



# PASSION FOR TRUTH

WHERE NEW LIFE BEGINS

## The Book of Acts – Chapter 15 Can Christians Lie, Cheat and Steal?

### Unraveling the Misinterpretation of Acts 15:20

Have you been taught that Acts 15:20, where James lists four things for Gentiles to avoid, means that we don't need to follow the law of God and only need to observe these four prohibitions? If so, you've been misled. It's a misunderstanding that has been propagated by countless denominations. The root of this misconception lies in not understanding the full context of Scripture and the cultural background of first-century Judaism. In this article, we will explore what Acts 15:20 truly means and how it has been misinterpreted by many.

### Setting the Stage: The Debate in Acts 15



The context of Acts 15 is critical to understanding the passage. Paul and Barnabas were in Antioch, where a significant dispute arose because some religious zealots from Jerusalem claimed that Gentile converts were not truly saved unless they were circumcised and kept

the law of Moses. This issue led Paul and Barnabas to travel to Jerusalem to discuss the matter with James and the apostles.

This meeting, often referred to as the Jerusalem Council, was essentially a courtroom experience, known in Hebrew as a "**Beit Din**," or *House of Judgment*. The apostles and elders gathered to debate whether Gentiles needed to be

circumcised to be saved. The outcome of this debate has been widely misunderstood, leading to the belief that Gentiles are only required to follow four specific prohibitions mentioned by James.

## The Four Prohibitions: A Misunderstood Conclusion

Acts 15:20 lists four things that Gentiles should abstain from: "things polluted by idols, sexual immorality, things strangled, and from blood."

### The Four Prohibitions Explained

#### 1. Abstaining from Food Sacrificed to Idols

The first prohibition concerns food sacrificed to idols. This directive was significant in a polytheistic society where idol worship was prevalent. For Gentile believers, abstaining from such practices was essential to maintain their newfound faith and witness to others.

#### 2. Avoiding Blood

The second requirement involves abstaining from blood. This commandment has deep roots in the Torah, where the consumption of blood is strictly forbidden. It symbolizes the sanctity of life and the seriousness of sin, reinforcing the need for respect towards God's creation.

#### 3. Sexual Immorality

The third prohibition addresses sexual immorality, which was rampant in the Greco-Roman world. This directive emphasizes the importance of moral purity and the call to live a life that reflects the values of the Kingdom of God.

#### 4. Strangled Animals

Lastly, the prohibition against consuming animals that have been strangled relates to the proper methods of slaughtering animals, which align with Jewish dietary laws. This requirement underscores the importance of respecting God's commandments regarding food.



Many have taken this to mean that these are the only requirements for Gentile believers. However, this interpretation is flawed for several reasons.

Firstly, the passage does not suggest that these are the only things Gentiles need to observe. It merely highlights four practices that were particularly abhorrent in the first-century Jewish context, especially concerning idolatry and pagan rituals. The early believers, both Jews and Gentiles, were expected to follow the Torah, which includes the broader moral and ethical teachings of the Old Testament.

## The Key to Understanding: Verse 21

The critical verse that is often overlooked is Acts 15:21: "***For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath.***" This verse indicates that James *expected* Gentile believers to learn the rest of God's law gradually as they attended synagogue services. The Torah, or the teachings of Moses, was read and taught every Sabbath, and it was through this ongoing instruction that Gentiles would learn how to live according to God's commands.

This understanding is reinforced by recognizing that "Moses" is synonymous with the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. The Torah, which means "**instructions**" rather than "**law**," was central to the life and practice of early believers. James' statement implies that while the Gentiles needed to abstain from certain practices immediately, they would learn the rest of God's instructions over time.

## The Role of the Synagogue in Early Christian Life

It's important to note that in the first century, there was no New Testament as we know it today. The early believers, including Gentiles, were learning from the Torah and the teachings of Jesus, which were rooted in Hebrew Scripture. The synagogue was the primary place of worship and learning, and it was here that Gentiles were expected to learn about God's commandments.

James assumed that Gentile converts would be ***attending synagogue services*** alongside Jewish believers every Sabbath. This was a time when Jews and Gentile believers in Christ worshipped together, and the idea of separating Christianity from its Jewish roots was not yet in play. The shift away from Sabbath worship and the eventual separation from Jewish practices came later, particularly after the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD and the rise of anti-Semitic sentiments in the early church.



## The True Nature of the Debate:

### *Salvation, Not Just Christian Living*

The debate in Acts 15 was fundamentally about how Gentiles could be saved, not about the entirety of Christian living. The

Pharisees who had come to believe in Christ were still holding onto their traditional views, insisting that circumcision and the full observance of the Law of Moses were necessary for salvation. However, Paul and the other apostles argued that salvation was through faith in Christ alone, not through the observance of the law.

James' decision in Acts 15 was a compromise that acknowledged the need for Gentiles to avoid certain practices immediately, while also allowing them time to learn the full teachings of the Torah. The four prohibitions were not meant to be an exhaustive list of what was required but were a *starting point* for Gentiles coming out of a pagan background.

## Rediscovering the Hebraic Roots of Christianity

Acts 15:20 has been widely misunderstood due to a lack of understanding of first-century Judaism and the cultural context in which the early church operated. The four prohibitions listed by James were not the entirety of what was expected of Gentile believers but were specific practices to avoid as they integrated into the community of faith. The expectation was that they would continue to learn and grow in their understanding of God's instructions through regular synagogue attendance and study of the Torah.

Understanding the Hebraic roots of Christianity is crucial for interpreting passages like Acts 15 correctly. By reconnecting with the original context and teachings of the early church, we can avoid the pitfalls of misinterpretation and better align our faith with the intentions of the apostles and the teachings of Jesus.

In Acts 15, a critical discussion arises regarding the requirements for salvation, particularly focusing on the relationship between the Jewish law (Torah) and the Gentile believers. The passage highlights a significant theological debate that has implications for both Jewish and Gentile followers of Christ.

## The Misinterpretation of the Yoke

In verse 10, Peter addresses the assembly, questioning why they would "*test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples*" that neither their ancestors nor they could bear. This statement is often misunderstood as referring to the Torah itself as an unbearable burden. However, the debate is not about whether the Torah should be kept - all present, being Jews, were committed to observing the Torah. The real issue was whether the Torah and its commandments could save anyone.

Peter argues that neither their forefathers nor they could achieve salvation through perfect obedience to the law. The yoke, therefore, refers to the idea of earning salvation through legalistic adherence to the Torah, which is impossible. *Salvation*, Peter emphasizes, comes through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, not through the law.

## The Role of the Torah in Christian Living

Peter's statement clarifies that the Torah's role is ***not to save*** but to ***guide*** believers in righteous living. The Torah provides a moral framework, outlining what is right and wrong, such as prohibitions against adultery, idolatry, and coveting. The blessings and curses associated with keeping or breaking these commandments were meant to guide Israel in their covenant relationship with God.

However, if one were to remove the Torah entirely, the concepts of sin, blessing, and curse would lose their meaning. *The existence of sin hinges on the breaking of God's law, as stated in 1 John 3:4, which defines sin as the transgression of the law.* Therefore, while the Torah cannot save, it remains essential for defining sin and guiding Christian behavior.

## The Inclusion of the Gentiles

As the assembly continues, Barnabas and Paul testify about the miracles God performed among the Gentiles, indicating that the Gentiles were being saved without



prior knowledge of the Torah or circumcision. James then speaks, referencing the prophets to support the inclusion of Gentiles into the faith. He cites the rebuilding of the "tabernacle of David," which would allow all of mankind, including Gentiles, to seek the Lord.

The prophets foretold that the gospel would reach the Gentiles, fulfilling God's plan for Israel to be a light to the nations. The inclusion of Gentiles was not an afterthought but part of God's eternal plan. The debate was not about whether Gentiles could be saved but how they should live as part of the community of believers.

## A Call to Humility and Learning

The passage from Acts 15 serves as a reminder that salvation is by faith in Christ, not by works of the law. However, it also underscores the importance of the Torah in guiding believers in righteous living. The early church's approach to integrating Gentiles into the faith teaches us the importance of humility and patience in spiritual growth.

As we continue to study the foundation of our faith, it is crucial to remain open to learning and to recognize that our understanding may evolve as we draw closer to the truth. The truth, as Scripture teaches, is what ultimately *sets us free*.

## Final Thoughts

This chapter in Acts challenges us to consider how we view the law, grace, and the process of salvation. It invites us to reflect on our own practices and beliefs, encouraging us to align more closely with the teachings of Scripture. The early

church's handling of this issue sets an example for how we can approach theological disagreements today—with humility, grace, and a focus on unity in Christ.

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