

Good morning, Fellowship – good to be with you this morning.

Have you ever had a situation where you learned new information and it was incredibly difficult to believe or accept? Like – if it's true – it changes the way you live, it changes how you've viewed past experiences, or completely changes your worldview going forward?

Let me share with you a story about a time that happened to me. Growing up, I had a very close relationship with my dad, Coy Kerry. He taught me how to play sports, coached me in some of those sports, led me through a year of Boy Scouts, let me "help" him do yard work. We hung out together. He was a father and a friend. He was affectionate, loving, and present.

In junior high, I was taking a sex-ed class and started to learn more about the birds and bees and it was around that same time that I found my parent's wedding album. In that album, I found the oddest picture. It was a picture of me – serving as the ring bearer in my parent's wedding.

Now, one thing you need to know. My parents told me they had never had "relations" together prior to their wedding. So, either I was a miracle story and the 2nd baby any of us had ever heard of being born without a physical, biological father – or something else was up.

Later that day, my parents told me a story – a story they had shared with me when I was 4 but a story I hadn't let sink-in. My mom got pregnant in high school, my actual biological father severed ties with us, and my mom decided to raise me on her own. A year later she met Coy Kerry. And two years later, they were married and a year after that he adopted me as his son.

As you can imagine, this was earth-shattering, life-changing news. But here was the question. Would I accept it or dismiss it? Would I allow it to change me? If I didn't accept the news – I couldn't live in reality, move forward or grow. **We call these kinds of moments – where you learn information that flies in the face of what you've believed or experienced – moments of cognitive dissonance.**

Kendra Cherry says: The term cognitive dissonance is used to describe the mental discomfort that results from holding two conflicting beliefs, values, or attitudes. People tend to seek consistency in their attitudes and perceptions, so this conflict causes feelings of unease or discomfort.

This inconsistency between what people believe and how they behave motivates people to engage in actions that will help minimize feelings of discomfort. People attempt to relieve this tension in different ways, such as by rejecting, explaining away, or avoiding new information.

Anyone see this happening today on social media or just in everyday conversation? People on two different sides of an argument, neither willing to listen or budge?

Cognitive dissonance creates discomfort, stress, and fear. It triggers a fight, flight, or freeze response in our brains, making it just about physiologically impossible to accept new information. Rejecting or dismissing new information prevents us from being transformed, causing us to feel stuck or live-in fear.

Obviously, the term cognitive dissonance didn't exist back when Acts 15 was written, but it shows up in the passage. Turn there with me as we continue our series called Renewal.

Before we read, let me bring you up to speed. Paul and Barnabas have taken their first missionary journey. They share the gospel in different cities – more importantly they share the message of Jesus with Gentiles. Who are the Gentiles? They're you and me, anyone who wasn't a part of the Jewish faith – anyone outside of Judaism.

In each city, people are placing their faith in Jesus, and churches are being started. Paul and Barnabas are encouraging and discipling them, welcoming them into the faith.

Now let's look at Acts 15:1-5 and then we'll break it down verse by verse.

15 Some men came down from Judea and *began* teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." ²And after Paul and Barnabas had a heated argument and debate with them, *the brothers* determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue. ³Therefore, after being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and they were bringing great joy to all the brothers *and sisters*. ⁴When they arrived in Jerusalem, they were received by the church, the apostles, and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. ⁵But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to keep the Law of Moses."

Men come down from Judea to Antioch – which is about elevation not direction. Antioch sits 2500 feet lower in elevation than Judea but 300 miles north of it. They go into Antioch and teach these new Gentile converts that they must be circumcised for salvation. They've gone with their own agenda and without permission from the church in Jerusalem – literally going to every church that Paul and Barnabas started in order to teach these new Christians a message that comes into direct conflict with the message shared by Paul and Barnabas. They're teaching a false gospel – that salvation is Jesus + circumcision. A false gospel is Jesus + anything else for salvation. When Paul and Barnabas hear this news, it turns into a heated debate.

The Greek word for "heated" can also be translated "dissension" and the idea is that Paul and Barnabas weren't willing to budge on this issue – they stood their ground. Salvation, the gospel, is Jesus and Jesus alone. After debating, they determine it's best to go back to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem to decide whose message is correct.

Erin and I could have used a council like this when we bought our first house together. We found the perfect place for us – in our budget, it had a huge bathroom with double sinks and closets (which was her one desire), and a huge kitchen (which was my one desire). We made an offer. They countered. We accepted.

A couple of days later, Erin and I were talking about the house and she made a comment. “You know. That bathroom is gross. Like, not just aesthetically, it feels dirty, there’s some water damage. We need to get that remodeled.” I shared my concern about our finances, “I don’t think we’re going to be able to afford that.” And that’s when she got a little stronger in her conviction, “If we don’t get that bathroom done, I’m not moving in that house.”

So, I said something really stupid in return. “Yeah, well now you just sound like a spoiled brat.” She replied, “What did you say?”

Now listen. This is one of those moments, guys, that you can apologize for what you said or double down. And being a Christian and a pastor, I replied, “You heard me. You sound like a spoiled brat.” To which, she responded, and let me say first – if you know my wife you know she doesn’t have a mean bone in her body so what she said back was both surprising and the best she could muster, “Yeah. Well you’re a penny-pinching miser.”

In case you’re wondering, we got the bathroom remodeled. Which is why I say I wish we had a council!

Paul and Barnabas begin their journey to the church in Jerusalem.

³Therefore, after being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and they were bringing great joy to all the brothers *and sisters*.

The church in Antioch sends and pays for this 300-mile trip up the Mediterranean coast back to Jerusalem and along the way Paul and Barnabas stop off at a couple of places to share with others all that the Holy Spirit was doing in the lives of Gentiles – how the Holy Spirit was bringing them renewal – salvation – through Jesus. And how do these Jewish believers in Phoenicia and Samaria respond? They rejoice. They celebrate. It’s almost as if Paul and Barnabas are building more of a case for their meeting at the church in Jerusalem.

Once Paul and Barnabas arrive in verse 4, they are welcomed by the church and its leaders and begin to share a detailed report of all the Holy Spirit had done in them and through them – how those once considered far off from God were being drawn near by the message of the gospel.

⁵But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to keep the Law of Moses.”

Now, there's some debate on this verse. Some scholars believe this group of men was the same group of men in verse 1 and some say it was a different group. Either way, the truth of the matter is that this is the moment of cognitive dissonance I told you we would see.

Everyone at this meeting, most of them Jewish, has heard the gospel. But some of them are insisting on incorporating their old way of life into their new one. They're taking grace and adding behavior modification. It's their way of "explaining away" this new information. The problem? Salvation by grace alone and salvation by grace with works can't both be true.

I don't believe these men were bad people. They were simply trying to follow the laws handed down to their people from God. Most of us know their lineage. The Jewish people believed themselves to be, and were, God's chosen people. The Lord, for decade upon decade, provided for them, protected them, disciplined them, directed them, and even loved them enough in some spots to let them have the freedom they asked for or chose. And each time, we saw the Lord attempt to or successfully woo them back into His presence.

Does that sound familiar? I am glad the Lord still does that with us.

But this wasn't just about following these moral and ceremonial laws – it was also about their ethnic and cultural identity of being God's chosen people. And now there are new people coming into the fold – those that for so long were the rejected, those outside of the chosen, those sinners, and drunkards, and oppressors.

So the message of the Judaizers and these believing Pharisees – if you want to be like us – you want to be a part of the chosen? You're going to have to take a few extra steps – follow certain rules and laws – right on down to circumcision.

In their moment of cognitive dissonance – they're unable to receive this new information, the gospel, freely. They're trying to explain it away. It will make us feel better if we can keep what we've known and just add this gospel thing into the mix.

There's another problem with that line of thinking and Peter gives us some insight.

⁶The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. ⁷After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. ⁸And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; ⁹and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. ¹⁰Since this *is the* case, why are you putting God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our forefathers nor we have been able to bear?

The other problem shows up in verse 10? It's impossible to bear the weight of the Law. By believing we need circumcision plus Jesus, by needing behavior plus Jesus, by needing your morality plus Jesus – it's like putting a yoke – that was the wooden crosspiece that joined two

animals together to pull a plow or cart – it's like putting that on the neck of these new disciples and they can't bear it – no human can.

Jesus shares this message in Matthew 11:

²⁸ "Come to Me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. ³⁰ For My yoke is comfortable, and My burden is light."

Jesus is saying, you've worn yourselves out trying to work your way to salvation. You've burdened yourselves with a yoke you can't carry. You can't handle it. It wasn't meant for you to handle. The Law was never given to you for you to be able to obey it fully but to show you that you can't. It's to show us we can't carry that burden – we can't put on that yoke.

Only Jesus can. So what He wants to do – is take on that yoke for you – living out the Law perfectly on your behalf but also to give you a new yoke – one that is comfortable, light, and full of rest.

Dane Ortlund in *Gentle and Lowly* says this, "His yoke is kind and His burden light. That is, His yoke is a nonyoke, and His burden is a nonburden. What helium does to a balloon, Jesus's yoke does to His followers. We are buoyed along in life by His endless gentleness and supremely accessible lowliness. He doesn't simply meet us at our place of need; He lives in our place of need. He never tires of sweeping us into His tender embrace. It is His very heart. It is what gets Him out of bed in the morning."

So where does the council land ultimately? Their literal response is in the rest of the chapter but it's summed up well in Acts 15:11-12.

¹¹ But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."

¹² All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles.

The council, based on the testimony of Peter, Paul, and Mary – I mean Barnabas – decides that the Gentiles are indeed welcomed into the community of believers and it's only by grace through faith in Jesus – not by any works so that no one can boast.

Renewal only comes by grace through faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

That's it. Nothing else.

When Paul and Barnaba speak, they shared stories to let everyone know that the Holy Spirit had gone before them and confirmed that this indeed was the way the Lord was bringing renewal to people - grace and grace alone.

And when I say renewal – I am referring to salvation. But I am also referring to renewal in every part of your life. You see, when it comes to cognitive dissonance and the gospel – I am not sure we're much different than the Judaizers. We still try to white knuckle our way to righteousness. Some of us have placed our faith in Jesus for salvation but are still waiting on God to punish us for our sins past, present, and future. Some of us still attempt to earn God's favor with our actions and good deeds.

And it makes sense. Most of our cultural experience has encouraged that type of thinking. Do good at work? You get raises and promotions. Don't? You get fired or demoted. Get good grades? You get scholarships. Don't? You won't graduate. You do what your parents tell you? You get rewarded. Do what you weren't supposed to do? You get punished. There are consequences.

The problem is we carry that line of thinking over into our spiritual lives. And Jesus is saying, my grace is free and sufficient for every area of your life.

What is preventing you from letting the gospel infiltrate every area of your life? What's keeping you resistant to it? Where do you need to let go of an old, maybe even subconscious belief that God's love and favor are about your actions and just receive His free grace.

Financially. Sexually. Socially. Your character. In your marriage. In your pain. In regards to forgiveness.

This is the renewal we all need and it only comes by grace through faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Once the decision was made about salvation, the council wrote a letter to the Gentiles letting them know of their inclusion into the community of faith but also that circumcision wasn't necessary for salvation. Verse 31 tells us that when they received the news – the letter – they rejoiced – probably mostly because those men didn't have to get circumcised – but more importantly because they left encouraged because of the free grace of Jesus. And this morning – I hope the same for you.

Maybe you came in here today believing that you needed to clean yourself up to come to Jesus. Maybe you were taught that you had to be baptized, or tithe, or go to church, or do some other good thing to come to Jesus. Maybe lately you've found yourself wondering if He loves you. Maybe you've struggled to believe you're accepted because of something you did in the past.

His grace is free and available to you.

When I was 4, I was at my grandmother's house with the rest of our family, and being the only kid in the family I was the only one in the pool swimming by myself. I was pretty young so I was still rockin' the floaties on my arms. My family all went inside and left me outside with my uncle Ken – who at the time I think was only 19 or 20 years old. While out there he jokingly said, "Hey man – you know what would be pretty cool? If you put your floaties on your feet."

A few minutes later he told me he was going inside for a minute and would be right back. So, I hopped up on the deck and decided I'd try his little floaties on the feet trick. In my little 4-year-old mind, I just assumed I'd be like Jesus and walk on water.

I counted to 3 and jumped in. And as you can imagine, I didn't walk on water. I wasn't Jesus. My head went straight to the bottom and my feet were above the water which meant I was pinned down. I fought and fought to get up and get some air. I was able to get a few gasps in before going back under and fighting some more.

There was nothing I could do. I was stuck. Trapped. I was going to die and there was nothing I could do. What seemed like an eternity was probably just a few seconds. But this literally could have been the end of me. But thankfully, someone looked out the back window – saw my feet in the air – and came running to my rescue. They pulled me out of the water where I was able to catch my breath – I was able to live.

Jesus, in His grace, has done the same in each of our lives. Where we were trapped in death because of sin, He came to the rescue. He pulled us out of a deadly situation. There was nothing we could do. We needed someone outside of our circumstances to save us – to give us life – to give us renewal. If you don't have that, I pray you will today.