

By Grace Alone - Acts 15:1-41

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, we're doing things a little bit out of order this morning. We're going to celebrate communion as a church after we hear from the Word.
- So if you would turn with me to Acts 15, we are going to be looking at the very first church council, the Jerusalem Council this morning.
- It's an important chapter in our narrative through Acts. We're going to be looking at verses 1 through 35, really 1 through 21. I'm going to give you homework to read the last section on your own as it's really a retelling of what we will study here this morning together.
- So with that, let me pray, ask God's blessing on our time, and then we'll dive into our study. So join me here.
- The other is good to be here this morning, to be with brothers and sisters, those that know you, that love you.
- [1 : 0 8] Lord, thank you for the gift of a body of believers to do life with, to encourage, to be encouraged by.
- Pray that we would be people that point one another towards you. We'd be people that celebrate the gospel, would savor your grace. Lord, we believe that we will see you someday.
- Lord, I pray that the hope of that reunion with you would purify us, for that is the real. Lord, we give you this time.
- We ask that you would speak to us through the power of your word, your spirit, and Lord, we would receive what you would have for us.
- And we would be different as a result. We love you, Jesus. It's in your name we pray. And all guys, people said, amen.
- [2 : 0 3] So we are in Acts 15 this morning, and at this point in our narrative, the gospel has moved beyond Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and we see that God is using really the most unlikely trophy of grace to do His work.
- It's outstanding. It's incredible. But I want us to just be careful not to put the apostle Paul in a different category than the rest of us.
- For we are all here this morning, if in Christ as trophies of His grace. If you're here this morning and you ran with a crowd that pointed you towards evil, and yet you trusted in Christ as your personal savior, then you're an unlikely trophy of grace.
- If you grew up in a home, in a church that had good doctrine, but there was a spirit of apathy at home, then by God's mercy, as you've trusted in Christ, you are an unlikely trophy of grace as well.
- If you were an unbeliever that thought you were too dirty to be forgiven, and yet you threw yourself on the mercy of God, then you're an unlikely trophy of grace.
- [3 : 2 9] And if you grew up in a Christian home, and perhaps you thought you were in by association and yet you still bowed your knee to Jesus, then you of all people are most certainly an unlikely trophy of grace.

And so let's just settle things here. None of us deserve to be here this morning. Amen? None of us are here based upon any work that we have added to the gospel. Amen?

And that is what we are going to rediscover this morning, that indeed grace is everything. And if we are not a people serious about grace, then why in the world would we gather on Sunday morning?

And I would say if the church gets the gospel wrong, it really doesn't matter how many other things it gets right. Because without grace, there's no gospel.

And with no gospel, there's no forgiveness. And with no forgiveness, there's no joy. There's also no fuel to actually follow Jesus in this life.

[4 : 30] And so I cannot overstate the importance of the events of Acts 15. It's about the gospel being the gospel.

And so let's just dive in and actually let's back up a moment here from to Acts 14 and look at verse 27 to sort of catch our bearings on what's occurring.

Luke writes Acts 14, 27, and when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them and how he, God had opened a door, a faith to the Gentiles.

So who is the great initiator of salvation? It's God. God is the great initiator of salvation. John 6:44, it's a father that draws men and women unto himself.

God is the initiator. He opened a door. And so Paul has just completed this first missionary trip to the island of Cyprus, up north to Turkey in the Glacier region.

[5 : 35] And he's brought a report with Barnum is back to the church at Antioch. And it's not just a report, it's an outstanding report.

It's a great report. And the report is this. God is rescuing, yes, even the Gentiles.

And you would think that everyone would be encouraged and most are, but not everyone. Look with me here in Acts 15 verse one says, but some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers.

Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved. So you have the picture in your mind's eye, the church in Antioch, just Paul Barnum has returned.

God has done an incredible work through them and their celebration. People are being rescued. God is working. There's joy in their midst.

[6 : 46] This is a day of celebration. And that's how it should be. I got a chance to meet a young lady last week, attending fourth first time, just came to faith in Christ.

That's the best. God is in the business of rescuing sinners. And that's the celebration that's occurring here in Antioch. And then a group of Jewish Christians show up from Jerusalem says they came down from Judea.

They came down because the altitude of Jerusalem, Judea is about 2800 feet above sea level. So you always come down from Jerusalem, even though they went north up to Antioch. They showed up and they began to accuse Paul and the team that they were being sloppy in their evangelism.

Think of them as like a church committee that says things like, well, you know, we've never done it that way before.

Great, the Gentiles, they came to Jesus. But Paul, do you have him circumcised? You know this sign of the Old Covenant, did you have them circumcised?

[7 : 58] Did you tell them hams off the diet? I mean, did you tell them the important things? And centrally what the issue is here is you have some individuals that are saying, how come Gentiles get salvation without first becoming Jewish?

Free grace, no way. You ever experienced the inequity of grace? A few years back, I recall our son came home from school and when they accomplished something good in school, they get a tiger paw.

It's like a piece of paper shape of a tiger. It's a big deal, I guess, when you're in the second grade, but for him to get a tiger paw was pretty miraculous and he was pretty excited about it.

And we get in the car and the first thing out of his sister's mouth was this, tiger paws are not special.

The inequity of grace. When Jesus understood this was lurking in the hearts of men, he told this parable of the workers in Matthew 20, five groups of workers, they go out.

[9 : 16] First group, second group, third group and the fifth group, they work one hour and yet at the end of the day, they get paid a full wage, full days wage. Group number one who worked all day thinking we're going to get something more, they get paid, they get the same payment.

And what is it that happens in the heart? They murmur, this isn't fair. These Jewish Christians that have come to Antioch are struggling with the inequity of grace thinking we are the people of God.

We have been faithful for centuries. These Gentiles, they ought to have to do a little something more in order to get Jesus.

Well how does Paul respond? Look at verses two to four. Luke writes, and after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, okay, that means things got hot.

And I love that we have this description here because there are times when we need to fight. And for Meek, Paul and humble Barnabas, this was time to fight.

[10 : 38] You're trying to change the gospel. You're trying to say that there's different medicine that man needs to heal that which ails him, we're going to fight.

Says Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were then appointed to go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles, and the elders about this question.

So being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, starting in detail the conversion of the Gentiles and brought great joy to all the brothers.

They're talking about the first mission. It's been fruitful. And on their journey, all these towns are hearing about it and their celebration. Verse four, when they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them.

So what occurs? These Judaizers that show up in Antioch, they want to find out, are these guys really sent from Jerusalem?

[11 : 52] And so the church in Antioch tells Paul and team, go 300 miles, go south to Jerusalem, meet with the apostles in the church and figure out if indeed these Jewish Christians are representing the teaching of Jerusalem, and in particular, James, who appears to be the leader of the church.

Does the enemy know when God is using an individual or God is using a local church? Say yes.

Yes. Of course he does. And his aim is always twofold. First, he wants to sow disunity.

Secondly, he wants to destroy the gospel. And you can put him in either order. Wants to destroy the gospel, wants to hide the gospel, wants to alter the gospel, distract people from talking about the gospel.

And of course that occurs again here now in Jerusalem, what blankets thrown on the welcome, look at verses five and six.

[13 : 04] But some believers who belong to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, it is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.

The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. So these Jewish Christians belonging to the party of the Pharisees, those protectors of the Mosaic law, they are believers.

It's described here that they are Christians. Yet they are legalistic Christians, perhaps on the verge of just, they're struggling with the inequity of grace.

I haven't done it that way before. You ever met a legalistic Christian?

You ever been one? Some of you are recovering because I've spoken with you. Maybe you grew up in a home like this.

[14 : 09] Well the central question here at the Jerusalem Council, this first church council in history, is this the question, what sort of gospel will be offered to the world for the next 2000 plus years?

Is it a gospel of works or is it a gospel of grace? This is the watershed moment for the church. It's a moment repeated in the 16th century with the Protestant Reformation.

What is the gospel? And the subtlety here at Jerusalem is it's a combination of the two. It's grace plus obedience to the law of Moses.

Grace plus something else. That's still a negation of grace. Scripture is clear, we're saved by grace through faith alone.

Trust, not by works. Grace plus works is a gospel where the victim helps rescue themselves.

[15 : 20] It's a gospel that puts me on equal footing with Jesus that I have assisted him in some measure.

There's actually two questions at this council. That's the primary one. How do we protect the gospel of grace? The second one I want us to notice here though is in addition, how do we protect the unity of a very diverse church?

So this council is going to try to solve both of these questions. How do we keep both our message and our church intact?

And a number of voices weigh in. Who do you suppose likes to speak first? Peter. This is last cameo in the book of Acts.

Let's see, Acts 15, 7 to 10. After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said, brothers, you know that in the early days, God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentile should hear the word of the gospel and believe.

[16 : 39] And God who knows the heart bore witness to them by giving them the Holy Spirit just as He did to us. And He made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.

Now therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?

So Peter, first to speak, he's speaking from his own experience that grace is enough to rescue Gentiles.

And he talks about in the early days. Okay. What are the early days mentioned here in verse seven? He is referring to early ministry.

It may have been up to about 10 years since the occasion that occurred where Cornelius and his family came to faith. And on that occasion, Peter received a vision from the Lord of different foods becoming clean when he's there at Simon the Tanner's house.

- [17 : 43] Read about that next 10. And essentially this vision was to tell him, hey, everyone is clean. Everyone is forgiven under the blood of Christ, whether Jew, whether Gentile.
- Peter got word directly from God on this matter. And he wants to explain this to the group.
- And no doubt Peter got a direct word from God. He also got a direct word from Paul. And if you recall, Paul confronted Peter on this very issue.
- It says in Galatians two verse 11, but when Peter came to Antioch, Paul speaking, I opposed him to his face because he stood condemned.
- So no wonder Peter has unctoned to be the first one to share because he got this wrong. Before he was eating with Gentiles, he was enjoying fellowship with Gentiles. He was not expecting them to participate in the ceremonial laws, the dietary laws of the Jews.
- [18 : 53] And then some Judaizers from Jerusalem show up and he's like, oh, I can't eat with them anymore. And Paul confronts him on this issue.
- And so I think Peter has learned his lesson. It's like, I am not going to make the same mistake. And he has great unction in sharing this with those at this council.
- This issue is settled in the mind of Peter. And he says, hey, don't expect the Gentiles to follow the Mosaic law before they're called Christians. And he says, it's a yolk on their neck.
- They can't bear it. You couldn't bear it. Israel, you couldn't bear it. The law was a tutor. It was a coach. Paul says in Galatians 3.24, it was a guardian until Christ came.
- Romans 3.20 says that it was there to reveal sin and convince you you need a Savior. You couldn't keep the law.
- [19 : 57] It was a yolk you couldn't even bear, Jewish believer. So why are you now saying to the Gentile believer, oh, it's grace, but you also got to participate in the Mosaic law.
- And so what's occurred here is this group of Judaizers, they're creating a hurdle to the Gentiles that they have to go over. It's a barrier before they can get to Jesus.
- Does this happen today, church? Just for the unbeliever to jump through before they dine at the table of grace?
- When I was in college, I was invited to a church. And this church communicated that unless you attend this church, you're not saved.
- That's legalism. It's a hurdle to the gospel. I think I mentioned a few weeks back. One of our profiles of who's welcome here becomes a hurdle.
- [21 : 04] For me to come and greet you, you have to be of a particular political stripe. That's legalism.
- Or just the attitude of locals only. We have been here longer. We were here first. So for you really to belong, you need to sort of prove yourself.
- Get in a pew for a decade and then maybe we'll let you greet at the door. And that can be a death to a church. It's legalism.
- And if that's lurking in your heart, you need to reject it, repent of it so that this would be an inviting place for whoever, for whoever.
- There's great power too in Peter's words because he's sharing this and he's also described it says in Galatians 2 8 as the apostle to the Jews and yet he's fighting hard for the Gentiles.
- [22 : 06] Nothing more is required for a Gentile to come to faith. It's simply trust in Jesus. Notice how Peter ends his words in verses 11 and 12 says, but we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus just as they will.

And all the assembly fell silent and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

Verse 11 is subtle. I don't know if you see that, but it's actually a bit inflammatory.

If you were a Jewish believer struggling with this issue because what Peter says is we, Jews will be saved through grace just as they Gentiles will.

We'll be saved just like the Gentiles. Peter inverts the statement here. A Jewish believer would have typically thought and said, well, well, they're saved just as we are.

[23 : 17] But Peter flips it and essentially what he's saying here is, hey, Jewish Christians, take your cues from the Gentile believers.

You suppose that hurts a little bit, stings a little bit. See the Gentiles, they get it. They never had the Mosaic law. They didn't have the law as a tutor as a guide.

All they know in terms of salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus alone. So take your cues from them.

Well after this, Paul and Barnabas, they share a bit more of God's rescue of the Gentiles. God's confirmed this, that it's through faith alone by the signs that God performed through us.

And then we come in this council to the final voice, to the moderator, to James, the half brother of Jesus.

[24 : 16] And as I said before, he appears to be the leader, the lead shepherd, the lead pastor in Jerusalem. We gather this from Acts 12 when Peter is released from prison and he says, hey, tell the apostles and James.

Why mention that? Because James happens to be the lead shepherd there. When the Jewish Christians go to Antioch in Galatians 212, they say, hey, we've been sent by James.

He had the authority in Jerusalem. And so it's interesting that James speaks now because if ever there was an apostle that would side with the legalistic Jewish believers, it would have been James.

This is a man of great virtue. Jewish history records him as James the just. He was a man known for the calluses on his knees from the hours that he spent in prayer.

His epistle. It's the epistle that says, hey, genuine faith is going to manifest in a life changed in works.

[25 : 27] So man, if there's ever one to side with the legalists, it's James the pious. Well let's see what he has to say here beginning in verse 13.

After they finished speaking, James replied, brothers, listen to me. Simeon, Simon, Peter, it's another name, has related how God first visited the Gentiles to take from them a people for his name.

And with the words of the prophets agree. And with this, the words of the prophets agree. Just as it is written, after this I will return and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen.

I will rebuild its ruins and I will restore it. That the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord and all the Gentiles who are called by my name says the Lord who makes these things known from of old.

That's a cool line. Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God.

[26 : 37] James is saying, this is my judgment. You could write the word in conviction. This is my conviction along with Peter, along with Paul, along with Barnabas.

The gospel is a gospel of grace. And James here doesn't base it on experience. What he does is he defends it based upon Scripture, which is critical because any church council that decides anything, if it's not grounded in the Word of God, dismiss it.

And so James says, what does the Bible say? And he quotes from the Old Testament. He quotes from Amos 9, 11 and 12. Kind of a cryptic prophecy here, but he makes the case that Scripture, from Scripture that the gospel was always intended to include both Jew and Gentile.

This was always God's intent. This is not a new idea. Genesis 12, then when Abraham, that he would be a great nation and he would be a great blessing to the nations.

That God would use the Jewish people to be a voice to the nations that Messiah has come, a Savior has come.

[28 : 03] And in Amos, this passage that James quotes, it's an image of a tabernacle rebuilt than nations surrounding it.

And it's actually in reference to the resurrection of Christ. But now Gentiles who are called by my name can participate.

It's always been God's plan. So the decision from Jerusalem is this. The gospel is free.

The gospel is free. It's grace plus nothing. Church, they got it right. They got it right.

Grace alone through faith alone. And if you're here this morning and you've trusted in Christ, you're like, Jay, I get it.

[29 : 04] I'm there. Yes. In fact, that's what I tell my unbelieving coworkers and friends that Jews can forgive you by grace through faith.

It's the message that I share that I speak. And so perhaps the question for us this morning isn't so much about the message that we speak, but more about the message that we believe for ourselves.

Do you wake up in the morning filled with awe that you have been rescued? Now I don't every morning.

You probably don't want to see me in the morning. My family hardly wants to see me in the morning. But there should be a level of gratitude, of joy to be able to wake up and know with certainty that your sins are forgiven.

And perhaps our legalism as we consider this text isn't so much about looking at others, but maybe it's more about looking at ourselves in the privacy of our hearts.

[30 : 29] We see ourselves as unclean still constantly trying to appease God. God is constantly unhappy with us.

That grace works for everyone else, just not for me. And I would never articulate that, but that's what I believe half the time.

And so perhaps the great inequity of grace is directed towards me as I look in the mirror. I just don't think I'm good enough.

You're not. That's the point. Which is why you need a Savior. You need a massive Savior that can forgive you a sins past, present, future.

Do you believe that? Then if you don't preach that to yourself, we're going to take communion in just a few moments and that's what it's about. You have been forgiven.

[31 : 31] Past, present, future. So walk in joy. In the joy, the grace is now the fuel to say God, let me express my gratitude in living for you, walking with you, pursuing after you.

The Jerusalem Council wasn't this anti-nomian like against law, like the moral things that you do don't matter. No, they do, but they're an expression of the fact you've been rescued of much.

You know the enemy, he loves, he whispers the same thing. Every one of us, he's an accuser. You're not forgiven.

You've done this. It's too horrible. And God himself says, you know what? It's finished. It's accomplished. And Jesus knew full well who we would become.

He knew. And yet he died yet in our place. I think about John Newton, the slave trader, how he was able to live with himself after the damage that he had done for years to families, to children, the grotesque things that he did against his fellow man.

[32 : 57] And the only way he was able to live with himself is that he came to faith in Christ. He understood that deeper magic of grace that Jesus could forgive me.

Nobody else would. Nobody else would. And yet Jesus forgave me. That Jesus looked upon me in kindness.

He knew the foul stench of my sin. And yet he forgave me. He forgave me, which is why for John Newton, his anthem, his cry, his words became the song that we sing.

"'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved." How precious did that grace appear? The hour I first believed.

"Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come, to his grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home." Grace will lead me home.

[34 : 01] The gospel works and it's working. Every day I'm a forgiven man. And I don't deserve it. But by God's grace alone.

And church, by God's grace alone, we will see Christ as He is someday. Amen? God is the hope that we have based not even 1% on our efforts.

It's humbling, isn't it? The greatest thing about you, you did not do. Then let's gather on a Sunday and worship.

That's why we're here. Well, the second question at this council. They got the gospel right, but will the church remain intact?

Especially as Jewish Christians, they're wrestling with the inequity of grace. I believe James here, after he gives this decision on the gospel, he's so wise.

[35 : 04] He's filled with the spirit and he makes some additional decisions. And I believe he does so in order to protect the unity of the church. A church that once saw Gentile Christians as second class was now in jeopardy of seeing Jewish Christians in that same way.

And so he gives the Gentile believers three restrictions. These are not for salvation, but they're for unity. And he's essentially saying, hey, don't now slam the door of liberty open so hard that you crush your Jewish Christian brothers in the process.

So let's look at it here versus 20 and 21. But should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols and from sexual immorality and from what has been strangled and from blood, for from ancient generations, Moses has had in every city, those who proclaim him, for he has read every Sabbath in the synagogue.

So we have three or four restrictions here given to the Gentile Christians in order that they would not give unnecessary offense to the Jewish Christians transitioning out of observance of dietary laws.

See Moses still being read in the synagogues. These ceremonial things are still being taught acts as a book of transitions.

[36 : 42] And so James says to the Gentile believers, hey, as you think about your brothers, your Jewish Christian brothers and sisters, stay away from anything food that has to do with idols.

A lot of what was sold in the market was used in that sort of worship, but avoid it. Might make shopping a little more difficult, but just, you know, but do that.

Have charity show deference. Additionally, don't partake in meat that's been strangled or has blood in it, right? And both these items would have made it difficult for Christians that are Jewish to break bread with Christians that are Gentile.

It would have destroyed the fellowship, the unity that was present. These Gentile believers, they have dietary freedoms in Christ.

And yet these Jewish Christians are not yet comfortable with these freedoms. Paul gives the principle here in 1 Corinthians 8, 9 where he says, but take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

[37 : 56] So give up this freedom if you can. And do so not for salvation, but do so for fellowship. Yeah, show charity.

Defer. Don't demand your liberty. The third thing or fourth thing depends on how you want to chart these out.

James says avoid fornication. General term used here, porneia. In this one restriction, it kind of seems out of context with the others.

The others have to do with cultural sensitivities. So what's going on here? And Bible scholars sort of disagree that the take that I have on this is simply that these other two cultural issues are going to destroy breaking bread with one another.

But if you're given to sexual morality, it will destroy all fellowship. And I believe that the James is tacking this one on because these Gentiles in large part, they're coming out of a very different culture than Jewish Christians.

[39 : 06] And many of them are coming out of very sexually loose culture. And I think he's just saying, hey, give attention to this. I think it's also interesting that he tax that on and says, hey, yeah, the ceremonial thing's done.

But God's moral law, it's now written on your hearts. So don't reject that. Well, fourth, what are our takeaways here?

Say first, if you're in Christ, through simple trust, through simple faith, you pray, Jesus, I'm a sinner.

I need forgiveness. I need a great Savior. Would you forgive me? I repent of my sins. If you'd be my Savior, then you are today forgiven.

You're forgiven. What the Scripture says is true, that you're a new creation. And you're continually becoming new.

[40 : 05] You're forgiven past, present, future. That's joy. That's the joy that we talk about.

And if you're struggling today and you continue to be reminded of who you once were, and you've dealt with those sins, you've confessed them to Christ, then what you're hearing is not from the Lord.

That's not the Spirit of God. The Spirit of God is always going to convict you in a very specific manner, not a general sort of, you're just bad. And you may be dealing with accusations that are not from the Lord.

And you take those captive. You take those last captive and preach the gospel to yourself again, again. And that's what Jesus does. Every time He says, take communion, we're preaching the gospel to ourselves.

It's true. It's true. It's true as a historical event that occurred that we are now different people were forgiven. It's so good.

[41 : 06] It's the best. I don't stand condemned. And if you knew my life, I should be. If I knew your life, you should be.

Secondly, if we are forgiven of much church, then we need to be a people that forgive much.

If you have been touched by grace, then be liberal with your kindness to everyone else, not demanding your rights, causing unnecessary harm to others.

Then sometimes we go the extra mile. I love the map that Pastor Scott put up for us. And we saw the end of missionary trip number one where Paul and Barnabas, they could have taken a much shorter route home, but they did not.

They deferred that right, that freedom. They said, you know what? We're going to become uncomfortable. We're going to do something out of the way. We're going to be inconvenienced because we have been forgiven of much.

[42 : 21] And it was a gracious thing that they did to go back the long way to go encourage other believers. Well you can read the rest of this text on your own, verses 22 to 35.

It's the outcome. It's just the decision from this council is let's send this news now out and communicate it to all the churches.

And it's just a restatement of what they decided. The gospel is free. Let the church be filled with gracious people offering the gospel free of charge.

Amen. Father, we thank You for time together. And Lord, we are so...

We are speechless that Your economy is not the economy of the wage, but is the economy of the gift.

[43 : 34] It seems too good to be true. And yet it is so. Lord Jesus, thank You that You would forgive a sinner like me.

And Lord, all of us here, we know there are days that we have deeply grieved Your heart, where we have disappointed You. And Lord, some of that is because we have forgotten who we are.

So would You remind us today? Would You remind us of the beauty of the gospel? That God that You would desire a relationship with the people?

And that You would do everything necessary for that to occur? And that You're a God that didn't just move us from enemies to neutrality. You actually adopted us and now call us Your kids. Lord, we're a family.

Lord, we just worship You and we give You thanks. And it's in Your name we pray. Amen.