

FRIDAY 16 September 2022 "What is enough?" (Acts 15:6-13)

Good morning my "Walking with Jesus" friends,

We've all experienced it... maybe many times in your life. *A discussion turns into an argument and soon emotions begin to flare up and an outright conflict is about to happen.* As the conversation started voices were calm, maybe even congenial, but as emotions engaged, voices grew louder and maybe vocabulary changed. We've all been caught up in these, haven't we? People can't ignore such a scene can they, and so a crowd soon gathers, and people start taking sides.

That is exactly what was happening when I left you yesterday in Jerusalem, about 48ad, with Paul and a group of Jewish Pharisee Christians arguing about what is required for a person to experience God's forgiveness for their sins. Very strong feelings on both sides elevated the debate quickly to a near frenzy.

I wonder who said it first. Listen, do you hear it? 'Massah - Meribah', 'Massah - Meribah'. The chant got louder and louder. These were all Jewish people; they knew their history very well. Moses had faced a similar angry crowd at a place he named "Massah and Meribah". The people were angry because they were thirsty in the desert and no water was seen in any direction. God intervened and told Moses to take some of the elders, the trusted leaders, and step away from the angry crowd. Moses records it this way: **"Moses cried out to the LORD, 'What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to kill me!' The LORD answered Moses, 'Walk on ahead of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile. I will stand before you there at the rock at Horeb...'"**

Here in Jerusalem as tempers were rising, finally wisdom prevailed and in order to prevent the argument from turning violent agreement was reached that the apostles and elders would sequester with Paul and Barnabas to finish this vital discussion. Luke records it this way: **"The apostles and elders met to consider this question."** (Acts 15:6) *What question, you ask? It's one of the most fundamental questions every human being must answer. "What must I do to gain God's forgiveness of my sins and acceptance into a relationship with God?"* Every church or temple or mosque or religious shrine, every priest or rabbi or pastor or spiritual leader is tasked to answer that question for the human race. That is where religions come from. *But only God can answer the question, so these spiritual leaders sequestered themselves to seek God's answer.* Let's join them. If we stand around the back of the room, we won't disrupt this vital, historic debate which has global and generational implications!

Luke, the author of Acts was not present, but the Holy Spirit led Luke to write this account: **"After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: 'Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the Gospel and believe.'" (Acts 15:7)** Look around the room. Heads are nodding, although reluctantly. *Many of the Jewish Jesus followers still struggled greatly with the idea that Jesus was welcoming Gentiles into His Church and that God loved Gentiles as much as He loved Jews!* But it was true, they all remembered. Peter had been directed by the Holy Spirit to go to Caesarea and actually into the home of a Gentile Roman military officer, Cornelius. As Peter had explained Jesus to them and told them the message of Jesus, Cornelius and his house full of Gentiles had believed in the truth Peter proclaimed, and the Holy Spirit had come upon them, even giving them the same gift of speaking in languages they did not know. It was the same as had happened when the Holy Spirit had anointed Jews in Jerusalem at the Pentecost festival! *As much as these Jewish Christians did not want to hear it or acknowledge it, they could not deny Peter's report of Gentiles becoming Christians.*

Peter continued: **"God, who knows the heart, showed that He accepted the Gentiles by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as He did to us. God made no distinction between us and them, for God purified their hearts by FAITH." (Acts 15:8,9)** Peter paused as his eyes moved around the room looking at almost everyone, face to face. For Peter that experience in Cornelius' house had been a life changing, 'defining moment'. He had never experienced anything like that, but in conjunction with the vision on Simon the tanner's rooftop in Joppa, (Acts 10:1-8) when the Holy Spirit had told Peter to go Caesarea, Peter was convinced. He had faced a radical choice: *Either Peter would fight against God, holding tightly to centuries old traditions and prejudice, or he would submit to God and allow God to teach Peter life transforming truth which was essential to the Jesus movement which was gaining great momentum among Gentiles.* Peter had learned from the mistakes he had made with Jesus, and he was determined to never again find himself opposing God, so Peter had embraced the extravagant concept that God loved every human being He created and wanted each person to know Jesus and have the chance for their sins to be forgiven by FAITH in Jesus alone! (1 Timothy 2:3-6)

Peter cleared his throat, took a deep breath and then laid out his challenge: **"Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the Gentile Jesus followers a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as the Gentiles are!" (Acts 15:10,11)** Silence moved across the room. Everyone knew Peter is right. No person, not even the great patriarchs David or Samuel or Moses or Elijah were able to live their lives in perfection before God. No one had ever been able to bear the burden of all the laws, all the sacrifices, all the Sabbaths... it was too much. *The only conclusion every person had ever come to was that perfection by human effort was impossible. Therefore, EVERY person has some sin no amount of effort could atone for. All humanity is at the mercy of God. Only God can declare a sinner forgiven. Only God can break the sin shackles. Only God can lift the heavy burden. Only God can draw us to Himself in a love relationship.*

Eyes lowered to the floor. Fists unclenched. Tempers calmed. Everyone was pierced in their hearts and minds. Peter was right. **Only God can extend sin forgiveness and when He does, no matter the person, it is both God's great Mercy and great Grace, for no person, none of us, deserves God's forgiveness.** We all deserve eternal separation from God for our sinfulness. (Romans 3:23; 6:23) Luke records what happened: **"The whole assembly became silent."** Peter looked at Paul and motioned for him to speak. Luke records: **"The assembly listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles. When they finished, James spoke up..."** (Acts 15:12, 13) This is the very same James with whom we've spent the last few weeks, watching him write his letter to the Jewish Jesus followers across the empire. You'll recall this James was the younger brother of Jesus, and James thought Jesus was a fake, until James too encountered the resurrected Jesus in the days after that famous Easter weekend, and then James became a passionate follower of Jesus.

I think we'll pause right here my friends. Tomorrow we'll come back here and listen to what James said to these leaders as they debated the essence of all religions... **what is needed for God to forgive a person's sins?** Because the question is so vital for you and me and every person, it's worth thinking about all the rest of this day. If you and I have to do something MORE than trust Jesus and His atonement death and God's promise to accept Jesus' death as payment in full for our sin... *then what do you suppose we need to do?* Fast occasionally? Pay large sums of money to the church? Live a perfect life? Get baptized? *What do you think you need to do, in addition to what Jesus already has done, for God to save you from your sin? And how will you ever know if you've done enough?* And if must do something, then why is Jesus' death not enough? Ponder this deeply my friends, and I'll meet you right back here tomorrow.

Today's Scripture is Acts 15:6-13.