

Father, we come before you this morning, heart somewhat pounding with the meaning and the heaviness and the beauty of what we've been proclaiming. That your path for us, it is beautiful and it is filled with joy and it is difficult and it is your path for us. May it be that we would follow your path, Father, I pray that you would speak to us this morning, spirit, Speak to us through your word, this gift of your word that you've given us. In your name, Jesus, we pray. Amen.

It is good to be worshiping with you. Covenant Family the image I want you to start with this morning, it's really what we've been talking about. We've been talking about this journey, specifically looking at the journey that Paul and Barnabas were on. This journey, it had highs and it had lows. And I want you to get this picture in your mind.

Many of you have probably experienced this before. When you have a small child, imagine four year old child or so reaching up and holding your hand. And as this small child reaches up and holds your hand, they hold your hand and they're ready to follow you with such complete carefree trust. They're just ready to go with you. And I want us to picture that.

That is Paul and Barnabas, their hand held up, hand in the hand of Jesus and they are following him along the journey that he has for them. So we, we looked at the first part of this journey last week and, and we were reminded that when they said yes to Jesus, that they were saying yes to being sent. And being sent is to love those to whom you are sent. And then to love those to whom you are sent is to speak up about Jesus to them, starting with where they are and pointing to him. So then we pick up this morning in this missionary journey that they're on and we'll pick up In Acts, chapter 14, verse 21.

So in Acts chapter 14:21, we read this. They preached the Gospel. So remember Paul and Barnabas, they had just gone to Lystra and then to Derbe. And about that we read, they preached the Gospel in that city, in Derbe and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch.

Now I want to pause there for a moment. Luke says this in a very understated way. They returned to these three cities that they had previously been to. But I want to remind you what happened in those three cities they had previously been to. When they had gone to Pisidian, Antioch, they had shared the Gospel and some believed and some did not.

And some of those who did not, they incited persecution such that the Gentile leaders of the city rose up and they expelled Paul and Barnabas from the city. So they're kicked out of the city. And now they're returning out of love for this young church. They're returning to that city from which they were expelled. They're also returning to Iconium.

And you might remember that in Iconium, Paul and Barnabas shared the Gospel and some believed and some didn't. And some of those who didn't again incited persecution in such a way that there was a plan afoot to. To have Paul stoned. Well, Paul and Barnabas find out about this plan and they get out of town before that can happen. So it's that town that Paul and Barnabas are returning to out of love for the church, returning to this town where the plan was to stone them.

The other town they're going to is Lystra. They're returning to this town. And you'll remember with that city, they had shared the Gospel and some believed and some didn't. And some, some who didn't incited persecution such that they actually did stone Paul. And again, Luke was understated about this and just he states they stoned Paul and then Paul got up and returned to the city and kept on preaching.

So again, Paul and Barnabas are out of love for the church, returning to this city in which Paul was stoned. So when we read that they returned to the city, read into that. This is showing some incredible love that they had for this young church to return to these churches. So they return to these churches and we continue reading in verse 22. They're doing this, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith.

We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God, they said. So there's three ways that Luke talks about Paul and Barnabas strengthening the church. The first of those that he mentions is they're teaching the church that they must go through hardships to enter the kingdom of God. So remember the kingdom of God. It's not a place, but it's a people who are giving their allegiance to King James, Jesus.

So it's right for us, when we hear this, to reflect and ask the question, do I want to enter into the kingdom of God? Do I want to give my allegiance to King Jesus knowing that entering into the kingdom of God is entering into hardship? Do I want to give my allegiance to Jesus? The reality is, so many times we would rather sit on the throne ourselves rather than Acknowledge Jesus sitting on the throne and living and giving our allegiance to Him. And as we read through Scripture, as we experience life, we realize the truth is, whether we like it or not, we were not designed to be sitting on the throne.

Our Creator created us to bring glory to him, to give allegiance to Him. He was. He is to be on the throne, and we were created to be his subjects. So when we try to live on the throne, it just doesn't work out. We are living in a way that we are not created to live.

So we ask this question, do I want to enter the kingdom of God? And then I might ask, well, is it worth it to enter into the kingdom of God? If entering the kingdom of God is entering into, you must go through hardship. And I think when we ask that question, Paul answers it throughout his letters to the churches. And he says, yes, it is absolutely worth entering into hardship, going through hardship in order to enter the kingdom of God.

Paul says, there is nothing on earth greater than knowing and experiencing the love of Jesus. So with that, he exemplifies with his life and he encourages the church that, that you must go through hardships and it's completely worth it to enter the kingdom of God. In my most recent conversation with God, as I'm asking God, why, why is your path harder than I want it to be? Why is your path the way, not the way that I would choose it to be? His most recent answer to me, which was so incredibly encouraging and has meant a lot, was simply conveying to me through his spirit that, Brentley, this is part of the particular path that I have for you.

Why am I going through this? Why is this hard? And God says, I think so many times to us, this is part of the particular path that I have for you. I am good, I am loving, and this is part of the particular path that I have for you. So another thing that.

Another way that Paul and Barnabas are seeking to strengthen the church is they appoint leaders to the church. You'll. You'll read in verse 23, we see this. Paul and Barnabas appointed leaders for them in each church and with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord in whom they had put their trust. So they helped organize these churches, these young churches that were still forming.

And there were leaders that were growing up in maturity and the gift of leadership. So Paul and Barnabas helped organize the church by appointing leaders. And then the third thing they did to strengthen and encourage the church was to pray for and fast for the church. Prayer is this mysterious and incredible thing that scripture consistently talks about, it's us coming into conversation with the Lord and bringing others into that conversation with the Lord and lifting them up in prayer. And it is mysterious and it is clearly scripture teaches time after time that this is powerful.

So Paul and Barnabas are praying for the church. They're fasting for the church. Fasting is a practice that can come alongside prayer that deepens and focuses, or I should say, helps deepen and focus our prayer. So Paul and Barnabas are praying and fasting for the church. This brings up the question in me to ask how, how is my life of praying and fasting for the church?

This is one of the key things that we can be doing to strengthen and encourage our church family. So I look at these things and the way that Paul and Barnabas, they are loving the church by returning the church at their risk and inconvenience, and they are seeking to strengthen and encourage the church. So the principle that this, that I want to bring out in this first part of this section of scripture is is that loving the church is risky and it's inconvenient. I mean, Paul and Barnabas, they could have. They had already gone on a missionary journey.

They came back to Antioch. They were reporting what had happened. They could have stayed in Antioch. That would have been so much easier and more convenient. But they had the hand of Jesus and he led them to return and to an inconvenient and risky journey of strengthening and encouraging the church.

So principle one, loving the church is risky and it's inconvenient. And I think it's part of what, of the particular plan that God has for us, his church. We read in verse 27 and 28 on. On arriving there, they. And that is Antioch, the.

The sending church. On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. And they stayed there a long time with the disciples. I think we see here that when you live that way, when you're on this journey following the Lord the way that Paul and Barnabas were, when you live that way, you have stories to tell. And the church is encouraged by those stories.

I think many of us experienced this as we came and listened to Heather Holloman and her husband Ashley speak last week. And we were engaged and inspired by the stories that Heather had. Heather had been following Jesus into these warm and important connections and conversations with people and the stories that she had about that journey of following Jesus into those places. The stories were inspiring and encouraging to us, the church family. So when you live this way, you have stories to tell, and the church is encouraged by those stories.

So next on this Paul and Barnabas journey, we read from chapter 15, verse 1. Here's what's going on. As Paul and Barnabas are in Antioch. Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers, unless you are circumcised, this is what they were teaching. Unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.

So if you think about it, if you think about what Paul and Barnabas had been teaching, you'll realize this is in complete contradiction to what Paul and Barnabas had been teaching. They had been teaching it is by grace, through faith that you have been saved. And. And now these certain men are coming to the church in Antioch and they're saying, actually, you have to be circumcised in order to be saved. So here's what happens next.

It could be, or you would think this is what might happen today. These people come from the church in Jerusalem and they're telling the church in Antioch that they're completely wrong, that Paul and Barnabas are completely wrong. So you might think the church in Antioch would say, all right, that's it, we're splitting away from the church in Jerusalem. They're wrong. But that's not what happens.

They, with great respect and humility, the church in Antioch comes together and they decide they're going to send Paul and Barnabas along with some other believers down to the church in Jerusalem. And. And they're going to meet with them and they're going to talk this out. So they go down and what becomes known as the Jerusalem Council and Paul and Barnabas share it with the people there. They share that God has been giving his spirit to men and women of all nations.

And God is not pouring his spirit out on these men and women of all nations. Based upon those men and women adopting Jewish culture, God is pouring his spirit out on men and women of all nations based upon their faith in him. And then some believers in that Jerusalem council who belong to the party of Pharisees, they declare and have a strong. They declare strongly that Gentiles must be uncertain that they must be circumcised. So we in our culture today rightfully would ask and wonder and want to consider, why is circumcision such a big deal to Jewish people?

Why can't they just accept that a new thing is happening and move past being stuck on this circumcision practice. When you think about it, the Jewish culture, circumcision had been an important part of Jewish culture, important part of Jewish law for thousands of years, all the way back with Abraham. God came to Abraham and he commanded Abraham to be circumcised and to circumcise all the males in his family. And that from that point on that males in Jewish families were to be circumcised. And circumcision was a purification ritual.

And it was a physical practice that pointed to a spiritual reality of the need to be. To have a circumcised heart, to have a cleansed heart, cleansed from sin. So there were many ways in which this physical symbol pointed to the spiritual reality that was our need for a savior. So for thousands of years, this was a significant part. In fact, it was law for the Jewish people that they would be circumcised.

So this is a big deal now that Paul and Barnabas are preaching that it's not about circumcision, it's about faith in God. So not only did you have circumcision as this part of the Jewish practice, but really there was an entire old covenant. There

was entire practices and laws and cultural traditions that were many physical symbols pointing to this spiritual reality. And you'll see what I've. What I've done in this slide up here.

The physical symbols were very clear, and there were very many of them for the Jewish people. And they pointed somewhat vaguely to this spiritual reality that was, we need to be saved and God is one day going to save, send a Savior. So all throughout the Old Testament, we see these physical symbols pointing to this somewhat unclear spiritual reality. And what happens when Jesus comes along and Jesus issues a new covenant, a new commandment? Jesus comes and he is the spiritual reality that the Old Testament law had been pointing to.

Jesus through his life, death and resurrection, he cleanses, he circumcises our hearts, he cleanses us from sin. So he is the spiritual reality that all of these physical symbols had been pointing to. So now since Jesus is here, the physical symbols, they are dissolving, they are evolving, and they're fading into the background. And. And what people are instructed to look at is the spiritual reality of who Jesus is and what he has done.

So we're fresh on this transition for the Jewish people, and it's difficult for them to allow these to let go, to loosen their grip on these physical symbols and to fully embrace the spiritual reality that is Jesus Christ crucified. So the current dilemma and the Way that's playing out is that Jews want the Gentiles to follow all of the physical practices, particularly in this situation, circumcision. So then Peter stands up and we'll read in 15, verse 7, Peter says this, 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. Then I want to keep reading, but this won't be on the slide. So just listen as I keep reading.

God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts, that is, he circumcised their hearts by faith. So Peter gives this clear testimony. And then Barnabas and Paul stand up in the Jerusalem Council and they give testimony to the Spirit being received by faith, not through adopting Jewish practices. And then James speaks up and he recognizes and declares how Peter's testimony and Paul and Barnabas testimony, it lines up with prophecy in Scripture.

So he presents this judgment, this decision. In chapter 15, verse 19, he says, it is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Not make it difficult, that is, we shouldn't make them all get circumcised, because that's. That's not the point of following Jesus. The point is that them being circumcised, that was a sign that was meant to point to this spiritual reality that has now come.

So now let's focus in on the spiritual reality, which is faith in Jesus Christ, who saves us, cleanses us from our sin. So James is pointing out, let's not trouble the Gentiles by requiring that they are circumcised. But here's where it gets slightly confusing to me, what James says Next in verse 20, he says, Instead, we should write to them telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals, and from blood. So it sounds like James is saying, gentiles, you don't have to be. You don't have to be circumcised and go along with this Jewish custom.

And then he says, gentiles, here are some Jewish customs that I want you to go along with. So it seems a little confusing. But when we look at this more deeply, I think we'll see there's a conviction, a conviction to follow the gospel, a commitment to the gospel, as well as a cultural sensitivity. What James is bringing before the people is he's saying, jews, let's not burden the Gentiles with this cultural tradition of. Of being circumcised.

And then he's saying, gentiles, I want you to be culturally sensitive. I want you to go out of your way to be culturally sensitive to your Jewish brothers and sisters. So I asked a few friends this week, what is something these few friends, they grew up outside of the United States. And I said, what are a few things that someone. That an American might do that's pretty common that if done in another culture, would be rude or.

Yeah, just kind of annoying and not fit with another culture? So some of the answers they gave were interesting. They said, tipping a server, wearing outdoor shoes indoors. What was another one that they mentioned? So they mentioned a few of these things.

Oh, the other one was eating, taking the last piece of food on a serving tray. So I hear those three things and I realize

I've done all of those things. And when I think about, you know, I live in this culture, I've grown up in this culture, and I think, you know, I actually see good reason for each of those things. So James in his, in a sense, is asking me, is asking us or asking the Gentiles to, out of sensitivity for their Jewish brothers and sisters, he wants them to stop wearing their outdoor shoes indoors, to stop taking the last piece of food on the serving tray.

James is giving this command that is this beautiful mix of a commitment to the gospel and cultural sensitivity between Jews and Gentiles. There's this last piece that we don't have time to get into now, but I just want to mention it. He also mentions to them the importance of following the Jewish custom of sexual morality, which is a very specific kind of sexual morality laid out in Leviticus 18. And James is encouraging the Gentiles to follow that. So this is where it gets into a long story, but we'll have to get into that another time.

The interesting thing, a lot of these customs, they fade away unless the custom is part of a moral code. So the sexual morality that is taught in Leviticus 18 is part of a sexual moral code that this is not going away. So we might. Some people today would look and they'd say, oh, look, the food laws, they evolve and go away, right? Well, the sexual morality of the people long ago, doesn't that evolve and change and go away?

Well, no, because that was part of a moral code that doesn't evolve and go away. And again, we can get a lot more deeply into that. But I don't want to get sidetracked for now. What I want you to hear is this is difficult, tricky thing, tricky things that the Jerusalem Council is discussing. Loving the Church is working out these differences.

It's working them out with conviction and humility. And the Jerusalem Church did this well, along with the Antioch Church. I think of the EPC motto, in essentials, unity, in non essentials, liberty, and in all things, love.

So principle one, loving the church is risky and it's inconvenient, and it's part of the path that God has for us. And principle number two is this. Loving the church is working things out with conviction and humility. And it's part of the path that God has for us. I want to invite the worship team up and as they prepare to lead us in this last song, which is really just a beautiful invitation for us into conversation with the Lord.

And part of the conversation with the Lord that I want you to consider are these two questions along the two principles that I just shared. How is God calling you to minister to, to strengthen, to encourage, to support and build up the church in risky and inconvenient ways? And how is God calling us as brothers and sisters in Christ to work out our differences with conviction and humility? I think it starts with us reaching out to our Savior, holding His hand and saying, I accept this part of the path that you have for me. I'm ready to go on this journey of mission ministry.

So I want to invite us to reach out to God and hold his hand and have this conversation with Him.