful to my parents and the RE classes that I have been attending from a young age, as they laid a strong foundation in my faith, and helped to shape who I am today.*

*In my junior year, I became close friends with a non-Christian. He told me he really liked me, but I knew he did not share my faith, and outside of school activities and homework, I quickly realized he did not have the same moral values as me. I did not doubt his feelings, but God's word had never been planted in his heart. Initially, I liked him too and became a bit emotionally attached to him. But when I talked with other sisters at church, they told me I should quickly cut it off before I compromised my sexual purity. It was not easy, but I managed to do so with the power of the Holy Spirit and intercessions from my peers. I am so thankful God gave me the courage to say no to him. This could not have happened without the prayer and support from my church friends. Looking back, I am forever grateful that God surrounded me with godly sisters in church to be there for me in my spiritual weakness. May all the glory be unto God.*

– Anonymous

### Testimony #3

*During high school, I got to know a sister during a church event. My parents told me I was not ready to be married; I was unstable emotionally and spiritually, and far too young to be dating. They were right, of course. Nonetheless, we started texting each other, sharing our thoughts through texts. I soon realized that I spent a lot of time looking forward to her messages. As a result, my grades began to suffer. This upset me, and I became angry at myself. So, one day, after Sabbath service, I knelt in the chapel and asked God to give me the strength to say no to this friendship. I ended up not replying to her message. Deep down inside, I knew neither of us were ready for marriage, or even for dating. It is hard for this generation because technology makes it so easy to share our feelings. But if I continued, I knew I could be emotionally blackmailed into sharing physical intimacy. Now, I simply pray a lot and ask God to give me the strength to guide my heart and guard my purity until I'm truly ready.*

– Anonymous

### Memory Verse

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“For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.” (Acts 15:28–29)

### Meaning

(See *Spiritual Teachings, Section D*)

### Conclusion

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The question of circumcision and its necessity was a major controversy due to its historical and spiritual importance for the Jewish people. The dispute needed to be directed to Jerusalem, where the council dealt with the debate in a graceful and logical manner, all while remaining in unity with one another. Their conclusion – that Jews and Gentiles alike are saved by God’s grace, not by their abidance of laws of Moses – was a result of their submission to the Spirit’s guidance and their desire to seek out God’s will.



## Lesson 8 Homework Assignment Answer Key

1. Why must we abstain from blood and from things strangled?  
*God gave blood the power to atone for our sins because blood represents life. The sanctity of blood is such that to consume it is a serious sin in God's eyes. Blood also sustains life itself, and therefore must be drained out of any creature that we eat.*
2. What was the importance of circumcision to the Jews?  
*For generations, Israelites had to be circumcised as a sign of their covenant with God, or else be cut off from it (Gen 17:10–14). It was a physical sign of a spiritual transformation and dedication to God (Deut 10:12, 16).*
3. What was important about the conclusion that James made?  
*James drew from the Scriptures to help resolve the conflict; personal testimony alone was not enough – their resolution had to be in agreement with God's word.*
4. What are the main reasons God wants us to abstain from sexual immorality?
  - a. *It defiles our bodies. Paul clearly warns us that sexual immorality is a sin against our own bodies, for our own body is the temple of the Holy Spirit and was bought at a price by Jesus Christ (1 Cor 6:13–20).*
  - b. *It destroys the sacred institution of marriage (Gen 2:24). The marriage bed must be kept pure (Heb 13:4). Jesus also reminds us that in a marriage, "they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate" (Mat 19:6).*
  - c. *Those who commit sexual immorality cannot enter the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9–10; Gal 5:19–21).*
5. What are ways we can seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit?
  - a. *Search the Bible to see what God has to say.*
  - b. *Follow the teachings/principles in the Bible and submit to God's Word.*
  - c. *Avoid making hasty decisions but pray over the matter for a period of time.*
  - d. *Observe and seek God's guidance and the leading of the Holy Spirit.*
6. Has there been a time when you chose what you wanted over what God wanted? How can you avoid this in the future?  
*Personal answers.*