

## “Working Through Prickly Problems Without Getting Stuck”

Text: Acts 15:1-35

Series: Book of Acts [#19]

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### Introduction

When I hear the word *prickly*, the first picture that comes to mind is a cactus. Now, there are many different kinds of cacti—there are about 2,000 different species. Not all cacti have prickly spines, but if you’ve been stuck by one, you probably wished that none of them had them.

We try to avoid those prickly spines, but some ingenious people have developed practical uses for them, including: tooth picks, combs, sewing needles, and fish hooks. As well, the live plants have been used effectively as living fences and hedges.

It’s not just cacti that come in many prickly varieties. Problems come in limitless varieties. All are prickly. It’s not easy to handle problems without getting stuck—the sharp stinging pain that can stop us in our tracks, hang us up and prevent us from moving forward.

As we continue in the book of Acts today at chapter 15, we meet a prickly problem in the early church. This was a painful and potentially paralyzing problem. If the church had not taken it seriously, it would have been like playing catch barehanded with a prickly cactus.

God gives us some lessons here on working through prickly problems without getting stuck. Now, let me clarify a few things about *getting stuck*. When problems strike, we always feel the sting. We can’t avoid that pain any more than the problem itself. But we don’t have to get stuck *in* the problem, in the pain. We can move through and beyond it. This is what we are looking at today.

Let’s review the background to this chapter. These events took place after Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch from their first missionary journey. Some Jewish believers came from Jerusalem. They began to teach things contrary to what the church had been taught. So, they *all* had a *prickly problem* on their hands. This record gives us a process for working through problems we face. That process begins with defining the problem.

### Define The Problem.

Let’s look at the problem facing the church. Luke describes it briefly, but clearly. These visitors were insisting that...

- verse 1, “... Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”
- and, verse 5, “... It is necessary to circumcise them [Gentiles] and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.”

The church at Antioch was mostly Gentile. In their minds this issue had already been settled. Everyone came to Christ equally, regardless of their background. No one had to go through Judaism and its law and customs in order to be saved. Salvation, being accepted by God, is grounded in God's grace and comes through faith in Christ alone. But these visiting Jewish believers insisted that in addition to faith in Christ, Gentiles also had to become Jewish and live like Jews. As you might expect, this caused "great dissension and debate" (2).

Page back in your mind to chapters 10-11 where God dramatically showed Peter that the Jewish ceremonial law was no longer in effect, that Gentiles and Jews now come to God on equal footing through faith in Jesus Christ alone. Even though Peter had settled this earlier in Jerusalem, as recorded in chapter 11, the question now resurfaced, "Can you really be saved without circumcision and the law?" It was difficult for many Jews to accept that keeping all the many details of the law was no longer required. This issue was settled here in this council, but would resurface again, as we will see in chapter 21.

In addition to Luke's definition of the problem, verses 6-11 give a summary of Peter's clear statement of the issues before the apostles and elders in Jerusalem.

The first step to dealing with a problem is to accurately and clearly define it. Sometimes it is not easy to see the problem accurately. On a hot summer day a lady bought some groceries and put them on the back seat of her car. She then went to another store and did some more shopping. Then, when she finished, she headed home. She was traveling along on the freeway when all of a sudden there was a *Pop, Pop, Pop*, and she felt something hit the back of her head. Holding one hand over the wound, she managed to drive to the closest hospital, and ran in screaming, "I've been shot!" The doctor came quickly and said, "Move your hand so I can see the wound." The woman said, "No! I Can't! My brains will fall out!" He finally convinced her to let him examine the wound. As she removed her hand the doctor discovered that she indeed had been struck in the back of the head... however, not by a bullet, but by what turned out to be refrigerated biscuit dough that had expanded in her hot car and ...*Pop, Pop, Popped* from its packaging.

Yes, it is not always easy to see the problem accurately. But if we are going to deal with it without getting stuck, we must see it as it really is. When we jump to conclusions we may be panicked by *biscuit dough*.

This applies to all problems: personal, family, work, friends, church. Defining the problem requires careful observation and listening, accurate communication, thought and consultation. Often it is helpful to put our observations on paper. Through that process other questions may rise to the surface, and we also may be able to see our own misconceptions more clearly. In all of this, we should ask God to guide and give us wisdom to see things as they really are. Step #2 is to discuss the problem.

## Discuss The Problem.

When this problem arose in Antioch it was defined, then discussed and debated. Because this issue touched the core of how one becomes a Christian, Paul and Barnabas didn't sidestep it by suggesting, "You believe what you want, and we'll believe what we want." And when the discussion did not bring an agreed resolution, they didn't continue going around in circles. Following Jesus' general principles in Matthew 18, they broadened the process by taking it to Jerusalem.

At the Jerusalem meeting Peter began with a report of God's work in saving the Gentiles. Paul and Barnabas related the signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. Then James, the half-brother of Jesus, spoke as chairman of the council pointing out that the position of Peter, Paul and Barnabas agreed with the Old Testament prophets.

Now, this record is a summary showing how the conclusion was reached after, as verse 7 tells us, "much debate." The arguments from those on the other side are not recorded here, nor are we told how many meetings it took to get to a resolution. But there was an open, frank discussion of the problem.

When you face a problem, after you define it, discuss it with everyone who is involved. If the initial discussion does not bring a resolution, don't get trapped in going around in circles. Broaden the discussion and make sure that everything is out in the open.

Now, we also need to remember that not every issue needs to be resolved. We have two options with problems: either do our best to resolve the issue, or let it go. For example, Gentiles being accepted with or without going through Judaism was an issue that had to be resolved. It was critical to the faith. But, when it came to diet or observing special days, Paul wrote in Romans 14, in effect, "Let it go." He instructs that "each person must be fully convinced in his own mind," and is not to judge one who takes a different position.

It is not always easy to know when to try to resolve or to continue to work at resolution, or let the issue go. Sometimes we may try to resolve things we should let go, and at other times we may try to let go of things we should resolve. The Bible gives us direction on some things. God will give us His wisdom on the others as we seek it.

As well, we frequently use partial measures—we *let go* of an issue, but not completely; or, we *resolve* an issue, but not completely. It is only as we define and discuss a problem in light of God's truth that we can determine what to do. Yes, this can be a risky and scary process. We have no control over how the other person or people will respond. We have no guarantee the outcome will be the one we want. In the process we may see and need to confess our own misconceptions or errors.

To work through prickly problems without getting stuck, we need to define the problem, discuss it, and then we are ready to determine a God-honoring solution.

## Determine A God-honoring Solution.

Let's move back to the Jerusalem council. After a thorough discussion the time came for a decision. Go verse 19 where James speaks,

“Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.” (19-21)

This was not an autocratic decision by James. Go on to verse 22,

“Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas — Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren.”

This council affirmed that salvation is by God's grace through faith in Christ plus nothing else. The leaders asked the Gentile believers to be sensitive to the four Jewish concerns listed in the letter.

How did these leaders make this correct, unified, God-honoring decision? It certainly was not with the weather vane of popular opinion. We see three factors involved here:

- The first was God's Word. In verses 13-18 James' first and main factor was what God had said in the Old Testament Scriptures.
- Secondly, was the factor of God's witness as they observed it. Paul and Barnabas reviewed God's working signs and wonders among the Gentiles in verse 12, and James referred to it as he introduced some relevant Old Testament Scriptures.
- Thirdly, we need to align our will with God's will. Drop down to verse 28, “...*it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us* to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials.”

“...*it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us*...” That is a wonderful statement! Being determined to know God's will, they worked at the issue relying on God in the light of Scripture's truth until their will lined up with His will.

Now we come to ourselves, to determining solutions for our problems. The first step at this juncture is to make sure we are committed to end up with a God-honoring solution. If we don't start with this we are bound to fail. Our sinful nature keeps pride on center stage. Matters of *the right way* versus *the wrong way* often are really issues of *my way* versus *your way*.

Then we, like the council in Jerusalem, need to use God's Word to test our thoughts,

works and conclusions. “What Biblical principles apply to this?” Look up, write down, work through the sense of applicable passages and what their truths mean to the current questions and issues.

Next, walk through some outward evidences you and others think are witnesses of God in this situation, and how well that evidence stands up to the light of the Bible’s truth.

Finally, there comes the time to make a decision. Having asked God for His wisdom, you can move to a God-honoring decision. Usually it is neither instant nor easy, but God will guide you, just as He guided the early church. Sometimes the initial, *big* decision is only the first in a series of decisions leading up to a final God-honoring solution. Remember, the record in Acts 15 is a summary. We don’t know how long the process of “much debate” (7) was. So we need to commit ourselves to keep moving, to keep working it through until our wills line up with God’s will, until it is complete.

Go back to verse 28 again, “... *it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us ...*” G. Campbell Morgan wrote,

“We must freely admit we very seldom hear this language. We do read that a matter was carried by an overwhelming majority, but that is a very different thing. An overwhelming majority often leaves behind it a minority disaffected and dangerous. We shall come to unanimity when we are prepared to discuss freely [and] frankly our absolute differences, on the basis of a common desire to know the mind of the Lord. ... If we come, perfectly sure in our minds, but wanting to know what the Lord’s mind is, then [before] the council ends, today as yesterday, the moment will come when we shall be able to say with a fine dignity and a splendid force, ‘It seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us.’”

Finally, when we’ve reached this point, we can delight in God’s encouragement.

### **Delight In God’s Encouragement.**

That’s what the church at Antioch was able to do. Go to verse 30,

“So when they [i.e., the messengers from the council reporting back to Antioch] were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. When they had read it, they *rejoiced* because of its *encouragement*.”

They rejoiced! Not because they *won a victory*. Not because they *beat* those *traditional, narrow-minded* Jewish believers. They rejoiced because the Holy Spirit guided the council in Jerusalem, in spite of the deep differences, to line up their wills with God’s and to preserve their unity in the truth. That encouraged them!

We too can and will delight in God's encouragement when we handle prickly problems without getting stuck. When we walk through this process as the early church did, we will experience the same delight in God's work. We will be encouraged. Yes, there are times when others involved don't want to discuss the issue, let alone resolve it. And so Paul wrote in Romans 12:18, "...so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men."

Also, each of us need to be alert to the danger of settling for the delight of our own victory rather than God's. The Olympics are approaching. On August 8, two months from today, it all begins in Beijing. Just a few athletes will experience the delight of victory. That's how competitions go. There is only one first place finisher, only one gold medal. If we have a competition mindset as we deal with problems, and one person or group wins, *everyone* loses.

## **Conclusion.**

We can work through prickly problems without getting stuck. But even with God's truth and good examples we can become careless and get still stuck... painfully stuck. On vacation some years ago, we were walking through an area with some tough, prickly cacti and other growth to get down to a lake. We all saw it and warned each other. But even with the warning, it was difficult to keep focused and not look at the lake and the rest of the beautiful scenery. And so, one prickly spine painfully penetrated the side of a shoe... and into my foot.

We all have faced problems, are facing problems and will face problems. And so, we need to be focused. Focused to...

- define the problems we encounter;
- discuss them;
- and determine a God-honoring solution so that we can...
- delight in God's encouragement.

As you spend some time reflecting on this with God now, acknowledge that problems are and will be a part of life, part of your life. You can't avoid the initial sting, but you don't have to get stuck there. Thank God that He provides the way to work through the problems you encounter. In faith, decide to continually align your will with God's will in every problem, to let Christ's mind and peace rule in your heart and mind.

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