



## **Guarding the Gospel – Part 1**

### **A Debate Worth Having**

**Pastor Mike Fabarez**

Well, if you happened to be a hipster being all cool and groovy back in the 1960s, and I know that wasn't a bunch of you, but your parents or your grandparents. What was playing on your transistor radio back then was a song by a local L.A. psychedelic band. And what was ironic about this number one song on the Billboard charts in 1965 was that these drug-induced hippies who were singing this song had lifted the lyrics that they were singing straight from the Bible. I mean, you wouldn't expect that. But it was all the rage, I mean, it was the number one song. And if you were to look up on Wikipedia and read about this song, you might have Wikipedia tell you that Pete Seeger wrote it and that a band called The Byrds made it famous. But if you do read that, don't believe a word of it, because it was really written in the dusty city of Jerusalem, and it was made famous by King Solomon some 3,000 years ago.

And of course, they gave it a new name, "Turn, Turn, Turn" but they basically just sang the words of Ecclesiastes Chapter 3, which God had us read for all these centuries, to know that even opposing endeavors, contrasting endeavors, they have their proper and appropriate times. There are times for both sides. As it starts for everything under the sun, there's a time, there's a season. "There's a time to be born and a time to die." And it goes through all of these contrasting pairings and sayings, you just need to know there's a season for each of them. And that's a very important thing. And I know that that song, it became very popular during the war-torn sixties, the Vietnam anti-war endeavor, because of the last line that says "there's a time for war and a time for peace." And I get that, I can see why it's popular.

But you need to realize it, even if anyone knew that it was the one that God used to write that initially, and that is King Solomon. He knew what it was being the commander in chief of the Israeli armies that there was a time that you've got to go to war. And then there was the time where you got to say, "No, we've got to ask for terms of peace. We've got to not have war," right? In every government. It's been incumbent upon them ever since, as Romans 13 says, that they have a responsibility to know. Right? Even in our government. Is it time to go to war? Is it not time to go to war? Whether it's the Civil War or the Vietnam War or some war in Ukraine, they've got to make wise decisions about is this the right thing to do?

And in a sense, every individual Christian has to make that decision about our lesser wars. I mean, the kind of wars that go on in our lives, the arguments, the disputation and the debates and the things that we might engage in that put us at odds with other people. We've got to ask the question, is this the right time to do that? Is this what we should be doing? Even as two lines above that last line of these pairings in Ecclesiastes 3 says, "There's a time to be silent and then there's a time to speak up." I mean, and you need to know which is which. Matter of fact, that's why it's in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, because that's what you call wisdom, right? Is it time? Is this the right situation? Should I go to war? Should I fight about this? Am I willing to argue over this? Should this be an issue between us? That's the real question.



We've been studying through the book of Acts. We've reached Acts Chapter 15. And if you know your Bible, this is a section of the Bible that describes what's called often the Jerusalem Council. And it really is about a debate and it really starts that way. We can't get out of verse 2 until we learn that Paul, the Apostle, and Barnabas, of all people, the Son of Encouragement, are engaged in what Luke describes as this: they were engaged in "no small dissension and debate," which is a nice way of putting it. They were in a major dissension and in a major debate.

Which remember this, the Apostle Paul was the one that wrote the church leaders, I'm quoting now, First Timothy Chapter 3, should not be, I love the old translation, "should not be pugnacious." Should not be pugnacious. I think our translation, the English Standard Version, calls it "not be violent." The Greek word literally is translated in ancient classical literature, a "striker," not someone who is combative, someone who is ready to fight. Because if we ask some people what's the right time to fight? They're like right now. I'm willing to fight about anything. They love Twitter. They're out there, I'm willing to debate anybody about anything and I just love to poke my finger in people's eyes. They love to fight. And the passage says, if you're a church leader, you can't be that way. You can't be someone who likes to fight.

Matter of fact, that contrasting virtue in that passage says you should not be a striker, you should not be violent, as the English Standard Version puts it, you must be gentle. It doesn't mean that you don't teach with all authority, but you can't be someone who likes to fight. Matter of fact, the next line says "you must not be quarrelsome." So if in this passage in Acts 15, you have Paul engaged in no small dissension and no small debate, and yet he says, well, the value for church leaders is that they're not quarrelsome and they're not always engaged, not combative, they're not argumentative. They're not always engaged in some kind of dispute. Then you must recognize this must be one of those times when it calls for it. And they don't just want to rely on a descriptive passage. This is a narrative, so we're looking at what actually happened. Maybe Paul's in sin. We find out later, of course, he's not in sin. It was a time to fight. The wisdom of Solomon, here is, it is in this particular case. Right? It's different than saying, well, let's just be at peace. We let our differences... We don't want to stand between them. We don't want our differences to make any kind of issues between you and I.

Matter of fact, we see from the beginning of Acts to the end of Acts, really, it's a chapter about conflict in many ways. It starts with Paul and Barnabas being in no small dissension and no small debate. And it ends with, and this will be in the next series. but that last paragraph with Paul having another dispute about the personnel on his second missionary journey that he's about to launch. So we're going to learn a lot about debate and dissension. And today, all I want to do in the first five verses is set up what's going to come, and that is the Jerusalem Council, where they're debating something that is of central importance, the gospel. And you saw on your bulletin today, you've seen the title I trust of the sermon. This whole series I've entitled "Guarding the Gospel." Guarding the Gospel. And we're going to talk about that. We're going to get into that. But today I just want to set it up with the first five verses where we see Paul and Barnabas engaged in the debate and they're sent down to go deal with this in Jerusalem with the other church leaders.



And I need to ask the question and to think through the question, well, is there a time that I should be willing to get into an argument over biblical things. That's why your mom says, "Well, I don't want at Thanksgiving any talk about religion or politics." Right? They just want peace. But I'm just saying, when is it that you disobey your mom and say, "Well, I'm willing here to have a little dispute during some kindly family dinner because I'm compelled to." It's incumbent upon me to know the difference between when to have peace and when to go to war. And in this case, you've just crossed the line, and it's time for me to cause an uncomfortable conversation and go to war with you. I'm not talking about yelling at anybody. I'm not talking about vulgarity. I'm not talking about that vein on your forehead popping out. I'm talking about you just getting into a conversation that you would rightly call an argument, a disagreement that Luke might say, "That's no small dissension and no small debate." Right? That's what we need to figure out today.

So let's set the stage for this by reading, first of all, the first five verses of Acts Chapter 15. If you don't have your Bible out yet, get it out, whether it's on your device or your computer, which I encourage you to bring to church, or that printed Bible that you brought, or there's one in the seat just in front of you. But turn to Acts Chapter 15. Let me read it for you from the English Standard Version, the setup here to a big thing that's going to take place in Jerusalem called the Jerusalem Council. Now, remember, we left off in Chapter 14 where they are in Antioch. Now, remember, there were two Antiochs. In the first missionary journey there was something we called Pisidian Antioch because it's in the region of Pisidia, that makes sense, in what is now modern-day Turkey. What is Galatia back in the ancient provinces of Asia Minor. And then there's another Antioch where they started and where they finished the missionary journey and that one is there in Syria, north of Israel, quite a bit north, almost 300 miles north of Jerusalem.

And I gave you a map on the worksheet. If you have the worksheet, it would be good to look at it, whether you downloaded it electronically from our website or have it there on that insert in your bulletin. And you're welcome. There's a map for you. And the maps, I try to only give you a map when it's going to be helpful here in you thinking this through. So this is really all about the beginning of Paul being sent from Antioch, Syrian Antioch, down to Jerusalem. And even when I say the word "down," we always say down when we're talking about south. But that's not how it works in the ancient world, at least not when you're talking about Jerusalem or the surrounding area of Judea. Matter of fact, anything going in any direction, north, south, east or west in their minds is going down, both metaphorically, because I mean, that's THE city, the city of Jerusalem. Judea is THE place. I mean, especially, just think about that, that's the place where God set his name. That's an important place.

But also physically, because if you're going to go east down to Jericho, for instance, southeast, you're going to go way down. Right? You're going to go in terms of the elevation from a city that's way up here, down in elevation, down to the lowest part on the earth, down by the Dead Sea. That differential in a pedestrian society, they're always going to say is down. So that helps us with the first sentence here in Acts Chapter 15 verse 1. Let me read it for you as you follow along. I've given you plenty of time to find it. Acts Chapter 15 verse 1.



"But some men came down from Judea." Now, you see the map. It's not south. It's north. "And they were teaching the brothers." What were they saying? "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

That's what Paul has been doing, right? He's been trying to tell people how to be saved. What does that mean? I'm no longer going to incur the penalties of my sinful life. I've done sinful things before God. When I meet God, meet my maker. Right? "Appointed to man once to die then the judgment." When I stand before God and my life is there before him, I'm going to be saved from the penalty of my sins. And that is the hope. That's what we need. We need God's grace, his mercy, we need him to forgive us. How do we get forgiven? Well, Paul's been traveling all around teaching people about that. Peter had from Acts Chapter 10 seen this first conversion of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, right? An Italian of all groups. Right? Here this first non-Jewish person was saved, and they were going around talking to these Gentiles about putting their trust in the Jewish Messiah, but they weren't turning them into Jewish proselytes, which if you were a Jewish proselyte and you had a baby boy by the eighth day, you better circumcise them according to the custom of Moses, which that cutting off the foreskin was a picture of that covenant relationship between the chosen people of God and their Savior and their God, Yahweh.

So that symbol and that sign, it marked you off as being separated in that culture as being a part of the covenant people of God. And they were saying, listen, you can trust in the Savior of Israel, "the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world," which is a projection of the image of a spotless lamb brought to the Levitical priest at the temple and sacrificed as a symbol of atonement. That the blood would be spilled, that you would be forgiven because of that substitutionary symbol, that picture at least of the ultimate substitute that John the Baptist said, "There he is, Christ the Messiah, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." So hey, you can be a Gentile and not become a Jew. You don't have to eat kosher. You can have a ham and cheese sandwich if you want. Right? And you don't have to have your kids circumcised. You don't have to be circumcised. You don't have to worry about the Levitical priesthood. You don't have to bring your animals to any sacrificial altar. You just go on living for God and with God, you don't have to become a Jewish proselyte. And here they were saying, "No, you have to be." So now either Paul and his missionary comrades were doing the wrong thing or these guys are saying the wrong thing.

Verse 2. "And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate," there's the phrase, a nice way of saying and there was a big argument with them. "Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed," right there in Syrian Antioch, "to go up to Jerusalem," that's south, "to the apostles and the elders about this question." But we got to talk to the big guns down there where the church started. Right? We had the first mega-church there. They were meeting thousands of people were meeting together. Peter was preaching. We got to go meet with those church leaders and we got to discuss this question. We've got to debate this question. We've got to take our dissension there. And we got to flesh this thing out. That's the setup.



Verse 3, "So, being sent on their way by the church," the church in Antioch, "they pass through both Phoenicia and Samaria." Now, I had to put those names on there. I couldn't find the map that had them on there. You're going to find one now through the free WiFi and I get that. But I search for a long time to find one that had the regions that marked the place from northern Syrian Antioch to Jerusalem. But Phoenicia is a region, with two key cities, Sidon and Tyre. They were traditional historical enemies of Israel in the Old Testament. That's up north, north of Mount Hermon, along the Mediterranean plains and the coast up there. That's Phoenicia. So they're going through regions and you see a lot of cities there. And then Samaria, you know Samaria, you see on your map there, a little body of water. That's Galilee. And then it's got the little Jordan River and then the Dead Sea. Right? There's the region of Samaria that sits between the two on the Mediterranean side, which is this way for you. I'm trying to mirror that the the right direction.

So that is Samaria. And you remember all the stories of Samaria starting in John Chapter 4 with plenty of discussion about Samaria. We know the history of Samaria and there are Christians now there. We're some years into the Church and the propagation of the gospel, and so he's going from city to city. It's about 275 miles. Who knows what kind of route they took going from synagogue to synagogue or, in this case, converted church to converted church? In other words, we have people won to Christ in all of these places and they're bringing a message, "they're describing in detail," it says, bottom of verse 3, "the conversion of those" uncircumcised, non-kosher "Gentiles." And they sat there and disputed them. No. Do you know what they found with them? Reception. Great reception. They thought, oh, that's great. That is good news. We give it the seal of approval. "It brought great joy to all the brothers."

Then they finally got to Jerusalem. Probably months later, maybe a month or two later. Who knows how long it took? Six weeks, five weeks? Seven weeks? "When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them," which is not only this journey where a lot of the people, even with Jewish background believers, but probably even thinking back into that first missionary journey through Asia Minor and the island of Crete, Sergius Paulus won to Christ. All these people who they describe, they told all about that. Right? And, you'd think that's fantastic. They're going to give you a high-five like everybody on the way down through Phoenicia and Samaria. The answer is no. "But some believers who belong to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, 'It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.'" You better tell them to keep the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament.

Okay. Now we're going to talk all about that debate, Guarding the Gospel, talking about this issue of ceremonial law. The parallels to today and how people make the same argument today. But right here what we're going to deal with is that there are groups of people in the church. In this case, it's designated as some from the Pharisees. Right? And you think, oh Pharisee. Not good. Those are the bad guys of the gospel. Right? You think bad guys. We got the scribes, we've got the Pharisees, we've got the Sadducees and those are the guys who are always opposing Christ. Well, remember, there are a lot of Pharisees who are getting saved, right? You got Nicodemus, right? You see people like Joseph of Arimathea, you got





Paul himself, who was Saul of Tarsus, who was a Pharisee of Pharisees, as he describes in Philippians Chapter 3. So plenty of Pharisees who were the high-ranking academic minds, seminary graduates who knew the Old Testament law, they were putting their faith in Christ and becoming Jewish background Christians now. And that's great. I mean, who knows the Old Testament better than these Pharisees?

So this doesn't mean these are people outside the Church. These are people inside the Church. It's just that they have this education in the Old Testament. They have so much experience in living as leaders among the Old Testament synagogue system. Probably in Jerusalem many of them had served from the Levitical priesthood, or at least within the leadership of the religious leadership of Israel. They had served there on the Temple Mount themselves in Herod's remodeled temple in the second temple period. So, we're not saying that this is an attack from the outside. This is a dispute from the inside. That doesn't mean that they were all genuinely saved, but it does mean that they all sat there and claimed Christ. They all quoted the same Old Testament Scriptures about the Jewish Messiah, but they were disagreeing about something that Paul and Barnabas, by example, were showing us. Hey, this is worthy of no small dissension and debate. In other words, this is worth a big debate. We ought to disagree about this.

That first section there when you see that statement in the top of verse 2 and you see why in verse 1, people were saying something about salvation and how to get saved. And it was different than what they were saying. And you have a dispute on your hands because this is an important topic. I don't want you to be an argumentative person. I don't want you to be a quarrelsome person. The quarrelsome person argues about a lot of things. What we need to know is when is it the right time to engage in a debate? Number one, if you're taking notes, let's start with that. "Know When to Debate." They are debating here and we're assuming that it's for a good reason. As it plays out you realize it is for a good reason. It must have been a good thing for them to debate. But I don't want to build for you teaching in a "narrative" text, which is a descriptive text, some kind of imperative for your life, unless I have "prescriptive" texts that tell you this is how you ought to do it.

So let's look at a couple of passages that we can apply in our lives that reflect what Paul and Barnabas are going through and know that we can still be the son of encouragement, we can still be the preacher of peace, we can still be someone wanting people to get along and to harmonize and to not be at odds with people and still realize there is going to be, as Solomon said, as The Byrds sang back in the 60's, "there's a time for peace and there's a time for war."

Take a look at a couple of passages with me after you wrote down that first point, know when to debate. Let's go to Jude Chapter 3. That's not hard to find. If you've got an old-fashioned Bible, go to the book of Revelation. Turn back one door and you find Jude. Jude is a one-chapter book, so I don't need to say Jude Chapter 1, it's just one chapter, verses 3 and 4. Jude, even by the way he starts this sentence in verse 3 is a lot like what I tried to describe the Apostle Paul would want to be, and that is I want peace. I'd like to talk about things that unify us, things that we all agree upon. And he says, I wanted to write a letter like that, verse 3. Jude verse 3, "Beloved, although I was eager to write to you about our common salvation,"



I'd just like to talk about things that you and I could high-five each other over and be like, "Yeah, that's great. We all agree with that." But "I found it necessary to write appealing to you," underline this now, "to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints."

God's people got a body of information. We call it "the faith." This thing that tells me how to get right with God, salvation. How does one get saved? He's delivered that and he's delivered it once for all. Even the way that's said. It's like propositional, it's objective, it's not bendable, it's not malleable, it is absolute and objective truth. God gave it to you and you ought to, here it comes, I appeal to you that you would "contend for it." If you grew up memorizing verses in another translation, you might even remember the translation sometimes uses a word after "to contend earnestly." Now, why would this one Greek word be translated "contend" in our passage or "contend earnestly?"

Well, because the word is a strong word for contend. Matter of fact, it's compounded by a preposition on the front end of it that makes it even stronger. This is like to "really wrestle." And the reason I say wrestle is because you've heard this Greek word, because it transliterates into our language as the word "agony." You've heard me quote it before any time it comes up, it's a good word picture "agonizomai" is a word that describes like a struggle, to be in agony is not pleasant. It's the opposite of pleasant. And then it's compounded with the preposition at the front end of it that's like really unpleasant. That's why some translators translate it, "to contend earnestly."

To contend earnestly means this is going to be an uncomfortable conversation. Matter of fact, this is going to be really uncomfortable. And so I'm saying here is a prescribed text, it's not just an example of what Paul and Barnabas did, because maybe they did the wrong thing. Here's what we know is the right thing. God is saying through Jude that there's a time when someone is messing with "the faith that was once for all delivered the saints," when you are appealed to with the authority of Scripture to contend in a strong way for that faith. You are to fight for it. You were to get an argument over it. I'm not talking about vulgarity. I'm not talking about dropping bad language. I'm not talking about you being pejorative. I'm not talking about ad hominem attacks. I'm talking about you saying, now, wait a minute, we've got to disagree on this because you're messing with something important. "The faith once for all delivered to the saints."

A couple of things that will help us. You see, I got more white space between number one and two because we'll spend most of our time here. I know that by the time I'm done with point one, you're going to do the math. You think, "Well, we're going to be here all afternoon." But I do want to spend most of our time here. I probably should have left more white space. But here's the point. I want to talk about a few things, because I don't want to just unleash some of you who think, "Yeah, now's the time for fighting, because I love to fight. I want to argue. Let's just argue." I don't want to make you an argumentative bunch. I've said that three times now. So there are some things that I want to tease out in Scripture to say, I don't want you to just find anybody who disagrees with you theologically and say, "I can't wait to debate them." Okay.



You need to know that a lot of debate in the Scripture would confirm this in many examples. They love the debate because their ego is tied up in being right. They just want to be right. They feel like their ego has been impinged upon because there's somebody saying something that is different than what they're saying. So I want to get your ego out of it. I really do. I want you to care about what's being said. And I want you to recognize that if it is misleading for people then there's a problem and I've got to care enough to step in. And it's not my ego. It's not about me.

Because, as John the Baptist said, do you remember that famous phrase that he gave us? I must decrease. "He must increase. I must decrease." Do you remember that? Smile at me if you remember that passage. When John the Baptist said that, it comes on the heels of him saying, "You guys are talking a lot about me. I told you I'm not the Christ." And then he said, "There's the groom and there's the bride. And the people in the crowds, that's the bride. And Christ, he's the groom." He calls him the bridegroom. That's the old word for it. The bridegroom is Christ. "I'm just the best man." That's the modernization of the word. "I'm just the attendant here. I'm just a friend of the bridegroom. And so my role is to point you to him. And I want the crowds not to be stuck on me. I don't even want to be a stumbling block." As Paul said, "We don't preach ourselves. We preach Christ. We want to proclaim him Jesus as Lord."

So I want you to be right with him. And if someone is saying something that's messing that up, then I want to get out there and make a correction. And John the Baptist was all about that. You want to talk about a guy who seems like he was ready to say anything to anyone, no matter who it was, that's John the Baptist, right? He was clear. If you said something wrong theologically about the gospel, about how to be right with God, he was going to correct you. He didn't care, and he did that with the Pharisees. John the Baptist is the guy sitting around eating locust dressing in funny clothes. And if someone messed up the truth, he was going to engage him. Why? Because he was an argumentative person? No, because just like the best man of the groom, all he wanted was people to rightly relate to the bridegroom. I want you to be right with the groom. So he says, I'm really not the issue here.

I want to make sure in any debate you have, you are not the issue. And I know it's easy for people to think it's not about them, but in fact, it is about them. Right? They're arguing because their feelings are hurt. They're arguing because they feel belittled. They're arguing because they think, well, you know, they're making less of me or they think I'm stupid. I want to prove that I'm smart. That's not the point. So you need to be less.

Let me give you another text that might help drive this home. Go with me to Titus. Titus. Now, remember Paul's first missionary journey took him to Crete. Sergius Paulus was won to Christ, that governor of the island. Titus ends up being left there. He's a protege, a disciple of Paul, and he puts him in this place and he says, okay, I need you now to pastor these people. Now, what kind of people need a pastor? Well, he's told them in Titus, he's going to give them all the same instructions, in essence, that he gives over to Timothy in Ephesus when he says, I don't want any pugnacious leaders, I don't want quarrelsome leaders. They need to be





gentle. They need to be not combative or argumentative. And so with all that in mind, read this carefully here in Titus Chapter 1.

Let's start in verse 10. "There are many who are insubordinate." And again, you can start to think it's about like the ego of the preacher in this case. No, it's not about that. They're not listening to you. They should listen to you. Well, they should listen to you but not because of his ego, right? It's because of the problem. And look at it. It's coming up. "They're empty talkers, they're deceivers, especially those," here it comes now, the topic that's on the table in Acts 15, "of the circumcision party." There are people who are trying to say you cannot be saved unless you're circumcised. And there's a lot of those people out there deceiving people. So what do I do about it? Just try to be gentle. Don't be argumentative. No, no, no. "They must," verse 11, "they must be silenced." They must be silenced. Why? Because you know the crowd, the bride, and the bridegroom, it's messing their relationship up. "Since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain," by the way, "what they ought not to teach."

And he gets into other issues in the church. "One of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said, 'Cretans are always liars, they're evil beasts, they're lazy gluttons.'" Verse 13. "This testimony is true." So again, you see, he's about to call them to do something that doesn't sound nice. Middle of verse 13, "Therefore rebuke them sharply." Just think about that. If you can hear your mother-in-law or your mom at Thanksgiving afterwards chiding you because you got in an argument with your brother-in-law and it's like, "Hey, you know, it was like you were rebuking him sharply." I don't know if they use that terminology, your mother-in-law. But, you know, it's like she's like, "I just wanted to have a peaceful dinner." And here is a command to this pastor to say you're supposed to be a peace-loving person, there's a time to rebuke people sharply. Why? "That they may be sound in the faith." This once for all delivered body of truth. We don't want people messing with that. You've got to make sure that people understand that.

Just like in verse 11, we don't want anyone's family upset and not understanding sound doctrine of how to relate to God. "Rebuke them sharply that they may be sound in faith, not devoting themselves to Jewish myths and the commands of people who turn away from the truth." I just need you to care about the people who are misunderstanding something. So it's not about your ego. It's about the real important issues.

One more Galatians Chapter 1. Galatians Chapter 1. It's about the central truths. And the central truths are critical. There are people I'm not interested in arguing with about tertiary issues. I'm not interested in third-tier issues in talking to people. And even most of the second-tier issues. I'm not wanting to debate you. Right? I want to know what the core issues are. And those are the issues that are going to trigger "no small dissension or debate" among people who care about the truth. Galatians Chapter 1, look at verse 6. Let's start there. He says, "I'm astonished that you're so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel." Now, we're going to look a lot at Galatians next time because it so parallels what we see in Acts 15. Not that I'm saying it's the same



discussion, it is the same topic, but I don't think it's referring to the same event. I can deal with that another time.

But the issue of the circumcision party saying if you want to be saved you better be circumcised and keep all the ceremonial laws of Moses. Right? We're going to deal with all that. But he says when they're telling you this, it's a different good news. It's a different gospel. They're saying how to be saved. Well, you got to do this. And here we've been telling people you can be saved without doing that. So that's different. "Not that there is another," because that one doesn't work, "but there are some who trouble you who want to distort the gospel of Christ." But listen, I don't care who it is, "Even if," it's us, "we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you," the one that God delivered once for all delivered to the saints, "well, then let him be accursed." That's some strong language. If you're talking about Gabriel or Michael, the archangel. Right? Well, that's serious. Well, "let them be accursed." "We've said before now we say again, if anyone is preaching you a gospel that is contrary to the one you received let him be accursed."

You've got to have this perspective, by the way, especially when your mother-in-law is chiding you for causing debate at the Thanksgiving table, you've got to have this Chapter 1 verse 10 clearly ensconced in your mind. Are you ready? He says, "Now, am I seeking the approval of man," or my family, "or am I seeking the approval of God. Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ." But the point is, I've got to see clearly in my mind that the idea here is that I am trying to please God and God, in particular, his wanting people related to Christ, his Son, I don't want anything to get in the way of that. I'm serving him. I'm like the best man, and the groom and the bride I just want them together. My ego's not a part of it. It's a central issue. You're messing with the gospel, and when that happens, we've got to have a discussion.

Unless, let me give you one little line from Christ. You might remember this from Matthew Chapter 7 verse 6. He says, you know, here's an exception. Don't throw your pearls to swine. Actually, it starts with this phrase, "Don't give to dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls," to swine or, "to pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and then turn and attack you." So many proverbs in the Old Testament say that if you're going to sit there and try and engage in a reasonable conversation, a debate, a disputation with a fool, all you're going to get is a beating. You're just going to create a fight and it's never going to go anywhere. Is there a time for verbal war? Yeah. I'm not talking about bombs. I'm not talking about knives. I'm not talking about you shooting anyone. I'm talking about you going into a verbal conversation about the truth of the gospel. Is there a time for that? Yes. Is there a time not to do that, even though the topics are on the table? Yes. You might be dealing with someone who is literally a fool. There's no reasoning with them. And there were people who Jesus wasn't even willing to debate.

And he quotes this passage to say, there are times we're not going anywhere with this. It says the proverbs say you are someone who's dealing with somebody who said something. There's a time to answer and a time not to answer. You remember the passage. "Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes." And there's a time when you got



someone saying a foolish thing and you say, "Well, if I engage them, I might be able to keep whole families from being upset and maybe even make some progress with this person. I might be able to get him to say, "Oh yeah, that was dumb. I was wrong. It didn't comport with the faith once for all delivered to the saints." And then it says, "Don't answer a fool according to his folly," these are back-to-back verses, "lest you be like him." When am I going to be like the fool? When I'm sitting here engaged in a conversation that's going nowhere. When I'm the kind of person being dragged into a debate and it's not a fruitful debate.

So there's a lot of wisdom that goes into this, even if the topic is right. Right? If your ego is all twisted in this and you can't even see straight enough to recognize whether or not you're fighting for your own reputation and your own ego, or whether you're fighting for the truth, well, then you better back down. If you're engaging with the right topic, you know your ego's not a part of it, but you see there's no possible way talking to this fool we're going anywhere. Well, then fine. Then it's okay for you to say I'm going to back out. But don't start quoting the fact that I don't want to get in a debate, because if you get into a debate then you're not nice and therefore it's always better to go the route of peace.

I heard someone just this week say, "Well, you know, I don't want to get into these discussions because you know what? I just want to be nice. I want to be loving. And of course, you're not loving if you want to debate with me." And they start saying things like this, some people even quote Jesus like, "Well, Jesus didn't defend himself." You've heard that, right? People say, "I'm not going to defend myself because Jesus didn't defend himself." Well, you're not the Lamb of God going to the cross to pay for the sins of the world engaging in an argument with people to get out of what God's will is. "Your will, not mine be done." That was the point. I want your will, not mine to be done. So Jesus is going to go to the cross. Of course he's not going to try to argue his way out of it when he stands before Pilate. But if you're speaking the truth and other people are saying, well, that is not the truth, particularly if it has to do with the gospel or something related to how we handle and interpret the word of God, then don't you let anybody back down and say, "Well, you know, it's the nice thing not to debate. And, you know, Jesus didn't debate."

Of course, he debated. He got in engagements all the time. You quote one instance when he didn't and say, well, that's the godly way to deal with it? Christianity does not equal niceness. You know that. And some people are going to say if you challenge anyone in a verbal dispute about something important in the Christian faith, that somehow you're not nice and therefore you're not a loving Christian. Stop with that nonsense. That is an argument that is a non-sequitur. It should go nowhere in your thinking. Does it mean we want quarrelsome people? This is the fifth time now I've said that. I'm not trying to create quarrelsome people. I'm not talking about you arguing just because you like to argue. I'm talking about the fact that we need to be ready to defend the truth. Right? We need to be ready to make a defense for the hope that's in us.

And it's not only just the gospel, which is the top-tier issue. It's how people deal with the Bible, how they treat the Bible. The Bible is a sword. Right? You know this from Hebrews 4. It's a two-edged sword. It's sharp, it divides and corrects. And this goes here and that goes there.



And this is right and that is wrong. And this motive is good and this motive is bad. It does that. When I was a little kid, I remember as clear as day I had a red rubber sword. My parents were smart. I don't want them to hurt anybody. So I would go around, you know, doing a lot of things with this sword and trying to hurt my brother and do everything I could. But it was just a weakly little plastic sword doing it.

Second Peter Chapter 3 at the passage it says, there are people who take the words of Paul, which he says they do with the rest of the Scripture as well, and they twist it and distort it. They treat it however they want. Christians are supposed to be, like it says in Second Timothy Chapter 2:15, "We're supposed to study to show ourselves approved to God, workmen weren't supposed to be ashamed, could rightly handle the word of truth?" "Rightly handle" is a little Greek phrase that literally means to cut it straight. To cut it straight. I'm not using a wiggly plastic or a rubbery sword. And some people are treating the Bible whenever they have some kind of social pressure, whenever the polls say something, whenever they have some reason to kind of bend and twist the clear teaching of the word to be something else, because they don't want the shame or derision of the culture, they twist it. If someone handles the word that way, particularly if they say they're talking for God, then it's time to engage. I can't let you do that, just like Peter says in Second Peter 3 people are twisting the Scripture to their own harm, "to their own destruction." And sometimes you've got to deal with people, even though they may not be dealing with a top tier issue, it may be a secondary issue, but how they're handling the word is so rubbery, it's so distorted, it's so twisted. They twist the Scriptures. I think we need to be really careful about letting that go and trying to say, "Well, love doesn't debate. So, you know, nice Christians don't ever call anyone out for handling the word in a rubbery way." There's a new phrase for a tweet. Tweet that one.

All right. You've done the math now, 45 minutes in the first point. So I hope you didn't have lunch plans. Number two, we'll go fast, I promise. Back to Acts Chapter 15 verse 2, the second half of verse 2. "Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question." Go down to Jerusalem. We would say down, go south, down to Jerusalem, climb up that elevation from those Samaritan plains and get up into Jerusalem and talk to the leaders. Now, these are the sharpest, most well-respected honored leaders of the Church. Now, Paul says in Galatians, who they are doesn't mean anything. It's about the truth. But I get that. But when we do need to, Paul put on his sandals, got his backpack, got his walking stick, and he went with Barnabas and the others down to Jerusalem.

Now, why would you do that? Well, because it is important for me to get counsel. Matter of fact, that's what's going to go on in this passage, they're going to counsel, "SEL" end of that word, counsel, at what we call a council "CIL", because they're going to get together and they're going to confer and talk about this question. Right? Paul is saying, "This is right. I'm going to go down and we're going to talk about this." He's got biblical reasons for the New Testament gospel, and we've got prophets, as we'll see in the passage, who are New Testament teachers teaching New Testament truths, who don't have a written New Testament. We've talked about that before. We'll talk about it more as the series goes on. And they're going to sit there and they're going to confer together and get counsel with one



another, which, by the way, is just a simple biblical truth. Sometimes you're hearing something, you're not sure whether you should debate, but you need to stop, pause, put a pin in that and say, "I need to get some good counsel on this."

Number two "Get Godly Counsel." And you should. When you've got an issue and you think this is impinging on the gospel, this is the wrong way to handle the word. I think their hermeneutic is wrong, but I'm not sure. We'll leave that for the pastors and the seminary professors and the missionaries to figure out. No, no, no, you need to get some counsel. We need Christians who are going to stand and contend earnestly for the faith, once for all delivered to the saints. Well, you need to educate yourself and you need to get some counsel. And the great thing about it, you don't have to travel 300 miles to get counsel. You can travel 100 yards into our bookstore and you can pick up a book written by a person who is respected and honored and studied and so clear in their thinking that they can publish a book on a topic. And you can say, "Okay. Now I can take what I've learned in the Scripture, and I can sit here and I can get counsel and voices from other people, and I can figure out this thing, so I can get a good handle on this. I'm not saying every Christian book is right, but sometimes we try to cull and get the best Christian books that we can in that bookstore so that we can do the work to build our thinking on all this. Right? We need to get godly counsel.

And the councils "CIL" have been really that practice from Nicaea and Chalcedon and Ephesus, all the early church councils were trying to figure out what are the best thinking people within the Church who know God's word, who are godly, who are honored among the people, what do they think about the deity of Christ? What do they think about the humanity of Christ? How are we supposed to figure out the Trinitarian concept? Let's think through this carefully. And they've always been conferring together and that's a good thing. And on a small scale, you may not call it a church council, but you'd better sit down with people who you respect and know within the church, people with flesh on, or people in books, and to say, I need to get good godly counsel so I know I'm going to war with good counsel.

Which, by the way, you want some passages on that. Proverbs Chapter 1 verse 5, you better get clear guidance, you ought to "obtain guidance." How about Chapter 11 verse 14? This is all in Proverbs. "Where there's no guidance you're going to fall." You're going to lose. Proverbs 15:22, "Without counsel plans are going to fail. Many advisors they succeed." Or how about the one I thought of first? Proverbs 24:6. "For by wise guidance you can wage war, in an abundance of counsels, there is victory." Before I go to war I better sit down and get some good counsel. The Jerusalem Council is about getting counsel, though they are spelled differently. That is important and we need to say, hey, that's a good pattern to follow. And we see it throughout Scripture as a clear principle.

Verse 3. Did you see how quick the second point was? No applause is necessary at this point in the service, but that was a good thing, what I just did. Verse 3. "So being sent on their way by the church, they pass through Phoenicia and Samaria." There's your map and on the map we see just how far it was. Although you need some scale in your mind, that's about 300 miles, 275 miles. And depending on what cities they stopped in and how they popped in and out off the coast, they were traveling many, many miles. And they were, I'm sure, sore at the





end of the day and who knows what kind of issues they had with their sunburn or their blisters on their feet. And they were working hard to go get that counsel. So I just wanted to tease that out as a separate point.

Number three, you need to "Work Hard for the Truth." To get a clear handle on the truth you need to work hard at it. And some people think, "Well, I could just sit around and feel my way through the Christian life." You can't. You have to think your way through the Christian life and thinking carefully and clearly and being a person who handles rightly the word of truth is going to take some work. And some of you, I talk about the bookstore, I mean, you've never been in there except to buy a card or something, right? I'm saying I put books on the back of the worksheet every single week. I carefully pick those so that you might go the next level, the next step, and continue to work through what we see in the topics that are raised in the sermon that you can do more research. But that's hard.

The reason you don't want to pick up a book that has theological terms in it, that you have to use a dictionary to figure out what in the world they mean is because it's easier for you to watch cat videos on YouTube. It's just easier for you to play a game on your phone. It's just easier. So I'm just saying we need to do the hard work and I need to push you in this sermon. Hey, Paul went 300 miles for something he thought he'd figure it out and he knew that he knew. He thought. I mean, but we're going to go and we're going to discuss this question 300 miles away in Jerusalem.

But what did he do on the way? That was point three. That was even faster than point two. Middle of verse 3, "Describing in detail," as he went through Phoenicia, Samaria and all the other places he went to, all the cities in those regions, "in detail the conversion of the Gentiles." He's saying it from town to town, church to church. "And it brought great joy to all the brothers. And when they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them." There's a lot of talking, a lot of detail, a lot of description, a lot of these non-koshered, non-circumcised, non-ceremonial law-keeping Gentiles who they're talking all about. And then they're seeing the response, at least it's being recorded by Luke, that everyone was like, "Yeah, that's good. That's a good thing, that's a good thing, that's good." It's good that Cornelius continued to live as a Roman centurion and he didn't become a Jewish proselyte. That's good.

And so here they had, in a sense, if you can follow me on this, he had all of his reading and all of his research, and this case, all of his reporting. He had it cross-checked by all these churches along the way. He didn't just rush into the discussion and debate this in Jerusalem. He was getting all of his data cross-checked. Now, that may not be an eloquent point, but can you write it down? Number four, "Let Your Data Be Cross-checked." Let it be cross-checked.

And here's one simple application of this number four. To have your data cross-checked is something that should be happening. It's the difference between you saying, "Well, I'll get a stack of books and I'll read those, and I like that. I'm kind of a self-studier. And I heard about your Compass Bible Institute thing and that's great. I'd even like to audit a few classes. But I want to audit a few classes. And you guys are so weird you don't even let us audit classes. I



don't like that. Maybe once a semester you let us audit one class. I want to audit classes because you know what I don't want to do? I don't have to write papers, I don't have to write papers. Because you know what happens with papers? It hurts because I get them back and they're all marked up and there are statements and then I get grades and I don't want to be graded. Certainly not by the people over there. I don't want to be graded."

Can you be a self-taught Christian who can sit there and really defend the faith once for all delivered to the saints? You can be. You can be. But there is something about the fact that going through some kind of formalized training, that's the forcing, by the way, of cross-checking your work, of you being able to say, I've read these books now, here are my thoughts. And if you just explained it at some conversation in the lunchroom at your workplace, that's one thing. But when you turn it in double-spaced, it's Turabian Chicago-style paper for 12 pages and then your professor, who we hope at Compass Bible Institute or any good school's case, knows more than you do, sits there and evaluates and cross-checks what you do and gives you feedback. There's just something about that. And that's why I value formal education for all of our pastors, because that's a good thing for us to be told by people who know more than we do, that's wrong, this is right. You didn't think of this. You didn't factor in this. You haven't read these authors and you don't know how this should affect your argument. That's super helpful.

And I've provided for you, I've tried to provide for you and our team has provided for you and some of you have contributed to provide for you a school that's right across the street that I hope has a great future in taking people, not just people who are going to be missionaries or pastors, but the regular folks in our church who say, I just want to have a better handle on the truth, that our classes are open for you to enroll, not as an audit, but for you to be a student. Some say, "Well, I'm too old to go back to college." Go back to college. "I don't even think I can write papers." You can write papers, right? And you can submit them and you can say, critique them. That's an important thing.

I'll blow your mind right here. Luke Chapter 2. Jesus, you remember in that caravan coming back from Jerusalem, they lost him. If you're raising the Messiah, don't lose him you're thinking, right? And they lost him in this three-day journey. Now, I just want you to think about that. You've gone and you can't find him. And by the way, there's no more responsible son than Jesus. He's the oldest, of course. Right? The oldest in the family. He's got brothers and sisters, but he's the oldest. So you can imagine in the clans, in these big traveling caravans that they had and a lot of extended family, you can see where this is feasible. And you know the story. He's 12 years old and they realize he's not there. And so they have to go back. And they go back and they find him in Jerusalem. Where was he in Jerusalem? Do you remember the story? In the temple.

And it doesn't just say he's sitting there because I don't know how you envision it. I always used to envision that he's just sitting there kind of telling those dudes what it is. It says he was in there asking questions. Right? Oh, he was dialoguing with them. And the thing we remember is they were just amazed at his understanding. But he's asking questions. And the end of that passage, verse 52, says that Jesus, this is the God-man, but in his humanity, we



see this development, this maturation of a person. It says he grew in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man. Think about that. The eternal Son of God, the Daniel 7 Son of Man, all authority he has. He is now in humanity, encased in humanity. And the pattern that he lays out for us in showing us how we ought to live, we ought to be living as he lived. Walking as he walked as First John says. And he was doing it by sitting there with the best, most learned people in his culture, asking questions, dialoguing with them and he becomes a pattern for us in growing in wisdom. That's so important.

And I'm telling you, we need to have our data cross-checked. Jesus didn't just go in there teaching these guys. He came in there asking questions. I just think that's telling. It doesn't in any way take away from his divinity. Right? But as Bruce Ware writes in his book, "The Man Christ Jesus," we need to understand, Jesus went through that process and it becomes a template and a pattern for us. That's a good, mind-blowing passage, but a good one for us to make sure that we're in the process of getting a better handle on God's word by submitting ourselves to situations where we get our learning cross-checked, evaluated, graded, marked up by a red pen.

Verse 5. After all of that and everybody along the way in Phoenicia and Samaria going, "Hey, that's great. I'm so glad those uncircumcised, non-kosher-eating Gentiles have become Christian. We're all about it. They're full brothers in Christ." "But," verse 5, when they got to Jerusalem, "some believers who belong to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, 'It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.'" Sorry. That's what they got to do. Now. It looked like Paul had put this all to rest. I mean, he'd stopped at many places along the way and everybody's high-fiving him that this is the right thing. But he's still got an issue.

This has gone on for months. We're assuming it took weeks and weeks to get there. And now when he gets there now, it may not be the same issue, but it often is. Sometimes it's just a bunch of other issues. But you need to know this, last point, number five, you need to "Know Debates Will Continue." Just know that. Know debates will continue. They will continue. They're going to continue until Christ comes back. And therefore, you're going to have to continually double down. You're supposed to learn. You're supposed to grow. There'll be a new threat to the church. There'll be something called the Emergent Church or CRT or some issue about the fact there's no male and female. And you're going have to sit down and say, "what does the Bible say? We need to figure this out."

Were you here last week when Dr. Allen was here, president of Midwestern? He said something and he said it quickly and maybe you didn't catch all the things that he was saying about statements. But he said the reason our faculty at Midwestern, he said, has to sign all of these affirmations, these statements to be in line with the doctrine. He said, the reason we have to do so many, do you remember what he said? Is because the world is so nuts, it's so crazy, and because all these things that keep coming at the Church continue to need clarification for all the professors and leaders and all the people. In our case, in our church, we need to know that we are handling rightly the word of truth when whatever it is that's coming down the pipe.



I mean, if you're back there having Arianism take root in the fourth century, well, then you better have a council called Nicaea to figure out if this is right or wrong. In the beginning, it was do we have to have everybody eat kosher and get circumcised to be a Christian? And so we called the Jerusalem Council. He quoted real quickly a few things. He talked about the Chicago statement on inerrancy. Do you remember that? We talk about the Jerusalem Council. That's the reason they named these little gatherings after the city, we got the Chicago Statement. He talked about the Danvers Statement. He talked about the Nashville Statement. These are issues on complementarianism and gender roles and all those kinds of things. These are important.

And so today it still continues on. Then there was the Dallas statement that was the most recent one where we got evangelicals leaders together to deal with this whole thing about social justice and CRT and what are we supposed to make of that as Christians? Right? This is going to continue on from Chalcedon to Dallas. People are sitting down and having to say, let's get our best counsel together, let's figure out what the truth is and let's make that statement and affirm the things and deny things and know what we believe. And I'm just saying that's going to continue on.

You're going to have to be, in one sense, a peace-loving Christian who always wants us to agree and get along. And in that sense you think that equals nice. And it is a nice thing when we can do that. But when there's a threat to the gospel, when there's a threat to the way we handle the word of God, we need to be on the kind of footing that says, you know what, I'm always going to have to somehow, in the back of my mind, sing that old song "Onward Christian Soldiers." Because it is, it's going to be "there's a time for peace and there is a time for war." And I just got to prepare you for that. We can put to bed all the things that are threatening the church right now. We can deal with the issue of gender, we can deal with the issue of complementarianism, we can deal with the issue of CRT. We can deal with all that. But there's going to be something that our kids and our grandkids are going to deal with. We've got to continue to deal with these issues so that we know what the truth says so that the gospel is guarded and the faith, once for all delivered the saints. Let's guard it as well.

Let's pray. Stand with me. Let's dismiss with this. God, we want to be people who love harmony. As far as it depends on us, we want to live peaceably with all men. Those are true statements. We love that. We don't want to be quarrelsome people. We don't want to be argumentative. We don't want to be combative. But God there are times when it's not about our egos, it's not about us. We need to engage with people in reasonable debate. Where Luke would say of us that's no small dissension, no small debate. There are times for that. Sometimes we need a little more study. Sometimes we need good counsel. Sometimes we need to get our data cross-checked.

But we need to prepare because there are always going to be threats to the gospel, to the Church of Jesus Christ. And so many people, they get isolated, they build their silos, they think they're right because something made sense to them and they just haven't done the work. And we pray, particularly as it relates to these issues of how one is saved and how one



deals with Scripture that we're continually getting back to what we need to have as the ultimate priority of the Christian life that we finish this race by fighting the good fight. When those wars erupt that we have, as Paul said, weapons of warfare for the right hand and for the left.

Not weapons that the world has, not worldly tools for fighting and stabbing and shooting people, but weapons that are like arguments tearing down every thing that raises itself up against the knowledge of God. God, we want to be able to take every thought obedient to Christ unless we're talking about fools. We want to take the thoughts and see them guided. We always quote that, God, you know about ourselves, but it's really after we get our own thoughts aligned, it's doing what we can to see people think rightly about your grace, about your truth, about the gospel, about your word.

So God, prepare us for that without loving any of it. We certainly don't want to love disputing, we don't want to love debate, but we want to engage in it as we have to. We don't want to leave it for some who just love that stuff. We want to be ready even this week, if we're called to defend the truth of the gospel, that we would do that, do that willingly, do that diplomatically, do that peaceably. Do that with sobriety and sound thinking. And God if we feel inept for that or ill-equipped, I pray we would do more to be equipped. God help us in that task, I pray. Get us ready for the rest of this series. We think through Guarding the Gospel, particularly as it relates to these issues of ceremonial laws and all the rest that we'll see in this text, we read through again the truths of Galatians and Hebrews. I just pray that you would help us to have a clear grasp on the Gospel of Christ. Faith alone, grace alone, Christ alone. I just pray we would have that firmly ensconced in our thinking and able to defend it.

In Jesus name. Amen.