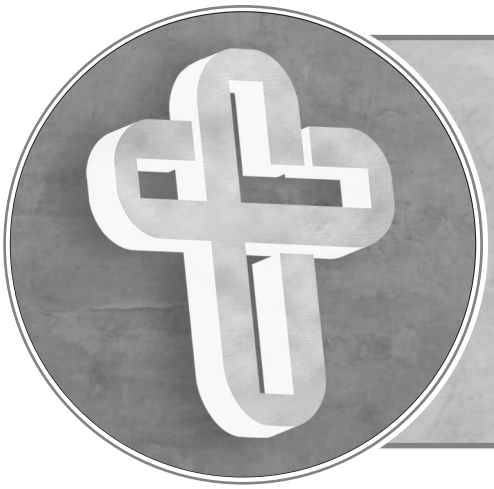


CORNERSTONE CONNECTIONS
MARCH 07 2026

us and them

Scripture Story: Acts 15:1-17.
Commentary: *The Acts of the Apostles* (or *Unlikely Leaders*), chapters 19, 20, 21.
Key Text: Acts 15:10, 11.

PREPARING TO TEACH

I. SYNOPSIS

The story that frames this week's lesson illustrates the central purpose of our mission and describes how we can negotiate through our problems with politics, personal preferences, traditions, and practices. By this time in the life of the church the Gentiles were breaking down the doors to know who Christ was, but some Jews felt strongly that in order to be a follower of Christ you must also be a good Jew. The practices and traditions of the Jews became so convoluted over time that it was hard for them to separate truth from tradition. So the church had a meeting—a "General Conference session" or board meeting to deal with the growing problems.

Paul, Barnabas, and Peter were in attendance while James presided over the meeting. The discussion was vigorous and passionate, because church and faith and eternal life are things that matter and are worth getting excited about. But in this storied moment, gospel minds prevail and embrace the basics of their faith with resolute conviction: the grace of Christ poured out at Calvary and made certain by the resurrection is a gift to *all* mankind, given freely and with no preference to race, gender, age, or social class. Another key feature that made this meeting so successful was the way Paul and Barnabas told stories of the miraculous way God was reaching the Gentiles (Acts 15:12). These stories sealed the meeting with a sense of renewed purpose and commitment to the gospel commission. This lesson can be a key moment to face the hard truth of politics and problems among believers; but moreover, to rekindle the heart of our mission through storytelling, and reminding ourselves why we are here.

II. TARGET

The students will:

- See how prejudice and preferences shape all people. *(Know)*
- Sense a unity of purpose based on God's grace to all. *(Feel)*
- Choose to be devoted to the gospel commission. *(Respond)*

III. EXPLORE

Growing in Christ, Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs, No. 11

We are also called to follow Christ's example by compassionately ministering to the physical, mental, social, emotional, and spiritual needs of humanity. As we give ourselves in loving service to those around us and in witnessing to His salvation, His constant presence with us through the Spirit transforms every moment and every task into a spiritual experience (1 Chron. 29:11; Ps. 1:1, 2; 23:4; 77:11, 12; Matt. 20:25-28; 25:31-46; Luke 10:17-20; John 20:21; Rom. 8:38, 39; 2 Cor. 3:17, 18; Gal. 5:22-25; Eph. 5:19, 20; 6:12-18; Phil. 3:7-14; Col. 1:13, 14; 2:6, 14, 15; 1 Thess. 5:16-18, 23; Heb. 10:25; James 1:27; 2 Peter 2:9; 3:18; 1 John 4:4).

TEACHING

I. GETTING STARTED

Activity

Invite the students to share their responses to the voting activity in the *What Do You Think?* section of their lesson. The voting activity should incite various opinions based upon their experience and perspective. To avoid students choosing not to commit either to agree or disagree, you can invite those who agree to stand or hold up their hand. Be clear about how you want them to take a stand.

Illustration

Share this illustration in your own words:

Fritz Kreisler was born in 1875 and died in 1962. Kreisler was a world-famous violinist who earned a massive fortune by playing concerts and writing compositions. But surprisingly, Kreisler generously gave almost all of his fortune away. He was a brilliant musician, but equally renown for being kind.

One day Kreisler discovered an exquisite violin but was unable to buy it because he no longer had such ample resources. He scrambled and saved and after raising enough money to meet the asking price, he found the seller, hoping to buy this amazing instrument. But his heart was crushed when he discovered it had been sold to a collector. So determined to continue and not give up, Kreisler made his way to the new owner's home and offered to buy the violin. The collector quickly refused, saying the violin had become his prized possession and he could not sell it. Disappointed, Kreisler was about to leave when an idea came to him. "Might I play the instrument once more before this precious treasure gets confined to silence?" he asked. The owner mused and nodded, giving his permission. Kreisler then began to fill the room with such heart-moving music that it made an unmistakable effect on the owner. He was so deeply stirred in his heart by the music that he said, "I have no right to keep that to myself. It's yours, Mr. Kreisler." He continued, "Take it into the world, and let people hear it."

II. TEACHING THE STORY

Bridge to the Story

Share the following in your own words:

What lesson or truth do you think this story illustrates? What is the meaning of this story from the perspective of Kreisler? What about from the perspective of the man who bought the violin and who was just going to keep it on display? What does this story teach us about how we should function as individual believers? How should we live as a body or a church?

Kreisler came to the same conclusion that many of the New Testament believers came to, and that was: *there is something that is worth everything.* The early church had problems, but their biggest problem was the amazing growth and impact they were having on the region. As a result, problems emerged. Read the story of how this band of believers functioned as a church.

Out of the Story for Teachers

After you read the Into the Story *section with your students, use the following in your own words to process it with them:*

- Read the story and *underline* what you think are key phrases to understanding what this passage is about.
- Draw a *circle* around all the individuals and people groups mentioned in this story.
- Describe what you see as the social and religious dynamics that are going on in the New Testament church at this time.
- Who are these "certain people" who demanded that Gentile believers be circumcised? What do you see as their spiritual focus?
- Why did Paul and Barnabas go to Jerusalem, and why do you think they went through Gentile territory on their way to counsel with the apostles in Jerusalem?
- What is the yoke that Peter referred to in Acts 15:10?
- After Peter spoke to the assembled leaders of the Christian church, Paul and Barnabas added their stories of Gentile believers they had met in their journeys. How do you think these stories impressed the congregation? How are such stories important to the decisions we make?
- What do you think God is trying to say to us today in this story?

Extra Questions for Teachers:

- When people work together for a cause that is worthwhile, there will be differences. How have

you seen these differences tear churches apart or bring them together?

- The center of the controversy was about whether the Gentiles should keep the traditions of the Jews (eating meat that was kosher, keeping the festivals, etc.) as part of their faith in Christ. How much of that is what Christ called them to teach (Matthew 28:19, 20) and how much was about getting them to conform?
- What traditions do you have in your culture that may not transfer to another?
- Is there a biblical principle behind what you do and why you do it?

Use the following as other teachable passages that relate to today's story: Matthew 20; Matthew 21; Acts 7:51, 52; Romans 12; 1 Corinthians; Revelation 14:12; Revelation 12:17.

Sharing Context and Background

Use the following information to shed more light on the story for your students. Share it in your own words.

It is likely that more than 10 years had passed since Christ ascended into heaven, and the church was growing by leaps and bounds. Peter and James were focused on teaching and reteaching the Jews and those closely connected with the faith of Israel. Paul and Barnabas set out to share the gospel with those who were not Jews, but Gentiles.

By this time there was somewhat of a structure and an agreed-upon process for the problems the young church faced. There had been seasons of famine and shortage of money. There were certain groups that felt neglected (Acts 6). On one hand there was the blossoming church filled with disciples of Jesus and the resident leadership of Pharisees and Sadducees. The adversarial elements that fought against Christ had not gone away and would need to be addressed (especially in light of Peter's sermon in

Tips for Top-Notch Teaching

From PowerPoint to Story

Storytelling. This theme will return again and again if you are hearing anything master teachers are saying about how people learn. The most pervasive, memorable teaching tool other than personal experience is through story. In fact, entire corporations are moving away from PowerPoint presentations and bullet-listed charts and graphics to telling stories in their boardrooms. Why? Because people don't change because of facts. They are transformed through experience, and storytellers usher you into the realm of thinking and feeling that is beyond becoming convinced something is true; they are convicted to live by it.

Look at this week's lesson and see how Paul and Barnabas turned this heated meeting around with stories from the front lines (Acts 15:12).

Teaching From the Lesson

Refer your students to the other sections of their lesson.

- **Key Text**
  Invite students to share the Key Text *with the class if they have committed it to memory.*
- **Flashlight**
  Read the Flashlight *statement, pointing out that most of the time it is from the commentary on this week's story found in the book* The Acts of the Apostles. *Ask what relationship they see between the statement and what they have just discussed from* Out of the Story.
- **Punch Lines**
  Point out to your students the verses listed in their lesson that relate to this week's story. Have them share the verse that spoke most directly to them and allow them to explain why they chose it.
- **Further Insight**
  Ask them how the quote in Further Insight *conveys the point of the story in this lesson.*

Acts 2 and Stephen's rebuke in Acts 7). So arguments would arise.

One of the basic arguments centered around food. It was common for food to be used in religious rituals but then sold in the market afterward. Then there was the manner in which food was prepared. God instructed the Jews to slaughter the animals that they would eat in such a way that the blood was drained from the animal. Disease (and in the minds of Jews—sin) was carried through the blood. But Gentiles who became believers in Jesus had no experience nor did they see the need to practice such things, and thus, controversy ensued.

The controversy in our story this week was held by "Judaizers," who held that in order for Gentile believers to become "true members of Israel" they had to be circumcised. Maybe the prejudices and tensions between Jews and Gentiles were still so strong that these little arguments were simply tangible ways to vent their prejudice. Either way, controversies are always a part of any group:

"In every society or organized group of people two types are always represented: the conservative, looking to the past, and the progressive, looking toward the future. The ultra Jewish element in the church held that there could be no salvation outside of Israel; hence, that all the Gentile disciples must receive circumcision and observe the Jewish regulations" (Jesse Lyman Hurlbut, *The Story of the Christian Church*, p. 26).

But this story is a testimony to how the church can stay on track and focused on mission in the midst of problems. They overcame this problem by: (1) Peter's reminder of how God's grace comes to all people the same way, through faith; (2) Paul and Barnabas' heartwarming stories of the miracles God was doing on behalf of the Gentile world; (3) James, the leader of the church at that time, taking a bold stand for the heart of the mission instead of letting little problems sidetrack the church. What might this look like today?

III. CLOSING

Activity

Close with an activity and debrief it in your own words.

Give each student a 3" x 5" card or a small piece of paper and something to write with. Then give the following instructions:

"We are a church, and we forget sometimes about what matters most to Christ. But we need to move forward and be able to agree upon what our mission is. So I want you to write out in 30 words or less what you think our mission is as a local church. Begin."

When they are done, set all the statements where everyone can see them. Then you can debrief with them:

"What were some common elements you saw in all the statements of mission? What were some of the most obvious differences? Now if we were to condense these together and agree upon one statement to work toward, what might be different in this church?"

Summary

Share the following thoughts in your own words:

This week's story is not at first the brightest portrayal of Christians—arguing over whether the outsiders (Gentiles) should be circumcised or not. It seems petty, but it was a real issue then. How they negotiated through it as a body of believers is what is truly inspiring! They found the core of what they were all about. They reminded themselves how they became disciples of Christ. Peter must have remembered how many times he stumbled—now he was a leader. James, the brother of Jesus, had his share of problems. Paul listed his in his letter. All of these people returned to the basic beliefs they knew to be true and worked together. Peter gave his remarks. Paul and Barnabas told stories. James closed the issue and refocused everyone back on the task of taking the gospel to the ends of the earth. What part will you play in this church today?

Reminder to Teacher: Global Youth Day is in two weeks! How are your plans for your Sabbath School service project coming along?



Remind the students about the reading plan that will take them through the inspired commentary of the Bible, the Conflict of the Ages Series. The reading that goes with this lesson is *The Acts of the Apostles* (or *Unlikely Leaders*), chapters 19-21.

LESSON 10

CORNERSTONE CONNECTIONS

MARCH 07 2026

STUDENT LESSON

Scripture Story: Acts 15:1-17.
Commentary: *The Acts of the Apostles* (or *Unlikely Leaders*), chapters 19-21.

us and them



Photo by Colleen Cahill

flashlight

"The traditions and maxims of men must not take the place of revealed truth. The advance of the gospel message must not be hindered by the prejudices and preferences of men, whatever might be their position in the church" (*The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 200).

keytext

"Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

(Acts 15:10, 11, NIV)

what do you think?

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

____ "Holding to human traditions is more of a problem in the church today than racial prejudice."

____ "Legalism is more deadly to church life than apathy."

How do the issues the church faces also reflect the problems the human race faces? Explain your response.

_____

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_____

did you know?

The word used to describe anyone who was not a Jew was "Gentile." The Greek word ethnos (where we get the word "ethnic") refers to nations or people, but the distinction Jews made heightened national or ethnic differences. God's purpose was to use the Jews as an entry point to bring the knowledge of the true God into all the world. Instead, many simply accepted the privilege and not the purpose, which led to the creation of "insiders" (Jews) and "everyone else" (Gentiles).

INTO THE STORY

"Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.' This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.

"The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.'

"The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: 'Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.'

"The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. When they finished, James spoke up. 'Brothers,' he said, 'listen to me. Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: "After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things."'"

(Acts 15:1-17, NIV)

OUT OF THE STORY

Read the story and *underline* what you think are key phrases to understanding what this passage is about.

Draw a circle around all of the individuals and people groups mentioned in this story.

Describe what you see as the social and religious dynamics that are going on in the New Testament church at this time.

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Who are these "certain men" who demanded that Gentile believers be circumcised? What do you see as their spiritual focus?

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Why did Paul and Barnabas go to Jerusalem, and why do you think they went through Gentile territory on their way to counsel with the apostles in Jerusalem?

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What is the yoke that Peter referred to in verse 10?

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After Peter speaks to the assembled leaders of the Christian church, Paul and Barnabas add their stories of Gentile believers they have met in their journeys. How do you think these stories impacted the congregation? How are such stories important to the decisions we make?

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What do you think God is trying to say to us today in this story?

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punch lines

"Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all" **(Romans 4:16, NIV).**

"All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him, for dominion belongs to the Lord and he rules over the nations" **(Psalm 22:27, 28, NIV).**

"I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" **(Genesis 12:3, NIV).**

"In other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring" **(Romans 9:8, NIV).**

"If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" **(Galatians 3:29, NIV).**

further insight

"The greater the responsibilities placed upon the human agent, and the larger his opportunities to dictate and control, the more harm he is sure to do if he does not carefully follow the way of the Lord and labor in harmony with the decisions arrived at by the general body of believers in united council."

—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles,* p. 199

connectingtolife

Sabbath

Read Romans 4:16.

Read and respond to the voting exercise in the *What Do You Think?* section of this week's lesson. This week's lesson deals with several themes: prejudice, gospel mission, legalism, church politics, and more. The closer you get to the lives of new disciples and to church life and mission, the more you see the problems. Perhaps one of the greatest problems they had to overcome was their prejudices about traditions. How have you found that still to be true today? But how do we break out of our rut? What changes do you think must be made in our hearts and minds before we can see others differently?

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Sunday

Read Psalm 22:27, 28.

Read the *Into the Story* portion and use the questions in the Out of the Story section to guide your study. The story is a look at the real church—one with obstacles and problems that need to be worked out as people are doing the mission of Christ.

How are the conflict and conversations of the New Testament church similar to the ones you hear in your part of the world? In what way are these problems universal and part of a "human problem"? What can we learn from this council of believers that might help us stay focused on the work we are called to do? What do you sense God is trying to teach you in this story?

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_____

Monday

Read Acts 15:10, 11.

The Key Text to memorize this week emphasizes that the way to salvation is the same for everyone. There is an "us and them" mentality that cannot be avoided when doing the mission of Christ. There are those who believe and those who don't know. How we see "them" should be framed by how God saved "us." Through the lens of God's grace we see the people of the world not as different people with different problems, but as possibilities. How do you react when you hear mission stories or testimonies of people coming to find Christ?

_____

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Tuesday

Read Genesis 12:3.

Read the quote in the *Flashlight* section and see if you can find anyone who disagrees with it in principle. But in practice, how do you define and distinguish "traditions" from helpful practices of the Christian life? Everyone has their preferences and prejudices, but how do we look past those and give our effort to the task of reaching the lost? What are some of your prejudices and preferences that you should be aware of?

_____

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Whom do you know who can put their preferences behind them for the greater cause of bringing people to Christ? How do they do it?

Wednesday

The Punch Lines in this week's lesson focus on the relationship between believers and unbelievers—or those who haven't yet heard the gospel. If you had to address a room full of missionaries that were going out to share the message of Christ to your part of the world. Check the verse in the list of five that you think would be the most helpful or important to share with them? Star the verse that speaks to you personally today as you think about your friends who don't know Christ as their personal Savior. Perhaps you could pray today for an opening, a window to share your personal experience of God's saving grace to someone else.

Thursday

Read Romans 9:8.

This week's lesson captures the drama that comes as a result of many people working for a meaningful cause. There wouldn't be problems if the task didn't mean so much to the people involved. So as you look at the problems your church faces today—the big problems like the issues the New Testament church faced—what can you do to be helpful? One of the things that helped Paul and Barnabas and James and Peter sort this problem out was the reminder to stay focused on the mission.

If you were to say what the mission of your church is in 50 words or less, what would you say? Write your mission statement out based on what you believe and know to be true, and keep it before you in your Bible or where you can see it every day as a reminder.

Friday

Read Galatians 3:29.

Read this story and imagine the faces of James, the brother of Jesus, Peter, and the new guys Paul and Barnabas. Imagine a whole boardroom of believers, deacons, and elders. Many of them have full-time jobs and shops, or might be unemployed now that they have become Christians. There are no "Bibles," only people writing letters and connecting stories of old to the amazing things that are currently happening. Was church then and church today really all that different? In what ways? In what ways will it always be the same?

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_____

this week's reading*

The Acts of the Apostles (or *Unlikely Leaders*), chapters 19-21.

* Unlikely Leaders is a special adaptation of *The Acts of the Apostles* created for you by the Ellen G. White Estate and Pacific Press. Get more information about it at http://www.cornerstoneconnections.net/article/191/about-us/conflict-of-the-ages-companion-books#.URlhF1rBO9s. By following the weekly reading plan, you will read at least one book of the Conflict of the Ages Series each year.