

The Necessary Pruning

Upside Down

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This morning, I want to encourage you to open your Bibles to the book of Acts 15. As you're turning to Acts 15, for those of you that are guests or visitors with us today, not only do we welcome you but we want to encourage you to join us on a journey, a journey as we walk through the book of Acts somewhat slowly but very strategically. This journey is more than just a chronology of the events of the early church though we're going in chronological order, it is more than the biographies of the key figures even though we're addressing them as they come up, in fact, our journey is really geared around this one statement that's made in chapter 17, verse 6, this early church without resources, without physical assets, and yet limited in number, it says there in verse 6 of chapter 17: these are they that have turned the whole world upside down.

Now we've gone through what we know as Pentecost. We've seen the early martyrdom of those early believers. We've seen the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. We've seen the early church go from addition to multiplication and today in chapter 15, right around the corner from chapter 17, we're going to address a subject matter that may seem somewhat out of place. Here is the early church that is growing by leaps and bounds not just in breadth but in depth, and yet here in chapter 15, we're going to see a very key component of what makes chapter 17 happen, their willingness to have some things pruned in their life. Now if you're in the process of growth, typically in the flesh the last thing you will think of is actually limiting that growth but the agricultural illustration is true, that if you do not prune it allows stagnation, it allows plateauing, it allows at times even for disease to creep in. It is actually by the pruning of an item that we allow for greater growth in the future.

Here in Acts 15, there are going to be three areas that the early church allows themselves to be pruned. For the sake of time, we're not going to deal, read the entirety of the chapter, in fact, we're going to separate this into really three messages within one. We're going to go back and kind of just look at these verses as it addresses the particular item that is to be pruned and then how it applies to our life.

The first area actually begins in verse 1. Verse 1 and 2, these words are spoken. It says,

1 And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved. 2 When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question.

Now what was it that was happening, what was it that they "pruned" in this first part of chapter 15? They pruned the propaganda. Now that's one of those big words that just kind of illicit all kinds of emotions but allow me to define what propaganda is. Propaganda is the distribution of information with the intent to bring or to discredit those who disagree with you. That's what propaganda is. It works on multiple sides of the proverbial equation but I want you to see what's happening here. What or whom shall I say is bringing this information? Who is it that's telling them that they aren't believing right? Who is it that's telling them that their faith is erroneous? It says certain Jews that had come in. This is critical to the equation today: those that were speaking ill words, those that were giving misguidance were not even believers. The lost world had the audacity to say, "You Christians don't believe right. You Christians aren't doing what you're supposed to do, the way that you're supposed to do it." And what we see here is a certain attitude from these early believers. Now this is important. What did they say? It says that they, verse 2, were determined. As a believer in Jesus Christ, what should be your greatest determination is that truth reigns supreme at the cost of everything else. Truth reigns supreme.

Now think about this, in John 14:6 what did Jesus say? "I am the truth." In John 17:17, in the garden of Gethsemane the night before his crucifixion Jesus says, "Thy word is truth." And yet according to Ephesians 2, the lost world – now think about this for a moment – the lost world possesses within them a spirit of disobedience. Then you go over into Romans 1 and it says and some of the lost world have a reprobate mind, meaning they are incapable of communicating proper instruction. So why would we as Christians, why would we as believers in Jesus Christ determine what we believe and how we live it based on those who are reprobate and disobedient? They were determined to know truth.

Now how did they act out on it? I love what it says at the end of verse 2, so they should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and the elders about this question. What were they willing to do? Go to the source. Now as I walked through my educational background, you know, that last journey that I took, that final journey, there was a lot of knowledge that was distributed, there was a lot of information that was received, but can I share with you the most valuable thing that I learned toward the end of my educational experience? The value of primary sources. In other words, we live in a world today where So-and-so said something that So-and-so communicated and yet we take it as the "gospel truth." You see, the beauty of primary sources is you go back to the original, you go back to whomever said it, you go back to the first person that read it, and the problem we're having in our culture today is there is so much false communication we don't know who to believe anymore.

So what does it say? They said, "Alright, we have an issue here. These guys are coming and saying that we're believing wrong, they're saying that we're living wrong." So they didn't go down to the coffee shop, they didn't get online to a social media platform, they went to Jerusalem. They went to Peter, James and John. They went to the men that saw him walk on the water. They went to the men who saw him heal the lame, the sick, and the blind. They went to the men who saw him raise from the dead. They were determined to not listen to the propaganda but only that which was truth. Now remember John 17:17, Jesus said, "Thy word is truth." This isn't just an issue regarding salvation and the forgiveness of our sins. You may be surprised what your Bible contains within it. It contains instructions on how you are to operate and be as an individual, as a family, how you're to identify, how you're to handle your resources, how you're to relate to those that are around you, how you're to treat employees, how you're to respect an employer. I could go on but eventually you're going to want to eat lunch today. It addresses everything.

Why is that important? Because when the lost, disobedient, reprobate mind puts their opinion into it, go to the book. Don't go to social media. Go to the book. And they said, "Do you know what? There's something above Jesus. There's something in addition to Jesus." And they said, "Do you know what? We need to go and find out what the truth is." And do you know what they discovered? That Jesus and his word is the only supremacy that we need in our lives.

Well, that's the first thing they pruned, they said, "We're not going to listen to that propaganda anymore." The second one is going to hit a little closer to home. In fact, let me encourage you to fast forward to verses 28 and 29. You see, the first issue was between the lost world and the believers, this second issue is among believers. Now think about this. The early church was a great, heavenly, supernatural mismatch. You had law-abiding, kosher-eating, Sabbath-worshiping Jews and a bunch of pagan, pork, barbecue-eating Gentiles that all of a sudden had to find themselves around the campfire somehow singing Kumbaya. I mean, it's different. In fact, one of the things that you see is not only in Galatians 3 but in Ephesians 5 and other passages, that those that were completely opposed, those that thought completely different, those that had completely contrary lifestyles now all of a sudden are one body, one church, and one faith. And you can imagine, just like I tease, you get two Baptists, you're going to get three opinions. You get these folks together and there's a whole lot of issues that are taking place. You see, they were willing to prune the propaganda of the disobedient world but this is where it hits home: as believers, as the family of faith, among ourselves, they were willing to prune their preferences.

Now let me define what a preference is. A preference is your opinion or affinity on a subject matter that is not of primary concern to the faith. Now by the time we get to verse 28, the Jews had their opinion on what was important, the Gentiles had their opinion on what was important, then you get to verse 28. We call this the Jerusalem Council, the first ecclesiastical gathering of the church.

28 For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things; 29 That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well.

Can I just share with you the amazing attitude that's being displayed there? Do you believe for one moment that those that came from a Jewish background got everything that they wanted in the declaration? Absolutely not. Do you believe those that came from a Gentile background got everything they wanted in the negotiations? Absolutely not. You see, the attitude was that it was more important to the health of the whole than the preference of the individual.

One of the most famous modern-day sports stories is one of which has been put to the movies entitled "Miracle." It's the story of the 1980 US Olympic ice hockey team. It's a story that even the non-sports fans around us at some level are familiar with. How was it that a bunch of 19 and 20 year old college kids beat the Russians who were paid professionals? How did that happen? By the way, just so you'll know, those of you that get into the details, the United States didn't actually beat Russia in the gold medal game. It was actually a semifinal game and these guys actually had to come back and win another game, but that's beside the point. Here you've got these professionals from Russia, these amateurs, these college kids from America, how on earth? That's why that famous call, "Do you believe in miracles?"

One of the most famous scenes, in fact, I think it's the key to the whole story, the team finds itself getting ready for the Olympic games, it's in Eastern Europe, they're doing a scrimmage match. They're playing this other team, they're not concentrating. Can I tell you what they're doing? They're being college kids. They're talking about things they miss back home. They're pointing out people in the stands. They're just being who they were. That night after the match was over, Coach Herb brought the young men on the ice to do something unusual, to do practice drills that they now were going to do after a game that was so lackluster. He made them do conditioning drills where they skate up and down the ice and up and down the ice. They kept going. They kept going. They're exhausted. They're falling out. Even the medical doctor said, "Coach, you're pushing them too hard." He said, "Too bad. Give me the whistle." Even the man who was in charge of shutting down the arena said, "I must close." And he said, "I'll take care of the lights." They kept going and they kept going until finally it happened. One of the men who would share the leadership role of the team called out his name and said, "I play for the United States of America." Why is that so key? Because earlier when they introduced themselves, they gave their name and their respective college that they played for. And all of a sudden this one player got it. He said, "You know what? It's not about my NCAA trophies. It's not about my MVP awards. I play for the United States of America." And in that moment the coach said, "Alright, we're done. Go to the hotel."

Can I translate that into a Meyersism for you? The name on the front of the jersey should be more important than the name on the back. Let's bring that in-house for just a moment.

Who we are as a family of faith, who we are as believers, who we are as the redeemed of Jesus Christ should be more important than our preferences, our affinities, or our likes. And when they came to the table, can I put it in 21st century language? They said, "Oh, I don't like the color of the carpet but it's not the most important thing. Oh, I don't like the style of the music. It's not the most important thing. Oh, I don't like where I have to park but it's not the most important thing." Did you hear that constant "it's not the most important thing"?

So what was the action? It's called mediation. Mediation is that word meaning that two groups who have different opinions discover where they can find common ground. They found common ground. This is what is so critical: there's only three issues. That's it. They said, "Hey, we know we have differences. We know we're different. We know we have likes and affinities and preferences. But can we just come to an agreement that these three things that are not critical to the gospel per se, they're not primary issues per se, but we just, we need to mediate?" You know, for those of you that are here with us that maybe don't have a Baptist background, can I tell on us for a moment? We're notorious for church planting or in some cases church splitting. What that means is this, that there's a lot of churches that were established because the church they were attending weren't doing things the way they liked it so they went and took their ball and went somewhere else. I haven't found many Baptist churches who split off and started another church over the deity of Jesus Christ or the power of the Holy Spirit or the efficiency of scripture. Typically it's style, preference, affinity, and/or, "Well, I didn't get my way so I'll get it somewhere else."

So what did they say? They said, "Do you know what? We're not going to make those secondary issues, maybe even those third level issues, we're not going to make them breaking points. We're all going to get under the umbrella together and we're going to go forward." You see, they allowed the propaganda of the world to be pruned, they allowed their personal preferences, and then we come to verse 33. This is the one where it may take you back for just a moment: there were some people that needed to be pruned. Now work with me. Verse 33,

33 And after they had tarried there a space, they were let go in peace from the brethren unto the apostles. 34 Notwithstanding it pleased Silas to abide there still. 35 Paul also and Barnabas continued in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also. 36 And some days after Paul said unto Barnabas, Let us go again and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they do. 37 And Barnabas determined to take with them John, whose surname was Mark. 38 But Paul thought not good to take him with them, who departed from them from Pamphylia, and went not with them to the work. 39 And the contention was so sharp between them, that they departed asunder one from the other: and so Barnabas took Mark, and sailed unto Cyprus; 40 And Paul chose Silas, and departed, being recommended by the brethren unto the grace of God.

Now before I go forward, allow me to remind you that the Apostle Paul struggled with John Mark. He obviously didn't have the same vision, he didn't have the same direction, he didn't have the same desires, but in the very last paragraph that the Lord Jesus gives us through the Apostle Paul, he says in 2 Timothy 4, "Bring John Mark with you. He is profitable unto ministry." Hear me clearly: John Mark was not being thrown away, he was not being tossed aside, what was simply happening here is that he was hindering what the Lord was doing and the Apostle Paul said, "Do you know what? We do not need to be weighed down as we go forward. Why don't y'all just go a different direction?"

What is the attitude that is present here? Now some of you may struggle with what I'm about to say but this is another one of those Meyersisms. If you, and by the way, that can be you as an individual, if you, that can be you as a family, if you, that could be us as a church, if you, that could be an entire community, are going to go to the Promised Land, you're going to leave somebody in the wilderness. Yeah, let that just simmer down for a while because what does our world teach us? Remember the world is the propaganda. The world says if everybody doesn't go, none of us go. The world says if everybody is not in favor, none of us are in favor.

But think about what happened. The Israelites are delivered out of Egypt. They find themselves knocking on the door of the Promised Land and what did they do? They believed the propaganda, didn't they? Egypt, the lost world, they take better care of us than even the Lord can. And they even had some preferential issues. Remember that the spies came back and two of them said, "Man, it's incredible," 10 of them said, "Woo, the armies are too big, the men are too big, the cities are so fortified. I don't think we can pull it off." So what did the Lord do? He said, "Okay, in order for you to go into the Promised Land, these guys have got to 'die off.'"

Now translate this to the book of Acts 15. John Mark was still profitable but not in that place and at that time and for that purpose. I want you to notice what the Apostle Paul says about him in verse 38, "But Paul thought not good to take him with them, who departed from them." You say, "Well, what was the issue with John Mark?" The issue with John Mark was he wasn't all in. John Mark was there when it was convenient, he was onboard when it made sense, but as a whole, notice it says that we went to a certain place and he just took off. He just, no-show. Can you think about it, this can be as an individual, as a family, even as a church family, how much time and energy we spend going to make sure that somebody is going to go with us to the Promised Land and not hang out in the wilderness. Now before you go back to Luke 15 and talk about the 99 and the sheep, that's a picture of a lost person. This is a saved person. This is somebody, John Mark was saved, he loved Jesus, he was indwelt with the Holy Spirit, but he was living a rebellious life. He wasn't all in. His was a life of convenience and not conviction.

So what was Paul's attitude? He said, "You know, it is actually better for us to go without him than with him." Can I speak business terms? Some of you, you understand this because you're in the process of doing so on a daily day. You know that no employee is better than a bad one. It's true, isn't it? No employee is better than a bad one. Well, that's

what the Apostle Paul is saying, "I would rather go in with less numbers than more mess."

Now you know this isn't the first time it occurred. You remember there's this little story in the Old Testament, a man by the name of Gideon. Gideon was going to fight the Philistines, those who had opposed the things of the Lord. He shows up with 30,000 men. He said, "Boy, we're going to do this." The Lord said, "No, you've got too many." You say, "What do you mean he had too many?" And if you read the story of Gideon and his men, the problem wasn't the numbers, it was the heart of the people. They weren't invested. They weren't fully in. Some of you are not in your personal Promised Land because you're trying to talk people out of the wilderness. Guess what? John Mark comes around, he is profitable for the ministry, he was not tossed aside, the Apostle Paul just said, "Do you know what? I'm going to go forward with less numbers than stay back with the whole."

So what's the action here? What actually took place other than what was just stated? Paul knew that the power of the gospel is not determined necessarily by the number of people that are in the seats, he knew that it was from and through the Lord himself and not through the "mass of humanity." And here's what he's willing to do and this is the key to all of chapter 15 whether we deal with the propaganda of the world, the preferences among ourselves, or the people among us: he was willing to take a step back so he could take multiple steps forward. You do realize chapter 17 is right around the corner. They're about to turn the world upside down.

I asked this last week but can I ask it again? Would that have occurred if John Mark had gone? Would there have been a distraction? Would there have been a round 2 where he would have departed? Would they have been chasing him down rather than preaching the gospel? We don't know but can I illustrate this in the modern era? There was a book that was written some years ago. It's not a faith-based book. It's not a "Christian" book, it's just a good read. It's called "The Plateau Effect." It's a book how entities and organizations and even individuals come to a place and a point in time in their lives where they just grow stagnant. They grow stale. They kind of plateau with whatever it is. And this book is kind of a study of how they broke through. One of the most fabulous stories in there and it's actually at the beginning, it's about a little company that I think you're probably familiar with called Netflix. Oh, that's right. Some of you have a Netflix app on your phone. Some of you may have been watching Netflix and I didn't know it. I thought you had the Bible online for all I knew. But Netflix created some two decades ago was created as a company, you know this well, designed to stream movies into your home. Now I want you to think back 20 years ago. Who was the king of the proverbial movie hill? Blockbuster. Oh, that's right. It blows our kids' minds that we used to actually have to get in the car and drive to go get a movie. I told them that when I was their age, we actually had to rent the VCR and bring it home for the weekend.

But nonetheless, Blockbuster is king. That's who and how everybody is utilizing things, then Netflix comes on the scene. It's a wonderful idea but there was one major problem: we didn't have the bandwidth, we didn't have the technology. Your computers, my

computer didn't have the ability to handle the stream so Netflix was in trouble. What do they do? Do they just succumb to Blockbuster and say enough's enough? Or do they think outside the box? Here's what they did. They decided to take a step back. Not five years back, not 10 years back, that's right, they went back 100 years and decided to mail your movie to you. Do you remember those days? You could go online to their website, order the movies and in three days they showed up. Now all of a sudden you didn't have to drive down to Blockbuster. Now all of a sudden you didn't have to get out in the weather. They would just show up to your house. It took about 10 years and Blockbuster was no more. Netflix hasn't mailed you a movie in a decade. Why? Because they knew where they were headed, they knew the potential and the possibilities but instead of saying we are determined in spite of the bandwidth, they said, do you know what? Let's take a step back, let's go backwards for a few days, and then let's see what opens up.

You do realize that's what was happening here in Acts 15, particularly when it came to John Mark. They were taking a step back. John Mark was a relative of Barnabas. He was a friend of Paul's but he wasn't all in. And I'm sure there are kinds of commentary given, all kinds of statements that were made, but do you know what's about to happen? Chapter 17. The world is about to be turned upside down because they ignored the propaganda, they were willing to mediate their preferences, and everybody was all in. May our world be turned upside down too but we've got to allow God to prune us.