

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: Strange Game

Dr. Scott Dudley

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Scripture: Acts 15:1-21

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." ² 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. ³ 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. ⁴ 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.

⁵ 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."

⁶ The apostles and elders met to consider this question. ⁷ 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. ⁸ God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to

us. ⁹ He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ 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? ¹¹ No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

¹² 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. ¹³ When they finished, James spoke up. "Brothers," he said, "listen to me. ¹⁴ Simon¹⁴ has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. ¹⁵ The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

¹⁶ "After this I will return
and rebuild David's fallen tent.

Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it,

¹⁷ that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things' ^[b]—

¹⁸ things known from long ago. ^[c]

¹⁹ "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. ²⁰ Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. ²¹ For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."

Transcript:

I want to welcome you. Thank you for joining us online for worship today. The passage of scripture comes from Acts Chapter 15, selected verses. It says this.

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. The apostle and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them. "Brothers, you know that sometime ago, God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. 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?"

The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders that God had done among the Gentiles through them. When they finished, James spoke out. "Brothers," he said, '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, that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name.'"

Holy spirit, ask that you help us understand these words from scripture and apply them to our lives. We pray this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

Well, there's a movie from the eighties whose ending I am going to spoil for you called War Games. It's about a computer that takes over the nuclear launch codes and is about to launch a nuclear war on the Soviet Union. It starts to run through all these different scenarios, the computer starts to run through all these different scenarios about trying to find a winner in nuclear war. Back and forth, back and forth, and then at the end, it finally stops and then it prompts this message that says, "Strange game. The only way to win is not to play."

I think that sort of applicable to where we are as a nation right now, the divisions we face in our families, the divisions in churches and schools and all over the country. It's not just war where division happens. It happens in families. You know, Uncle Fred says something political that you don't like so you fire back at Uncle Fred and then he fires back at you, and then pretty soon people stop talking. Family falls apart. Strange game. The only way to win is not to play. Division happens between husbands and wives, friends, churches, there's division all over the place in our country right now, division about lots of stuff, right?

It's been interesting talking to Pastor Alexis from New Hope Revival. He said to me a couple of times, the folks in New Hope Revival came from countries like Rwanda and Congo, trying to get away from ethnic violence there that culminated in a genocide in Rwanda that killed 800,000 people. They know what happens when division goes unchecked and they are concerned for us and they are praying for us. Strange game. The only way to win is not to play.

But Jesus has a better way. Greater things are possible than division and disintegration. I can't decide if it's appropriate for me to be preaching a sermon two days before the election, or if it's like the stupidest thing I've ever done, but we're going to find out. Because I believe that people of God right now, we have an opportunity to show a different way, a better way to our culture, that greater things are possible than division and disunity and disintegration. By that, I do not mean that we avoid telling hard truths that need to be told. I do not mean conflict avoidance, where we just agree to disagree so that keeps everyone comfortable. No, no, no, no, no. I'm talking about a way to work through disagreement that benefits everybody.

Now the issue in the text that I just read from is that the first Christians were Jews, they were Jewish Christians. But then Gentiles, that is non-Jews ... in fact, the Greek word that's used is [inaudible 00:04:05], from which we get our word ethnic, they started to become Christians too. So yay, right? No, not so yay. Because see, Jews and Gentiles hated each other. If a Jewish person so much has accidentally bumped into a Gentile in a crowd, they'd have to go home and wash because they would be considered unclean. So this is a cultural and an ethnic conflict that they're facing.

The Jewish Christians said, "Well, the Gentiles, they need to obey and follow all of the Jewish cultural customs, including circumcision, even for adult men." Because Gentiles weren't circumcised. Now, remember, there's no anesthetic back then, right? So this is not warm and welcoming and friendly, right? "Come to church and get circumcised." Just bad marketing. Good luck getting a men's ministry going in that church. But deeper than that, it's saying that Jesus' death on the cross isn't enough to forgive us. That you need to do all these cultural things on top of it, right?

For Jewish Christians, this is about their culture. This is about their history. This runs very, very deep. The passage says this brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute with them. Not mild — sharp dispute.

Are there any sharp disputes going on in our culture right now? About everything. Masks, COVID, politics, you name it, right? But notice they don't avoid the topic because it's controversial. They don't. But they also don't yell, cancel, and bully each other. Instead, they find a productive solution that benefits everybody.

For this sermon, I'm just going to focus on one word in the text, and it says this, "The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul." All of Facebook became silent. Twitter, stop Twittering. Right? They listened, but they listened in some particular ways that I think show us how we can work through division a better way, to work through division in our families and our churches in our culture, and even maybe around the Thanksgiving dinner table. First, how did they listen? They listened to understand. Not to argue. They weren't formulating their rebuttal when the other person was talking. They're listening, they're trying to understand each other's point of view.

I recently read a satirical article that said this. "A fascinating study released today from a very reliable source confirmed that all your opinions are correct. There are no flaws in your worldview whatsoever. Based on this information, we recommend that you never examine your beliefs or challenge your own assumptions. The study also researched everything you disagree with and found that it is deeply flawed and inherently unreasonable. The only logical conclusion, therefore, is to hate people who disagree with you and maybe punch them."

Okay, so that's satire. Or is it? That's, it's scary close to what we're seeing right now, right? It's interesting, brain research shows that when we argue, our cerebral cortex where all our higher reasoning happens, that just shuts down and we kind of go into what's called our lizard brain, right? That's the fight or flight instinct. In that mode, we cannot process new information, you can't hear new ideas, because you're thinking like a lizard. Right? The result is nobody gets convinced about anything. That Facebook thing you posted, that meme that you thought was just a smack down, it didn't convince anyone of anything because we're all in our lizard brains right now.

So get curious, get curious. "Why do you believe what you believe, Uncle Fred? Helped me understand." Doesn't mean you're going to agree with Uncle Fred, but you might understand them better.

You know you've done this well when you can say to the other person, "Here's what I'm hearing you say," and they say, "That's right. You've heard me correctly."

This works in marriage, with friends, parents, kids. Anytime you find yourself saying, "I just don't understand how anyone could believe X. I don't understand how anyone could vote for Y," that phrase, "I just don't understand," means that you just don't understand and you need more information.

Now, there are some things like racism that are just evil and understanding them, that's not exactly what we need to do there. And if it's a personally hurtful topic for you, maybe you can't

engage in this kind of conversation to protect yourself. But someone else may be called to engage in that, not to understand racism, but maybe to understand the brokenness that led that person into racism. What's going on in them that got them there?

Also right now, it just needs to be said, there are some folks who are really scared about this election. Now is not the time to argue with them. Now is the time to listen and to understand them and pray for them and point them to Jesus, who is our ultimate hope. Listen to understand. Second, they listened to scripture. During the discussion, the Apostle James says, "The words of the prophet are in agreement with this. As it is written, I will rebuild David's fallen tent, that the rest of humanity may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles." So he cites scripture to say, "No, look, we're supposed to include the Gentiles." His worldview is formed by scripture. For far too many of us, even Christians, our worldview is being informed by Fox News or MSNBC or Ben Shapiro or Trevor Noah, not scripture. Scripture should construct our worldview.

Next, they listened to people's lived experience. It says, "They listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them." They listened to Paul and Barnabas talking about the things that they've experience, what's happening. Our lived experience is God's doing something here. Then finally, they listened. Humbly because the question is not, "What do I think?" The question is, "What does God think?" They held open the possibility, "I could be wrong, or maybe I'm partially right but maybe I'm missing some other things that I need to know."

We are all living in an echo chamber where social media only shows us the things they know we want to see. Our own ideas are constantly reflected back to us, and so we start to think someone on the other side is crazy because we don't know anyone who thinks like they do on the other side because we've unfriended all of them. So our ideas are constantly being reinforced and never challenged.

Whenever I get a critical email or a critical comment, I always pray through it and say, "God, is there something here that you're trying to teach me through this criticism?" Even if it's mean, even if it's disrespectful, sometimes it hurts and it takes me a while to say that prayer, but I always pray through the criticism. "God, are you trying to teach me something in this criticism?" Even if it's badly phrased. Sometimes the answer is no, but often, more often, the answer is yes. And I need to at least adjust how I'm doing something. Sometimes, it leads me to a complete reversal of 180 in my thinking.

One of the things God changed my mind on about five years ago was around issues of racial justice and reconciliation. Some of you are happy about that, some of you are not very happy about that, but I prayed through your emails as well. That change happened by seeing all the places in the Bible where God calls for racial justice and reconciliation. It's not just a few verses, folks. It's like everywhere. It's like everywhere in the Bible. It also happened by listening to the experiences, the lived experience of people of color in this church. Like an Asian woman who just a few weeks ago was at Bartell Drugs here in Bellevue and someone shouted a racial slur at

her. This is a different person than the one I told you about around a month ago, right? This is happening to people in our church more than you think it is, right here, right now.

I also read research. I read numerous studies, things like one from UCLA that found that 64% of white people have physiological reactions that indicate fear and danger when they see a picture of a black person. Liberals and conservatives, just the same, including people who said they had zero bias. Through scripture, research, listening to the lived experience of people of color, I changed my mind from thinking, "You know what? Racism is pretty much gone in our culture," to thinking, "No, we've made great progress. There's been wonderful progress, but we still have a ways to go because unfortunately, it's still here."

Listen to understand, to scripture, to lived experience of other people, and humbly. Now, all this raises some questions, right? Like, "Okay, Pastor. Yeah, yeah, yeah. We should listen, yeah, yeah, sure. Yeah. But come on, pastor, tell me, really, who should listen first and who should listen most? It's my spouse, right? Pastor?" No. No, don't be sitting there going, "I hope my spouse is here," and, "I hope Uncle Fred is watching this sermon." No, no, no, no, no. Scripture says, the Bible says this, "As far as it depends on, you live at peace with everyone." You listen first, you listen most. Which you am I talking to? You. You. Don't be looking to your left and right.

But there's also another pattern that we see in scripture and it's an important one, and it is that the people who listen first and most are the majority or whoever has the most power. Because the majority perspective is never in danger of being unheard, it's the majority. In this story, the Jewish Christians are the majority and they have the decision-making power, right? So they listened first and they listened most. You see this over and over in scripture. Just a few chapters earlier in Chapter Six, another conflict where Greek widows said there were being left out of the distribution of bread and not the Jewish widows. Right? The Jewish Christians who had all the power and were the majority, they didn't say to the Greek widows, "Oh, it's all in your head. There's no injustice going on." No, no, no, no. They listened carefully and then they fixed it. Those of us who are white are called to listen first and most to people of color because we are the majority and we have more power. As a boss, as a boss, I need to be the one to listen first and most to opinions that are different than mine. It doesn't mean there can't be discussion, it doesn't necessarily even mean I'm wrong. Sometimes I'm right. But as a boss, it means I listen first and most because I have the most power. You can ask the staff. Sometimes I do that pretty well and other times not so well at all, because it's hard to do, but I know I am called to do it. Another question that comes up is, "Okay, yeah but aren't there some things so evil, we don't try to listen to understand, we just need to shout about it? I mean, Jesus, after all turned the tables over in the temple and drove out the money changers. Isn't there a time for that?" Biblically speaking, the answer is yes, there is. Yes, there is. But I also know that I'm not Jesus, so before I go all Prophet Jeremiah on someone, I need to make real sure that this isn't just about my need to be right but that it's actually a call from God.

In this story, ultimately, the Jewish Christians who are the majority, they are the ones that make the sacrifice. They decide that they're not going to require circumcision, which is a huge loss for

them. This is a 2,000-year-old tradition that they just said goodbye to. But respect is shown for both sides, because they also tell the Gentiles to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals, for the law of Moses has been preached in every city. What that means is they just got rid of a 2,000-year-old tradition so in respect for those Jewish Christians for whom that was a big loss, they made some concessions by temporarily keeping some of the dietary laws. That's what the law of Moses refers to. Later on, they changed that too, but for now, they keep them. They say to the Gentile Christians, "Look, you don't have to follow Jewish culture, but out of respect for your Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ, avoid these things."

Together, they arrived ... by considering both perspectives, they arrived at a better decision. Because this thing that could have destroyed the church early on actually became the thing that led to its explosive growth, because the minute they made this decision, Gentiles started flooding into the church. We make better decisions together when we listen to the other person's perspective.

One of the things Anthony Ballard on our staff wants to do is bring together Christians who are in law enforcement and African-American Christians to pray together and worship together and then have hard conversations. Difficult, painful, messy conversations that would hopefully lead to understanding each other better, and who knows, maybe even find ideas to reform policing in ways that improve officer safety and guarantee that everyone is being treated equally. Right? Because supporting good cops and seeking justice and equal treatment for everyone, those two things are not mutually exclusive in the kingdom of God.

Practically speaking, just this week, two days from election, what can we do? Well, first, we can pray. Pray for our country, pray for this election. In fact, tomorrow night, I'm going to be joining pastors from around the Seattle area and we're going to pray for our country and for this election. You can see the website there on the slide, feel free to join us. It's at seven o'clock. We'd love to have you join and pray for country.

Second, get curious. Ask questions. We don't have to agree, but we can learn and we can understand each other a little bit better. We're actually going to get a chance to practice this as well. On November 12th, as a church family, Anthony Ballard and I are going to lead an online discussion around the topic of race. Just please, I'd encourage you to be a part of that, especially if you are concerned about how we've been handling the topic of race on either side of the political spectrum. Let's reason together. Let's have a conversation. Let's seek to understand each other. Even just understand the words that we're using, because as I've said before, sometimes we use the same words but we don't mean the same things. The phrase Black Lives Matter means very different things to very different people. To some people, that phrase means a Marxist organization that deeply concerns and worries them. But to other people, people of color in our church, a lot of them, that phrase doesn't mean the organization at all. They're not talking about the organization when they talk about that phrase. To them, it's about a movement and a statement of their inherent worth and their dignity.

Three, model respectful dialogue, especially online. Especially since some of what we are seeing online, we know is disinformation coming from places like Russia and China, and their real aim isn't so much to influence the election one way or another, it's to create chaos and division in the US to weaken us. So before you repost that inflammatory headline that you liked so much, maybe stop and ask yourself the question, "Do I really want to be Putin's puppet right now?" Then finally, focus on Jesus and find our hope and our courage in him. I hope you're going to join us next Sunday, for worship next Sunday, because we're going to do some things that I believe will encourage all of us. No matter what side of the spectrum you're on, join us next Sunday for worship. I think it'll be encouraging for everyone.

Few days ago, I got an email from a white woman in our church about a conversation that she and her husband had with a white neighbor of theirs about race, among other things. This is what she wrote in her email. She said, "We have a neighbor that we're friendly with who's faithful Christian man, recently widowed, and has lived in this neighborhood for decades. Yesterday, he walked over and started a conversation with a very kind thank you for the delicious meal last week. Then he asked us about the Black Lives Matter sign that's in our yard. We could tell he was concerned and nervous, but his tone was genuinely just curious, curious and kind. Well, this led to an hour-long conversation about abortion, riots, black friendships, segregation, loss, oppression, anger, and grief. For topics that could have easily been very heated, as we clearly had very different perspectives, it was all based in love and respect. He said he was concerned about our sign, but he also respected us and was genuinely curious how to reconcile those things.

My conversation with Mr. Ron taught me a lot. First, if I'm wondering where someone is coming from, just ask and talk about it, and for the love of everything that's holy, don't make assumptions. Also, bring it up in a kind and calm way as Mr. Ron did. 'Thanks for the meal. Hey, I noticed your sign.' He didn't attack, wasn't defensive, wasn't trying to make us feel stupid.

Second, as we were talking, he used scripture not as a weapon. He used scripture not as a weapon, but as a genuine guide for us life. I respected that.

Third, I learned that Mr. Ron is frightened. He is a vulnerable man living alone and our sign honestly scares him. I need to be sensitive to what my actions or words communicate to others. There are some who are afraid and that's a real thing.

Fourth, we have so much more in common with those we disagree with than I ever realized, and Mr. Ron led the way at every point in the conversation and finding our common ground.

Fifth, I married a really good man who can engage in difficult conversations masterfully. I knew this already, but a good reminder.

Near the end of our conversation, Mr. Ron said, 'Sometimes I wonder how I'd respond if a protest or a riot came onto our street. What would I do, and you know what I was thinking? Maybe I'd set out a table with a few chairs at the end of my driveway. I'd sit there and talk to

anyone who wanted to have a conversation. I don't know if I'd actually do that, but I'd like to think that's what I would do."

This woman said in her email. "That to me, was a beautiful picture of a leading with love posture that reminds me of who I know Jesus to be."

They listened and understood each other better. Didn't necessarily agree, but they understood each other better. Belle Pres, we can do this. Belle Pres, we can do this. We are doing this. I have heard reports from your all in group. I've experienced it in my all in group that we are able to disagree biblically and respectfully. We can show our culture how it's done. We can show our culture there's a better way. We can show our culture. Greater things are possible than division and anger and rage. Together, we can find Jesus' better way, his better ideas, his better decisions.

I don't know what Tuesday's going to bring. I know there's a lot of fear and anger and important things are at stake, but one of the things that is not at stake is the future of God's kingdom. That is assured. Jesus is Lord no matter what, and he calls us to bring justice and healing and reconciliation. That's what we as a church are going to do no matter who wins or who loses.

I have been in the room in Rwanda when victims of the genocide forgive the people who killed their family, and through telling hard truths and painful conversations that were received with repentance and humility, have even managed to call each other brother and sister in Christ. I've been in the room when it happens. I've seen it now in Rwanda, formerly warring tribes together are discovering better ideas, better solutions that is healing their country. Don't tell me it can't be done; I've been in the room when it happens.

So come Tuesday, no matter what happens, I will thwart the devil's plans. I will give him a nervous breakdown by listening, loving, and learning, because this is the heart of God who came to us in Jesus to reconcile what has been put asunder, to heal the nations, to tear down every dividing wall of hostility, so that in the name of Jesus that is above every name, above every governor, above every senator, above every president, we will be reconciled. We shall be as one and we shall overcome.

When we come to communion, we see this so clearly. The word communion also has the word, root word for community, unity, commune together. It's at this table that all of our differences fall away because the one thing we all have in common is that we need the grace of Jesus. We need his death on the cross to forgive us for our sins. I'm not better than you and you're not better than me. My way and your way, they both have problems, so how do we come together and find his better way? The greater things that are possible through him, it starts at this table, where the ground is level, at the foot of the cross.

Jesus, thank you for that. Thank you that you died for my sin, the sin of the whole world. Lord, I confess I have contributed to disunity. I have not always listened to understand, I have not

always led with love. Lord, ask that you forgive my sins, all of our sins. Thank you that you do that. As we come to communion right now, God, in our homes, wherever we are, as we listen, as we pray, as we reflect, meet us, Lord, fill us with your love. Help us see each other the way you see us. We pray this in your name, Jesus, amen.

On the night Jesus was betrayed and arrested, after giving thanks, he took the bread and he broke it and he said, "This bread is my body given for you." Eat in remembrance of him. Then after supper, Jesus took the cup and he said, "This is the new and everlasting covenant poured out in my blood for the forgiveness of sin. All of you, drink from this." Every time we eat this bread and we drink this cup, we are reminding ourselves of Jesus' death and resurrection in our desperate for it until he comes again. The blood of Christ shed for you, drink in remembrance of him.

Jesus, thank you so much for your great gift, for your healing, for your forgiveness, for the reconciliation that is possible in you. Lord, as we go from here, Lord, we ask that Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday with the election and everything, Lord, that we be people who, who live like you, who lead like you, who show your love, your courage, your hope, your justice, and your healing reconciliation. We pray this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions: Please Read Romans 8:1-6

Opening Question:

1. Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions – Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

2. What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage and sermon?
3. What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions – Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

4. Which of the following is easiest for you to do in a conflict situation, and which is the hardest: Listen to understand: Listen to scripture; Listen to other's lived experience; Listen humbly. Which do you need to focus on in the weeks ahead?

Closing Question and Application:

5. Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

