

RULES FOR FOLLOWING JESUS

Saul and Barnabas worked hard in Antioch to build the gathering of believers, and before long the city became a center for people who were interested in learning more about Jesus. And they also took trips away from their home base to spread the Good News to other cities and towns. People they talked to were mostly part of Greek culture—whatever their ethnic background, they called themselves Greeks. Some of them were Jewish like Barnabas and Saul but others of them worshipped one or more of the Greek gods: Athena, Hermes, and Zeus. It was at this time that Saul started to go by his Roman name, Paul, so he could better connect with Greek people.

Many listeners were interested by what Paul and Barnabas had to say, and were amazed by the power of the Holy Spirit. Once when Paul healed a man who hadn't been able to walk, the watching crowd was so impressed that they thought Paul and Barnabas must be the gods Hermes and Zeus—and they started bowing down to worship them! The two men were embarrassed, and made sure to let everyone know that, no, they were just human beings—the power that they showed came from God! For sure, there were plenty of people who got really angry hearing about Jesus—Paul must have gotten used to death threats, he heard so many! But everywhere they went some people were drawn to their message, and the number of Greek believers continually grew.

But not everyone who followed Jesus thought that was a good thing. Back in Jerusalem, many of the believers were sure that worshiping God the Jesus way was something only Jewish people could do. They didn't actually mind Greeks or other foreigners joining their community, but they wanted to make sure that the newcomers would follow all the same rules that they did—all those rules that God had given to Moses, and that all the Jewish people had lived by ever since they'd come back from exile in Babylon. And most especially, they wanted to make sure that all the new believers were circumcised. Circumcision is an uncomfortable procedure that all Jewish baby boys have done to mark them as Jewish, and they felt that all the men who came to follow Jesus should have to do that too. It was important enough to them that they sent teachers to Antioch to let everyone know about the rules.

Paul felt differently. To him, the important part of following Jesus wasn't acting just like other Jesus followers, it was paying attention to what Jesus actually taught: loving God, and loving your neighbor as yourself. He didn't want new believers to have to do anything extra! In fact, he didn't believe that a Greek Gentile believer was any different than a Jewish believer from Jerusalem. He explained his thinking in a letter to a church in Galatea: "Everybody is God's child through faith in Jesus," he wrote. "In Jesus, nobody's Jewish or Greek, slave or free, girl or boy. Anyone who makes a big deal about circumcision just cares about what other people think. Circumcision or not doesn't matter; what counts is being part of God's new creation!"

Unwilling to let the teachers from Jerusalem define the rules for following Jesus, Paul and Barnabas took a trip to talk to the apostles there. They had a big meeting, and everyone listened to what the other side had to say. Paul reminded Peter of the time Peter had gone to Cornelius's house and eaten with him, and he talked about all the miracles and wonders God was doing among the new Greek believers. In the end, the meeting agreed with Paul, and made a short list of just three rules they felt were important to preserving people's relationship with God. Those rules were the oldest in the Jewish tradition, from before the time of Moses: they dated all the way back to Abraham. Since Paul, Peter, and everyone else agreed that Jesus connected everyone in the world to the promises God made to Abraham, that seemed perfect. And the rules weren't too demanding, so the number of new believers continued to grow.

flip over for more!

Wondering Questions

I wonder why it was important to so many people that new Jesus followers should obey all the Jewish rules?

I wonder how it feels to you when there's different rules for different people?

I wonder why Paul, and the others who thought like he did, wanted Gentile believers to be free of the Jewish rules?