

Empowered to Discern

Read Scripture Passage Acts 15: 1-22

Introduction

Over the past several weeks, one question has quietly been following us through the book of Acts. **Is God still speaking?**

Week after week, we have seen that the answer is yes. The Holy Spirit is still leading. Still calling. Still sending. Still opening doors that no one expected. Last week, as we looked at Acts 13, we asked, "God is still speaking, but are we listening?" This week, Acts 15 presses that question even deeper: **God is still speaking, but are we still hearing what He is saying?**

Because this is part ten of a longer journey through Acts, today's passage is not a detour from the series but a turning point within it. The same Spirit who empowered witness in the streets, courage under pressure, and mission beyond familiar boundaries now empowers the Church to listen together when the path ahead is not obvious.

But if you've ever tried to follow God, you know that question naturally leads to another one. **How do we know we're hearing Him rightly?**

Because if we're honest, every thought that crosses our mind isn't necessarily the Holy Spirit. Every strong opinion isn't the voice of God. Sometimes sincere, faithful Christians come to different conclusions while genuinely trying to follow Jesus. That's exactly where Acts 15 begins.

The early church has just experienced incredible success. The gospel has spread beyond Jerusalem. Gentiles are coming to faith. Churches are being planted. Lives are being transformed. If there was ever a moment when the church could have sat back and celebrated, this was it. Instead, they find themselves in one of the greatest crises they have ever faced.

Some believers insist that Gentiles must first become Jews before they can become Christians. Others are convinced God is doing something entirely new. The stakes couldn't have been higher. This wasn't a minor disagreement about worship styles or church programs. This was a question that would shape the future of the gospel itself.

And what I find remarkable is this: the church doesn't simply ask, "Who's right?" They ask, "What is the Holy Spirit saying to us?" That's discernment. Throughout Acts we've seen the Spirit empowering people to preach, to heal, to serve, and to endure persecution. Today we discover something else the Holy Spirit empowers us to do.

He empowers us to discern His voice. Not only as individuals... but **together** as His Church. With these thoughts in mind, now let us turn our hearts to God in prayer.

...PRAY...

Movement One – Discernment Requires Humility

One of the things that strikes me most about Acts 15 isn't actually the decision the church reaches. It's the way they reach it. Luke could have simply told us the outcome and moved on, but instead he slows the story down. He wants us to see the process because the process is just as important as the conclusion. Before the church ever arrives at an answer, *it first learns how to seek the answer together.*

Think about the people gathered in that room. Every one of them carries authority in his own right. Peter is there, the one who preached on the day of Pentecost. Paul and Barnabas are there after seeing God do extraordinary things among the Gentiles. James, the brother of Jesus and a respected leader of the Jerusalem church, is there as well. If anyone had enough spiritual credibility to stand up and say, "Here is the answer; discussion over," it would have been one of these men. But that is not what happens.

Instead, they listen to one another. Peter shares what he has witnessed God doing. Paul and Barnabas testify about the lives that have been transformed through their ministry. James turns to the Scriptures to ask how what they are experiencing fits within what God has already revealed. There is conversation. There is prayer. There is careful reflection. *They aren't simply defending positions; they are trying to discern the voice of the Holy Spirit together.*

I think that's an important distinction *because discernment is different from debate. In a debate, the goal is to convince everyone else that I'm right. In discernment, the goal is for all of us to discover what God is saying.* Those are very different pursuits. One begins with **confidence in my own conclusions**. The other begins with the **humility to admit that I may still have something to learn**.

That kind of humility doesn't come naturally to us. We all have opinions. We all have experiences that have shaped us. We all have convictions that we hold deeply, and many of those convictions should be held deeply. Humility doesn't require us to abandon our convictions every time someone disagrees with us. It does, however, require us to continually hold those convictions before the Lord and ask whether we are seeing the whole picture. **Mature disciples are people who remain teachable because they know that God is always deeper than their current understanding.**

I think this is true not only for us as a church, but for each of us personally. Most of the time when we're trying to discern God's will, we ask, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" That's an important question. But sometimes the better question is, "Lord, what are You trying to teach me before You show me what to do?" *Very often God is more interested in shaping the person making the decision than He is in simply revealing the decision itself.* Discernment isn't just about receiving guidance; *it's about becoming the kind of people who recognize the Shepherd's voice because we've spent time listening to Him.*

That is why *humility is the foundation of discernment*. Pride assumes it already knows the answer and simply asks God to approve it. Humility approaches the Lord differently. It prays, "Father, if I've misunderstood, correct me. If my heart has become clouded by fear, pride, or selfish ambition, reveal it to me. And if You are leading in a direction I wasn't expecting, give me the courage to follow." Those are not easy prayers to pray, but they are the prayers of people who genuinely want God's will more than their own.

Before the Jerusalem Council ever reaches a decision, they first posture themselves to listen. That is where discernment always begins. It begins with hearts that are humble enough to believe that God is still speaking, and ears that are willing to hear what He is saying—even if what He says challenges what we thought we already knew.

As St. John's considers its' challenges and the opportunities before us, God will challenge us in the same way. Each of must come to the place where we realize that while we all have our unique perspectives on issues, and our experiences may have shaped us to assume certain "logical conclusions", the first step is remember that "God opposes the proud, but gives grace and favor to the humble." (James 5:6,) and that when we humble ourselves before God, he will lift us up in honor.(1 Peter 5:6 and James 4:10)

Movement Two – Unity Is More Important Than Winning

One of the things I find fascinating about Acts 15 is that this entire controversy was born out of success. Think about that for a moment.

The church wasn't arguing because the mission had failed. They weren't debating because nobody was coming to faith. Quite the opposite. The problem was that the gospel was spreading faster than anyone expected. Gentiles were coming to Christ in such large numbers that the church suddenly found itself asking questions it had never had to answer before.

In other words, the very thing they had been praying for had happened—and with it came an entirely new set of challenges.

I think that's worth remembering because we often assume that if we're in God's will, life will become simpler. The book of Acts tells a different story. Sometimes the greatest challenges don't come because we're losing. They come because God is blessing, doors are opening, and we're suddenly faced with opportunities we've never had before. That isn't just true for churches. It's true for our own lives as well.

When we're walking through hardship, we tend to seek God earnestly because we know we need Him. We pray more. We listen more carefully. We ask others to pray with us because we recognize our dependence upon the Lord. Success, however, presents a different kind of temptation.

When things are going well, it's easy to begin believing we've figured things out. We start trusting our experience. We become confident in our abilities. Without ever saying it out loud, we begin to shift from, "Look what God has done," to, "Look what we've accomplished."

That has always been one of the greatest spiritual dangers facing God's people.

Throughout Scripture, God repeatedly warned Israel not to forget Him when they entered the Promised Land. The temptation wouldn't come when they were wandering through the wilderness. The temptation would come when they lived in comfortable homes, harvested abundant crops, and enjoyed peace on every side. Moses told them, in effect, "When you prosper, don't let your heart become proud and say, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.'" Success has a way of quietly convincing us that we deserve the credit for what only God could have accomplished. I wonder if that's part of why Acts 15 is so important.

The apostles understood that they were standing at a crossroads. If they handled this disagreement poorly, the very growth God had given them could become the thing that divided them. One side could have declared victory over the other. Instead, they kept asking a different question: "What will best serve the work God is already doing?" That is a profoundly different way of approaching conflict.

They weren't trying to preserve someone's reputation. They weren't trying to prove who had interpreted the situation more accurately. They weren't even asking whose tradition deserved to prevail.

They were asking how the gospel could continue moving forward without unnecessary obstacles being placed in front of the people God was drawing to Himself. That changed everything. Notice that nobody gets everything they want.

The Jewish believers are asked to accept that Gentiles do not need to become Jews before following Christ. The Gentile believers are asked to willingly limit some of their freedoms out of love for their Jewish brothers and sisters. Both groups give something up. Both groups choose the health of the body over personal preference. To some, especially in the polarized world we live in today, that may sound like compromise. But Acts 15 shows us something deeper: not the weakening of conviction, but the surrender of self-interest so the gospel can move forward.

Unity has never meant that everyone thinks exactly the same way. Unity is not uniformity. Even in Acts 15 there were sincere disagreements. Unity means that our shared commitment to Jesus Christ becomes greater than our determination to have our own way. I think that's one of the great challenges for the Church today.

We live in a culture that celebrates winning arguments. Social media rewards the sharpest comeback. Television rewards whoever speaks the loudest. Politics teaches us to defeat the other side rather than understand them. Before long, it's easy for the Church to begin acting by the same rules.

But the Kingdom of God doesn't operate that way. The question isn't, "Did my side win?" The question is, "Did the gospel advance?" Those are not always the same thing.

Sometimes we can win an argument and lose a relationship. We can defend our position perfectly and yet damage our witness in the process. We can be technically correct while failing to reflect the character of Christ.

The apostles refused to let that happen. They understood that the greatest victory wasn't proving someone wrong. The greatest victory was seeing more men and women come to know Jesus Christ.

As St. John's continues to seek God's direction, I think this becomes an important question for us as well. Every decision we make, every conversation we have, every opportunity we consider should ultimately be measured by something greater than personal preference or institutional survival.

We have to keep asking ourselves: **Will this help us participate more fully in what God is already doing? Will it remove barriers that keep people from encountering Christ? Will it strengthen our witness to this community? Will it help us faithfully steward what God has entrusted to us for the sake of His Kingdom?**

Because at the end of the day, the only victory worth celebrating is not that we got our way. It's that the gospel continues to change lives and that His Kingdom continues to expand.

Movement Three – Discernment Always Serves the Mission

When the Jerusalem Council finally reached its decision, something remarkable happened. Luke doesn't tell us that everyone lived happily ever after. He doesn't tell us that every disagreement disappeared or that every question had been answered. In fact, if you keep reading the book of Acts, you'll discover that the early church continued to wrestle with difficult issues. They were still ordinary people learning how to faithfully follow an extraordinary God.

But one thing became crystal clear. The mission continue. The mission remained central. The decision didn't become the destination. It became the doorway for the gospel to continue moving forward. That's an important distinction.

Sometimes churches can spend so much time making decisions that the decisions themselves become the ministry. Meetings become the mission. Debates become the mission. Preserving traditions becomes the mission. Even change itself can become the mission if we're not careful. We can become so consumed with what we're deciding that we forget why we're making the decision in the first place.

The church in Acts 15 never lost sight of the "why." Everything they discerned was ultimately measured against one question: **Will this help us participate more fully in what God is doing?**

That is a question every church should ask itself. Not, "What do I like?" Not, "What have we always done?" Not even, "What would make us more comfortable?" But, "How does this help us fulfill the mission Jesus has entrusted to us?" Because the mission never changes.

Jesus told His disciples to go and make disciples of all nations. He told them to proclaim repentance and forgiveness in His name. He told them to love God, love their neighbors, care for the poor, welcome the stranger, and be His witnesses to the ends of the earth. Two thousand years later, that mission has not changed.

Methods change. Cultures change. Technology changes. Buildings change. Generations change. The mission does not. That's why discernment is so important.

Discernment isn't simply asking God what He wants us to do next. Discernment is continually asking whether what we're doing is still serving the mission Christ gave His Church. I think this has been the thread running quietly through our entire series in Acts.

All throughout the book the church has been challenged to take the next faithful step. And then the next. It is a book about them listening and responding to what God was doing.

- On the Day of Pentecost, the Spirit came so the Church could bear witness to Christ.
- When Peter healed the lame man, it wasn't simply to perform a miracle. It opened the door for the gospel to be proclaimed.
- When Philip met the Ethiopian official, the Spirit sent him because someone was ready to hear the good news.
- When Saul was transformed on the road to Damascus, it wasn't simply so one man's life could change. God was preparing a missionary to carry the gospel throughout the Roman world.
- When Peter entered Cornelius' home, God wasn't merely settling a theological debate. He was opening the door for the nations to come to Christ.

- Last week, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul." Why? Because there were still cities that had never heard the name of Jesus.

Now, in Acts 15, the church pauses to discern—not because the mission has stopped, but because they don't want anything to hinder it. Do you see the pattern? Every movement of the Holy Spirit has been leading toward the same destination.

Jesus is building His Church.

That's why every time we seek God's direction, whether it's in our personal lives or here at St. John's, we have to keep asking the same question. How does this help us join what Jesus is already doing?

As we look toward the future, there will be decisions to make. Some of them will be easy. Others won't be. There will be opportunities that excite us and challenges that stretch us. There may even be moments when faithful people see things differently. When those moments come, I hope we never ask merely, "What do we want?"

Instead, may we become the kind of church that asks, "Lord, where are You already at work, and how can we faithfully join You there?" Because discernment has never been about protecting our own agenda. It has always been about participating in God's.

And when the Church humbly listens, seeks unity instead of victory, and keeps the mission of Jesus at the center, it can say with confidence the same words the Jerusalem Council wrote nearly two thousand years ago: **"For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..."**

I don't know of a more beautiful aspiration for any church than that. Not that every decision is easy. Not that every person always agrees. But that together we become a people who have learned to recognize the voice of our Shepherd and are willing to follow wherever He leads.

Conclusion & Invitation – "Lord, We Are Listening" (*condense as needed if time constraints*)

As we've walked through the book of Acts this summer, one truth has become impossible to ignore. The Holy Spirit has never stopped leading His people.

Week after week we've watched Him come at Pentecost, give courage to frightened disciples, push the Church beyond its comfort zone, transform enemies into brothers, welcome those who had once been excluded, send missionaries to places no one expected, and now teach the Church how to discern His voice together.

In every chapter, the Spirit has been doing something new. But in every chapter, one thing has remained the same. God was building His Church for the sake of His mission. That hasn't changed.

The same Holy Spirit who guided the Church in Jerusalem is still present with His Church today. The same Shepherd who promised, "My sheep hear my voice," still calls His people. The question has never really been whether God is speaking.

The question is whether we are listening. Not listening only as individuals, asking, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" But listening together as His body, asking, "Lord, what are You saying to us?" I believe that's where we find ourselves as a congregation.

God has been opening doors before us. Some opportunities we never could have imagined even a year ago. There are conversations ahead of us. Decisions ahead of us. Possibilities ahead of us. I don't know exactly what all of those will look like, and neither do you.

But I do know this. If we will continue to humble ourselves before God... If we will care more about the advance of the gospel than about getting our own way... If we will keep the mission of Jesus at the center of every conversation...

...then I have every confidence that the same Holy Spirit who faithfully led the Church in Acts will faithfully lead St. John's as well.

That is really the invitation this morning. Not simply to make one particular decision, and not even to agree with every person sitting around us. The invitation is to become people of discernment.

- People who open the Scriptures before they open their mouths.
- People who pray before they presume.
- People who listen before they speak.
- People who care more about God's Kingdom than about their own preferences.
- People who genuinely desire God's will—even when it isn't the direction we expected.

Imagine what kind of church we would become if every one of us walked into every conversation with one simple prayer already settled in our hearts:

"Lord, if I'm wrong, correct me. If I'm proud, humble me. If I'm fearful, strengthen me. But above everything else, help me hear Your voice and give me the courage to follow." I believe that's a prayer God delights to answer.

So as we continue this journey together, may we become a church that can honestly say—not because we've always agreed, not because we've always found every decision easy, but because we've sincerely sought Christ together— **"It seemed good to the Holy Spirit... and to us."** May that always be the testimony of St. John's.