



## SUN BLOCK

Sunday, October 21, 2007

Rev. Dr. David E. Gilbert  
Scripture Lesson: Acts 15:1-19

**“We ought not to put fresh difficulties  
in the way of those who are turning  
to God from among the Gentiles.”  
-Acts 15:19 (Moffatt Bible)**

You’ve had the experience, haven’t you, of coming in half-way into a conversation or argument between friends or family members, and not knowing what they were talking or disagreeing about? It’s a little unsettling, isn’t it? You find yourself somewhat at a loss. You don’t know quite what the subject or the point of the conversation or disagreement is and you ask, “What’s going on?” And then someone fills you in and you feel better.

Well, the text we are about to read and hear this morning is a bit like that. We find ourselves in the middle of an argument in progress – an argument or debate that is taking place in a church

meeting or church council. Our text is Acts 15:1-19. You will find it on page 102 of the New Testament in the Bibles that have been provided for you.

*15Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’<sup>2</sup> And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders.<sup>3</sup> So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria,*

they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers. <sup>4</sup>When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. <sup>5</sup>But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.'

<sup>6</sup>The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. <sup>7</sup>After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, 'My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. <sup>8</sup>And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; <sup>9</sup>and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. <sup>10</sup>Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? <sup>11</sup>On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.'

<sup>12</sup>The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. <sup>13</sup>After they finished speaking, James replied, 'My brothers, listen to me. <sup>14</sup>Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. <sup>15</sup>This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written:

<sup>16</sup>"After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up, <sup>17</sup>so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called.' Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things <sup>18</sup>known from long ago. <sup>19</sup>Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God...."

Well, this morning I intend to zero in on one particular statement in this text. It's the statement that appears right at the end here. The speaker is not Paul, but James (the leader of the church in Jerusalem, and one of Jesus' own brothers.)

We are at a bit of a loss to figure out just what is going on, but the words that form the heart of my message this morning, -- James's words here in his testimony, -- ring out loud and clear, and on their own without regard to the context, they capture our attention. They say something that might be worth reflecting upon: **"We ought not to put fresh difficulties in the way of those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles"** (Acts 15:19, Moffatt Bible).

Now if that sounds a bit different from what we just read out of our pew Bibles that's intentional. It's from the James Moffatt Bible translation. Mr. Moffatt's text sounds crisp and different, and I think it carries the meaning here best. **"We ought not to put fresh difficulties in the way of those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles."**

That is Mr. Moffatt's translation.  
Mine is simply, "Get out of the way."

The debate in which James is making this case with Paul and Barnabas and Silas and Judas and all that lot of interesting, contentious disciples has to do with how much of the Jewish law non-Jews should have to keep in order to become Christians. The success of the apostolic preaching was such that non-Jews were being drawn to Christ in great numbers but not by means of the Jewish law which Jesus himself, as a Jew, had kept. What did this mean for non-Jews as well as for Jews, Gentiles, and Christians?

Now if you really want to know the answer to that question, and if you really insist on having this all sorted out to your satisfaction and clarity, I suggest that you read the Acts of the Apostles first, and then any number of decent and respectable commentaries. They will tell you all that you ever wanted to know and considerably more than you actually need to know about the subject. A clue, however, which will suffice, is given at the eleventh verse where Peter says in response to all of this, "*But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ just as they will.*"

It is as simple as that. We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus and that they will be saved in the same way. We ought not to get in the way of that process of their salvation or of our own. That is all that you need to remember or to know.

What draws me to preach on this is not the party politics of the early church, --- the debate between Christian Jews and

Christian Gentiles --- as interesting and important as that debate was. What draws me, what strikes me is the fact that in behalf of God we often place obstacles in the way of those who seek God and who are sought by God. Good people for good reasons often do silly and even bad things that make it difficult for others as well as for them themselves to come to God.

James tells us quite clearly that we ought not to put fresh difficulties in the way of those who are turning to God. That word *fresh* is interesting because it says that there are already enough difficulties in this relationship of allowing God into our lives. There are already enough obstacles in the way that God wants to enter into our lives, and we ought not to be erecting new ones. Don't get in the way of those who would turn to God, or of God who would turn to you. Don't get in the way. Don't block the sun.

Now it may seem odd to think of ourselves as obstacles to God's work: "*God has no hands but our hands,*" we used to sing in Sunday school. And we often comment (or hear someone else note) how God, -- in his mysterious providence -- uses us, even us -- poor, humble, and chipped vessels as we are -- to accomplish his work in the world. So as I said, it seems odd at first to think of ourselves as obstacles to God's work. Aren't we on the Lord's side? Aren't we being used of God? Aren't we endeavoring to live our lives to the best of our abilities, --- trying even in our own ways to lead, or at least point, others to God, to Christ? What gives?

Some of you may have attended a Billy Graham Crusade at one time or another. I never went to a Billy Graham Crusade

myself in person, but I watched a fair number of his crusades on television over the years and I went to a crusade very much in the pattern of a Billy Graham Crusade once. Great was the pressure, I recall, to accept that invitation at the end of the service. (And I felt that way even though I'd already by that point committed my life to God.) I thought about the pressure others were facing. The friends you'd gone to the crusade with, --perhaps even your parents --wanted you to go forward, and not to do it was to defy all of the efforts of the church, of these concerned folk. How could you let them down?

“Not to choose is to choose.” That was invariably the theme of the invitation. By not choosing God in that invitation, you were choosing someone else. You were choosing another way, another path.

The pressure was great. A friend of mine remembers feeling forced down that sawdust trail. He later repented of that repentance. And he has held the church at a distance ever since. I suspect there are quite a few like him.

Now maybe your experience was different. Maybe for you that kind of Crusade invitation was just the thing you needed to bring you to God. Certainly many can say that. But I wonder what might have happened to all those people like my friend if we hadn't got in their way and had let them turn to God, not on our timetable, not even on their timetable, but on God's timetable?

It is so difficult, --isn't it? -- no matter what our tradition or our inclination, to realize that the coming of faith is something between God and each soul.

It is hard not to get in the way because it is in our nature to get in the way.

Peter Gomes remembers many years ago an Easter Sunrise service in Plymouth, Massachusetts, when people stood looking out to sea from the hill overlooking Plymouth Rock toward the horizon, where it was still cold and gray and dark. They all stood huddled, the minister before them, singing hymns and singing psalms, and waiting for that resurrection sun to come over the dark horizon. If any of you has ever watched a sunrise you know that the sun doesn't rise gradually, it pops up over the horizon.

So, Gomes says, they sang their hymns and said their prayers and knew that they were waiting for the first glimpse of resurrection sun, when it popped up over that dark, straight line far out to sea; and just at the crucial moment the minister leading the service turned toward the sun and said, “Christ has risen!” and held out his hands – and *blocked the view* of that rising sun until it had risen and everyone had missed it.

He had enjoyed that glorious instant of resurrection sun, but he had got in the way and the rest of them couldn't share the instant because of him. They didn't see the resurrection sun until it was up there shining and round as if it had been there all the time.

Friends, isn't that a bit how it is with us sometimes? We desire to witness for Christ, but we end up getting in the way --- not because we believe so much in ourselves, but because we believe so little in God's ability to know and to do the right thing at the right time. Yes, God wants us to join in his work, but the

way we join in that work is not always helpful to God.

A witness is one who sees, who tells, and who is. We are the evidence of which we speak. It is not simply what we see and what we tell, but what we are, who we are. Don't get in the way, don't block the sun, but be the way by which God enters the world.

Elliot Forbes tells the gentle story of how his father and his uncle as very young boys enjoyed a walk through the woods with their aged grandfather, the great Ralph Waldo Emerson. The younger of Emerson's grandsons, Forbes' own father, a boy of six, apparently bashful and shy and very much in his own way aware of the greatness in which he stood with old Ralph Waldo Emerson, picked a buttercup from along a roadside and approached his grandfather with it, saying, "Look, Grandfather, a buttercup." His older, smarter brother, Cameron, said, "Of course Grandfather knows that that's a buttercup." The intimate, fragile moment between the little boy and the old man was shattered by the rude insistence of what we call truth and reality. Forbes recalls that his father never quite fully forgave his brother, even though they both lived well into their nineties.

God moves toward us in tender and insistent ways, in love divine, all loves excelling. Despite ourselves we, too, move toward God as plants the light and as birds invariably the dawn. I profoundly believe this to be so.

There is much in all of this for those of us who believe to be and to do, but one of the first things that we must learn to

do is not to get in the way of that happening. Don't get in the way. Don't block the sun. Get out of the way. Be the way and allow the light to shine through you and on you and in you.

**"We ought not to put fresh difficulties in the way of those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles..... But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."**

Join me in prayer:

*Lord, sometimes we confess we 'get in the way,' we 'block the sun.' We do silly things, foolish things that can get in the way of others coming to you, and of ourselves coming to you. Help us to trust in your timing with people and with us -- to trust that your grace is at work not according to our timetable, or even according to their timetable, but according to your timetable. Help us to trust that your grace is sufficient for them even as it is for us; in Christ our Lord. Amen.*