



ACTS 21:15-26 ESV

15 After these days we got ready and went up to Jerusalem. 16 And some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us, bringing us to the house of Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we should lodge. 17 When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly. 18 On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. 19 After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. 20 And when they heard it, they glorified God. And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, 21 and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs. 22 What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. 23 Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; 24 take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law. 25 But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality." 26 Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them.

STRUCTURE

- I. **Arrival in Jerusalem:** hospitality with a disciple (15-16)
- II. **Meeting in Jerusalem:** alignment with the leaders (17-25)
 - a. *Gospel Unity Celebrated*—grace crosses ethnic boundaries (17-20a)
 - b. *Cultural Sensitivities Negotiated*—grace flexes without compromise (20b-25)
 - i. *For the Jews:* Paul is asked to honor Jewish customs—not for righteousness but to guard unity (20b-24)
 - ii. *For the Gentiles:* The Jerusalem decree is reaffirmed—not to burden but to show respect (25)
- III. **Peace in Jerusalem:** submission and generosity for the sake of the gospel (26)

GENERAL COMMENTARY:

After a series of severe warnings about danger in Jerusalem, Paul arrives. But instead of hostility, he finds hospitality in the home of a disciple; he finds unity with the leaders in Jerusalem; and he pursues peace with the broader church. Just as God mercifully prepared Paul's heart for suffering through prophetic community, He now affirms Paul's calling through the church in Jerusalem. This is God's way. Seeing the pain ahead, He prepares His people—through timely warnings, shared tables, gospel partnerships, and affirmation from key players.

The bulk of the present passage centers around Paul's meeting with James and the elders. Luke's purpose is to show that Paul was not a maverick—rejecting the law of Moses to win Gentiles. On the contrary, Paul's ministry to Gentiles is fully embraced by Jerusalem's leadership.

Whatever rumors have arisen about Paul's "compromise" of Scripture are shown to be false; instead, Paul and the Jerusalem leaders are united in both message and mission, demonstrating that gospel faithfulness can take culturally diverse expressions without theological compromise.

"Compromise" is a tricky word. In ethical or theological contexts, "compromise" means *violation*. Paul indeed compromises, but without violating gospel standards. Ironically, the gospel itself motivates compromise—not ethically or theologically, but relationally—for unity's sake. This has been Paul's pattern in every church where Jew and Gentile cultures collide (1 Cor. 9:20-21). Therefore, the request of James and the elders lands: they ask Paul to honor Jewish culture. Paul responds by participating in a Nazirite vow, purifying himself, and generously covering the expenses of four Jewish brothers completing their vow. Rather than touting his gospel freedom from such Mosaic obligations, Paul freely lays down his rights for the sake of unity.

Two outcomes result. First, Paul dispels the false rumors about his "anti-Moses" stance, promoting peace among the brothers in Jerusalem. This gospel unity contrasts sharply with the hostility he will face from unbelieving Jews in Jerusalem. The new dividing line is not ethnicity—Jews versus Gentiles—but faith. Believing Jews and Gentiles align with Paul; unbelieving Jews and Gentiles oppose him. The gospel unites, but it also divides.

The second outcome of Paul's actions is that he models how the church must strive to maintain unity. The gospel unites us spiritually, but *experiencing* unity requires compromise. Not the wrong kind of compromise—where truth is watered down—but the right kind of unity: truth expressing itself in love. Love never compromises truth, but it does accommodate culture. Paul accommodated Jewish culture without compromising the gospel, and we must emulate his approach. Our tendency in the church is to draw lines where God hasn't. We divide over ethnicity; over secondary and tertiary doctrines; over missional strategies; over the color of the carpet! In Christ, we are all one. The same gospel that unites us compels us—in love—to bend where we can for the sake of peace.

Grace knows how to bend without breaking.

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

15 After these days we got ready and went up to Jerusalem. 16 And some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us, bringing us to the house of Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we should lodge.

—Paul traveled everywhere in teams, often picking up new teammates along the way.

—Ministry is a team sport. Who is on your team? With whom are you serving God?

—Paul ministered in Cyprus with Barnabas back in Acts 13:4-12. Perhaps Mnason was one of his converts?

We aren't told when Mnason relocated to Jerusalem, but his description as "an early disciple" might point to a longer-term residence in the Holy City. Perhaps he caught the revival bug from the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost. Maybe he was among the many diaspora Jews who enjoyed the Pentecost blessing of Acts 2 and decided to stay.

17 When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly. 18 On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. 19 After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. 20 And when they heard it, they glorified God.

—"the brothers received us gladly": This is the theme of Paul's initial reception in Jerusalem, which contrasts sharply with his rejection by unbelieving Jews. The new dividing line is not ethnicity—Jews versus Gentiles—but faith. Believing Jews and Gentiles align with Paul; unbelieving Jews and Gentiles oppose him. As our Lord said, "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters" (Matt. 12:38), and, "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matt. 10:34).

—"went in with us to James":

- James, the brother of Jesus, was not a believer during Jesus' earthly ministry—"For not even his brothers believed in him" (John 7:5). But something changed. After the resurrection, the risen Christ appeared specifically to James (1 Cor. 15:7), and from that point, James came to profess faith—not just in his brother, but in his Lord.
- By this point, James had become the primary leader in Jerusalem. This is remarkable, considering some of the apostles still resided there. Here is the evidence that James led the Jerusalem church (surrounded by apostles and elders):
 - Peter defers to James (Acts 12:17)
 - James leads the Jerusalem Council (15:13-21)
 - Paul reports to James (21:18)
 - Paul singles out James and numbers him with the apostles (Gal. 1:19)
 - James is listed first among three pillars of the church, even before Peter and John (Gal. 2:9)
- James wrote the Book of James.
- James, the brother of Jesus, is distinct from James the son of Zebedee—the apostle and brother of John—who was executed by Herod Agrippa I in Acts 12:2.
- Paul was viewed as the apostle to the Gentiles, and James (along with Peter and John) was the apostle to the Jews. Galatians 2:7-9: "On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles), and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised."

- The coming together of James and Paul represented a coming together of Jews and Gentiles. On the ground, these two factions in the church had been clashing. But at the leadership level, Paul and James were one. This unity among leaders would ultimately flow out into unity among believing Jews and Gentiles.
- Where the leaders are one, the people are one. Church unity flows from leaders walking in gospel unity. This passage shows us the way.

—“and all the elders were present”:

- The church in Jerusalem began with only apostles. But as house churches cropped up across the Holy City, elders were established. Presumably, they oversaw their house churches but also came together for joint decisions in Jerusalem.
- At Convergence, we have a similar structure of governance. House church elders oversee their house churches, but they also come together with other elders as part of a “full council of elders” for some deliberation and decision-making.
- Paul’s warm reception was not private. James and “all the elders” approved of him.

—“he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles”:

- This scene parallels the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. In both cases:
 - Paul stood before James and the elders (Acts 15:6; 21:18);
 - He reported God’s work among the Gentiles (Acts 15:4,12; 21:19);
 - Concern arose regarding the relationship between Jewish customs and Gentile faith (Acts 15:1,5; 21:20–21);
 - A relational compromise was reached to preserve unity (Acts 15:19–21; 21:23–25);
 - Scriptural truth was not compromised, even as cultural concessions were made (Acts 15:15–18; implied in 21:25);
 - The same apostolic letter reaffirming Gentile freedom is referenced (Acts 15:23–29; 21:25).
- Why does Luke so strongly parallel the two scenes?
 - He wants us to know how important church governance is. When the gospel is at stake, the church must respond with Spirit-led discernment, communal deliberation, and courageous leadership that protects both truth and unity.
 - A decision made in the past continues having present application. Church leaders must be aware of how their decisions will impact the future, and they must revisit past decisions for collective wisdom in application.
 - He underscores the ongoing tension between law and grace, tradition and freedom. By paralleling the scenes, Luke reminds us that this tension isn’t a one-time issue; it is a recurring challenge in the life of the church that requires ongoing pastoral sensitivity.
 - He highlights the maturity and consistency of Paul. Despite facing similar pressure, Paul remains faithful to the gospel and models submission, humility, and cultural flexibility without theological compromise.
 - He shows how unity is preserved through relational leadership, not top-down control. In both scenes, unity is achieved not by authoritarian control, but through careful listening, respectful dialogue, and mutual trust.

—“And when they heard it, they glorified God”: In Acts 11, the Jews of Jerusalem glorified God for His work among Gentiles; in Acts 15, they did the same; here, it happens again. Despite the cultural tensions, Luke shows how the leadership of the Jerusalem church resoundingly supports Paul and his Gentile mission.

And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, 21 and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs. 22 What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come.

—“many thousands are among the Jews of those who have believed”: God had restored Israel to God in fulfillment of His promises (Isa. 49:6; Rom. 11:5), even if there was a “partial hardening” (11:25) among the Jews. Most Jews rejected the gospel, but many did not.

—“they are all zealous for the law”: Despite becoming Christians, they continued practicing the Torah as they always had—with Sabbaths, new moon festivals, kosher diet, and the like.

—“they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise... or walk according to our customs”:

- Paul sometimes says things that look—on the surface—like a rejection of Moses:
 - Rom. 14:5-6: “One person esteems **one day** as better than another, while another esteems **all days alike**... The one who **observes the day**, observes it in honor of the Lord.”
 - Gal. 4:9-11: “But now that you have come to know God... how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world...? You observe **days and months and seasons and years**! I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.”
 - Gal. 5:2-4: “If you accept **circumcision**, Christ will be of no advantage to you... You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law.”
 - Col. 2:16-17: “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of **food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath**. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.”
 - 1 Tim. 4:1-5: “Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and **require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected** if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.”
- In the above verses, Paul does not mandate— and at times explicitly warns against—requiring observance of Jewish festivals, Sabbaths, and food laws as necessary expressions of Christian faith. Therefore, it’s not hard to see how some people interpreted Paul’s teaching as anti-law and anti-Moses.
- However, Paul was not anti-law or anti-Moses. Other verses clarify this:
 - Romans 3:31: “Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.”
 - Romans 7:12: “So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.”
 - 1 Corinthians 9:20–21: “To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews... not being myself under the law... but under the law of Christ.”
 - Acts 21:24: “Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself live in observance of the law.”
- The misinterpretation of Paul’s teaching is a classic case of oversimplification. As Peter once said, “...as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are **some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.**”
- Peter affirmed that Paul wrote Scripture, and some of Paul’s writings were hard to understand. However, the difficulty arose not from intellectual but rather moral defect—these people would “twist” his teachings “to their own destruction.”
- How, then, should we understand Paul’s teaching?
 - Paul was adamantly against relying on Jewish works of the law for justification. Both Jewish and Gentile believers are justified by faith (Gal. 2:16; Rom. 3:28).
 - Paul upheld that believers are free to practice Jewish customs, as long as it is not for the purpose of justification or to live a life pleasing to God (Rom. 14:5-6; 1 Cor. 7:18-19).
 - Believers must never pressure others to obey Jewish customs (Gal. 2:3-5; 5:1-2).
 - There can even be wise and holy reasons for practicing Jewish customs, even if they are not required:
 - In order to save Jewish unbelievers, by relating to them culturally (1 Cor. 9:20-21).

- In order to avoid offending the conscience of Jewish believers, for the sake of unity (present passage).

—Satan thrives on misunderstanding. Rightly dividing the word of truth requires incredible nuance. Universal truths can be applied in diverse ways, depending on circumstances.

—Other contemporary biblical tensions that require pastoral sensitivity and nuance:

- We are freely forgiven by grace through faith, BUT this does not entail a license to sin.
- We are called to submit to authorities, BUT this does not entail violating Scripture and conscience.
- We are called to forgive unconditionally, BUT we cannot always be reconciled, particularly in cases of unrepentant sin.
- We are called to unity, BUT we can't unite around heresy.
- Prophecy continues, BUT this does not endanger the doctrine of Scripture's sufficiency.
- God speaks by revelation, BUT He also guides through practical wisdom.
- In each of the above scenarios, we must hold both sides in tension rather than upholding a rigid ideology that neglects obedience, conviction, or pastoral care.

23 Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; 24 take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law.

—"Do therefore what we tell you": James and the elders counsel Paul, and in the following narrative, he submits. This continues the theme of unity between the Apostle to the Gentiles and the Apostles to the Jews (James & Co.).

—Their advice is not based on gospel requirement but rather gospel unity. The gospel in no way required Paul to join these "four men" who were "under a [Nazirite] vow". The Nazirite vow was a special, voluntary commitment in the Old Testament (Num. 6) for an Israelite to set themselves apart for God in a unique way. The word "Nazirite" comes from the Hebrew root *nazir*, meaning "consecrated" or "separated." The vow included: no wine, no haircuts, no contact with dead bodies, and it typically lasted for 30, 60, or 100 days (except with Samson and John the Baptist, for whom it was lifelong). The Jewish Council viewed Paul's participation in a non-obligatory Jewish law as an opportunity to show solidarity with the Jews and make a statement: PAUL IS NOT ANTI-MOSES. The rumors these Jewish believers had heard about Paul was just that—rumors.

—Since the four men were already under the Nazirite vow, Paul would not have fully participated in it. He would have joined them only for the final phase—their seven-day purification period leading up to the offering of sacrifices and the shaving of their heads (Num. 6:9–20). This required Paul himself to undergo ritual purification, likely because he had recently arrived from Gentile regions and would otherwise be considered ceremonially unclean by Jewish custom (cf. Acts 24:18). His role was to pay their expenses—a generous and highly visible act of solidarity—and to publicly align himself with their temple observance. In doing so, Paul demonstrated not that he was bound to the law for righteousness, but that he honored the law as a Jew and was willing to become all things to all people for the sake of the gospel (1 Cor. 9:20).

—"that you yourself also live in observance of the law":

- When they say "you yourself live in observance of the law"—this was true, for sure, of the moral law. And it was true circumstantially, as here, for the sake of the gospel. But in other settings, Paul did not observe the law like a Jew. How do we square this? Their statement only seems partially true.
- We square it like this: (1) Paul observed the moral dimensions of the law—Rom. 13:8-10: "Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,' and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law." (2) Paul voluntarily submitted to ceremonial dimensions of the law for the sake of the gospel, as in this passage. (3) James and the elders were speaking pastorally, to dispel a false rumor, rather than diving into nuances.

25 But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality."

—"But as for Gentiles who have believed": After affirming Paul's interaction with Jews, James turns his attention to Gentiles. The mother church in Jerusalem approved of both Jews and Gentiles who believed, choosing not to divide along cultural lines but rather to navigate their difficulties with pastoral sensitivity.

—"we have sent a letter": the letter from Acts 15.

—"they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality":

- In my commentary on Acts 15, I answered "why these four requirements?":
 - First, these are not presented as requirements for salvation. By teaching that salvation is free, the Gentiles would no longer be troubled. Second, the rest of these requirements must be for the sake of not offending the conscience of the Jews.
 - *Food sacrificed to idols*: elsewhere, Paul teaches that we can consume such food as long as it doesn't strike the conscience of some (probably Jewish) believers and lead them to sin. This is right in line with James's conclusion.
 - *Sexual immorality*: on its face, this appears to be the only ethical requirement in the list (the rest relate to ceremonial Jewish laws). Why would Paul list this and not a million other Christian ethics? Not lying, not murdering, etc. Probably because Gentiles routinely mixed the worship of their gods with food and sex (James's first two rules). In order to relate to Jews, these Gentile converts need to move away not only from their idols but also to their manner of worshiping idols: idolatrous food and sex.
 - *Food that has been strangled and blood*: these two regulations correlated. If an animal had been strangled, you could not drain its blood as the law stipulated (Deut. 12:16; 15:23). Strangled food was unclean. Therefore, James was commanding the Gentiles to respect Jewish food laws.
 - This does not suggest that James contradicted Jesus, who declared all foods clean (Mark 7:19). Rather, like the Apostle Paul, James taught Gentiles to respect Jewish food laws for the sake of conscience—even though Jesus freed them to eat all food under normal circumstances.
 - James wasn't saying that people had to follow all the old Jewish food rules forever (see Acts 10-11). He just wanted everyone to be respectful and considerate of the Jewish traditions, especially in situations where it might cause confusion or offense. Jesus had made it clear that, in general, all foods are okay to eat, but James was asking the Gentiles to be respectful of the Jewish customs for peace and understanding.
 - Tim Chaffey: "So why did James think that four restrictions should be placed on Gentiles? Was it because Gentiles needed to obey these laws to be saved? Not at all!... The reason for the restrictions was so that the Gentile Christians who were not under the Mosaic law would not unnecessarily offend the Jews. Notice, James did not include circumcision or the entirety of the law in his response. In fact, the four "apostolic decrees," as they have been called, are quite similar to four of the regulations in the Mosaic law placed upon foreigners who wished to remain in the land of Israel. They were to abstain from pagan sacrifices (Leviticus 17:8-9), from blood (17:10-14), things strangled (17:13-14), and sexual immorality (18:6-23)."
 - Alexander (quoted by Stott): "The abstinence here recommended must be understood... not as an essential Christian duty, but as a concession to the consciences of others, i.e. of the Jewish converts, who still regarded such food as unlawful and abominable in the sight of God."
 - In sum, James compromises relationally but not doctrinally. He refuses to compromise the gospel, saying, "we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God" (Acts 15:20). To trouble them would be placing a "yoke on the neck... that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear" (15:10). He maintains the glorious freedom of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. However, he does offer an olive branch to his Jewish siblings in Christ, asking the Gentiles to respect Jewish culture, with which some of their consciences

were bound. James does not require the Gentiles to be circumcised, which represented covenant membership, for this would contradict the gospel, which places us all in the covenant by faith. But he does ask them to maintain a few other Jewish laws for the sake of relational harmony.

- It is a sin to separate over minor matters, but it is a sin NOT to separate over major matters. It requires discernment to know the difference.
- The early church rightly separated over a major matter—the gospel—contending that Gentiles are co-heirs of the promises made to Israel through faith in Christ alone. But they refused to separate over minor matters—Jewish sensibilities—contending for Gentiles to respect the culture of their Jewish siblings in Christ.
- When some believers broke away from the First United Methodist Church over a redefinition of sexual ethics, this was right and holy. To have refused to separate over such a major issue would have been sinful.
- However, when we divide over minor matters—like the age of the earth, music style, or belief about the end times—we display our spiritual immaturity and carnality (1 Cor. 3:1-4).
- Schreiner: “Gentiles do not need to start acting like Jews, and Jews do not need to start acting like Gentiles, but they should be compassionate and understanding to both perspectives... Jews can practice the faith in their way, and Gentiles can as well—but all need to be washed in love. Distinguishing what is necessary and what is periphery is paramount for Christian fellowship.”
- F.F. Bruce (qtd. by Stott): “a truly emancipated spirit such as Paul’s is not in bondage to its own emancipation.” In other words, Paul felt so secure in his gospel freedom—that he didn’t HAVE to obey Jewish customs—that he didn’t feel pressure to tout his freedom as slavish independence.
- An example of this might be someone who grew up in a legalistic church that condemned dancing or forbade all drinking as inherently sinful. Later, they discover that Scripture doesn’t condemn dancing or moderate drinking—Jesus even made wine! But instead of walking in quiet confidence, they swing to the opposite extreme. Now they dance *extra hard* at every wedding and make sure everyone knows they’re drinking wine at dinner—posting about it, joking about it, turning it into an identity. Ironically, that person may not be free at all. They’ve simply traded one kind of slavery for another. They’re still obliged to prove something. But true freedom doesn’t have anything to prove. It doesn’t overcompensate. It can bend without breaking. That’s the kind of freedom Paul lived in—gospel security, not reactionary independence. That’s why in Acts 21, he could freely join in a Jewish purification rite—not because he had to, but because love compelled him. He wasn’t proving he was “free from the law,” nor was he pretending he was “still under it.” He was simply walking by the Spirit and building bridges.

26 Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them.

—This concluding verse shows Paul fulfilling what the Jerusalem elders asked of him.

—Therefore, Paul not only honored the gospel by choosing not to separate over minor convictional differences; he also honored the Jerusalem leadership by submitting to their request. Paul and the Jerusalem leaders are one; so are Jews and Gentiles in Christ.