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Sunday School Lesson

**PAUL CHAMPIONS FREEDOM AND
BROTHERHOOD**

by Rev. R. C. Todd

Lesson — Acts 15:23-29; Gal. 5:18-19.

The evangelistic tour undertaken by Paul and Barnabas described in last week's lesson produced, along with many Gentile converts, a serious controversy in the early Christian Church.

The dispute concerned the basis upon which these converts could be admitted into the Church. Should they or shouldn't they, be compelled to accept all that was involved in the Jewish religion, out of which Christianity had come? For example, should they be compelled to become "sons of Abraham" by the rite of circumcision, in order to receive the promises of God made to Abraham and to his seed? Most of the Jewish Christians, insisted that they should. Paul and Barnabas, the leaders of the movement among the Gentiles, felt that they should not. In this they were supported by Peter (see Acts 10, and Acts 15:11.) A council was called at Jerusalem to consider the matter. James the brother of Jesus, presided, and gave an opinion which was accepted, and this was embodied in the decree of the Council recorded in Acts 15: 23-29. The decree was a compromise and did not go as far as Paul and Barnabas in setting aside the Jewish ceremonial law. By implication circumcision was not required. But four injunctions were laid upon the Gentile converts which were ceremonial in nature. (1) They must not eat meat which had been offered to idols, for this was considered by the Greeks to be an act of communion with the pagan god. (2) They must not eat blood — that is, meat, from which the blood had not been drained. The practise of draining the blood from the animal goes away back into the history of sacrifice in the Jewish religion. The blood represented life, and was poured out on the ground and on the altar to keep the spirits of the departed alive in the abode of the dead. The original intention of the practise was long forgotten, but the practise remained and was scrupulously observed by the Jews. (3) They must not eat meat from strangled animals. This is just a particular application of the foregoing, as naturally the blood remained in the strangled animal. (4) They must refrain from fornication, — that is from the ceremonial fornication practised among the fertility cults, having to do with the worship of gods and goddesses of fertility. Thus a portion of the Jewish ceremonial law was retained. The consciences of the strict Jewish Christians were set at rest. The Gentiles believed that in time the rest of the injunctions would have no meaning. In the meantime, however, the essential unity and brotherhood of the Church was retained by the compromise, and the way was opened for the Gentile evangelistic mission of Paul, without causing a split in the Church.

The whole epistle to the Galatians deals with this question. Trouble had arisen in the Galatian Church, founded by Paul, from the influence of certain Jewish Christians who had not accepted the Jerusalem decree. They were telling converts in the Gentile Church that they were not saved unless they were circumcised. Paul was bitterly and righteously angered by these troublemakers who would set barriers between the Gentiles and acceptance of Jesus Christ and he wrote very vehemently to the Galatians about the matter, telling them that Christ had made even Jews free from the obligation of the ceremonial law. If men had to become Jews after the flesh and ceremonially before they could be Christians, then why did Christ die? If Christian faith was not sufficient for men's salvation apart from adopting the whole burden of Jewish law, then Christ did not save men at all. (see Gal. 2:16-21)

In Gal. 5:13-18, Paul points out that being freed from the Jewish ceremonial law does not mean license to do as one pleases. Love and brotherhood are more important than liberty, because if liberty is abused, strife and contention result, and the community is destroyed by them. In other words, true liberty can be exercised and maintained only within the boundaries of brotherhood. "Love and do as you please." This is exactly where modern Capitalistic democracy goes wrong with its supreme emphasis upon liberty, instead of upon brotherhood, within the bounds of which alone can true liberty flourish.

In Gal. 5:16-18, Paul points out that the conflict between the desires of the "flesh" and the will of God, renders a man helpless to do good. The use of the word "flesh" here is important. It means not merely sensual desire, not merely the "body," but the whole nature of man, which is sinful. By "spirit," Paul means not the spiritual side of our humanity, but the Holy Spirit. Only when we are led by Christ, alive amongst us in the Holy Spirit, are we able to attain real righteousness.

People who try to be righteous by their own efforts, may accept the stan-

dards of ordinary decent citizenship as the marks of true Christianity (as many do today) because in these they find a way of life that is quite within their capacity to follow. But there is nothing distinctively Christian at all about the popular every day standards of good conduct with which most of us are satisfied. Why should Christ have had to die to establish this easy kind of morality in the world?

We have got to face the fact that human nature is essentially sinful; that even when we do good, evil is present with us; that even in our common acts of charity, we act selfishly; because it gives us a feeling of selfish satisfaction inwardly. We do our alms and say your prayers that we may be seen of men. The aim of man is so serious and so deep rooted that Christ had to die for it. And doing penance, and having masses said, and burning candles, and making pilgrimages to the shrines, and giving to charity, and trying to be brotherly and so forth, accomplish as little toward making us righteous as circumcision would have done for the Gentile converts in the time of Paul. Men are saved from their sinful nature, only by commitment to the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ. This is still the teaching of the Protestant Church, and it must commend itself to all people who have been seriously confronted by their sinfulness, and Christ's righteousness. Christians confess that they owe all to the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and that what righteousness they can bring forth to exhibit before him is nothing but "filthy rags."

This does not mean an indifference to morality. It does not mean that since men cannot be truly righteous by their own efforts, it does not matter how they conduct themselves. Paul's teaching arose out of a realization of how deep rooted is our sinful nature, and of how high is the righteousness to which God calls us in Christ. It certainly cannot be said that a man who wrote as Paul did in Gal. 5:17-26, and in many other places, was indifferent to moral issues, or Christian responsibilities. He was striving after REAL righteousness, and because it was so real and so righteous, he knew it was humanly unattainable except by the grace of God. Only what God does IN man, can be trusted to produce true virtue.

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