

ACTS 15:1-35

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Preacher: Benjie Slaton

- [0 : 0 0] The following sermon is from Grace and Peace Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Grace and Peace is a new church that exists for the glory of God and the good of the northeast suburbs of Hamilton Place, Collegedale, and Ottawa.
- You can find help more by visiting gracepeacechurch.org. The following sermon is from Grace and Peace Church in Chattanooga.
- Remember, it may be long, but it's still the word of the Lord, and God gives it to you because He loves you and He wants you to know Him. If you don't mind, Ansley, could I ask you to get me a bottle of water?
- That would be great. From our snack stash that will be out after worship. I'm going to steal from the stash. Okay, so let's give a little explanation. What's going on here? Well, you can imagine the conversation in Antioch when these Jewish leaders, when the churchy people show up.
- They come in and they gather around with the leaders. They've been there maybe a few days. They've observed everything that's going on from all over. Thank you very much. People are coming to Christ from all over.
- [1 : 3 4] But why in the world aren't you teaching the law of Moses? You know, unless a person is circumcised, they can't be saved, right? Awkward silence, you know?
- And then finally Paul speaks up. Work alone. Not anything else. Not by any human act of obedience.
- Not by any act of devotion. No matter how well-meaning it is. Guys, that even applies to circumcision. I think it would be an awkward disagreement.
- So, they decided that they were at an impasse. They appealed to the apostles in Jerusalem. So they traveled down together. A church council is convened by James. And they report on the amazing things that happened.
- And then finally the question gets asked. How can they be faithful? How can the Gentiles be faithful if they don't follow the Mosaic law and get circumcised?
- [2 : 4 3] And it sounded like they discussed this for a long time. And finally Peter broke the log jam. He stood up and he said, You remember how I went to Cornelius? He was the first Gentile convert.
- He was like, You remember when I did that? The main thing that happened there was that the Spirit of God fell on them just like it fell on us. And what Peter said was, What we know now is that it is the presence of the Spirit of God that make these Gentiles part of the people of God.
- Not anything they did in response. It was the fact that God's Holy Spirit was poured on them that set them apart. That changed their lives. That made them to be the people of God.
- Not any sort of act of obedience or any sort of cultural marker. Like circumcision in the Old Testament. That was the key moment. The grace of God transcended every human culture.

The grace of God that was poured out on Cornelius transcended Jewish and Gentile culture because it stood above every culture. God's grace reveals both the beauty and the brokenness of every culture.

[4 : 00] The apostles couldn't demand that the Gentiles now take on Jewish cultural forms. So they drafted this letter and they sent it up with Paul back to Antioch.

And the letter was clear. From it, they made two things that they needed to abstain from. The first one was they needed to not partake in food that had been sacrificed to idols.

And that meant food that had been, meat that had been strangled or the blood had been shed as part of an idolatrous worship. That was the first thing.

Food with idols. Second thing was they needed to abstain from sexual immorality. Okay. That the Greek Christians were free from any sort of cultural demands.

They were free. They didn't have to become Jewish in order to become Christians. They needed simply not only to be free, they needed to realize that in their freedom, they needed to simply respect Jewish culture.

[5 : 03] They needed to be aware of how their own cultural decisions affected other people. So, a little background. For Jews, meat that had been sacrificed to idols was a big deal.

It was part of their dietary laws. And for Greeks, it wasn't a big deal. So, Greeks, in the Greek culture, you would take your goat or whatever animal you had around the house. You'd go to the temple of Zeus.

They would sacrifice it. They would do it oftentimes in this kind of brutal way where they would strangle it and then bleed the blood out. And then, for Greek folks, they didn't have a problem then taking that home and eating it or taking it to the market and selling it.

And so, for Greek folks, it didn't really matter where the meat came from. They were not worried about their organic sticker. They wanted to just... They just took whatever meat was in the market. They didn't think twice about it.

But for Jews, this was a big deal because it violated both the dietary laws as well as their sense of idolatry. They didn't want something that had been stained by idol worship.

[6 : 06] And so, what the apostles were doing was saying, Look, you are free. You don't have to follow the same things as the Jews, but you need to respect them. So, you know, don't eat...

Eat organic. Eat clean. Don't eat the stuff that has been sacrificed to idols. So, that's the first thing. The second thing is that the Jewish Christians didn't have to reject their own heritage.

Do you see how big a deal this is? Because that was the fear, is that the Jewish Christians thought, If we allow these Gentile Christians to not be Jewish, what that means is we won't be Jewish anymore.

We're losing something of our heritage. And the apostles are saying, No, no, no, no, no. As long as you allow the Greeks to be Greek, you can remain being Jewish.

You can practice Jewish customs. See, they were allowing for these Greeks and Jews to see the world differently and yet to be united by their faith in Christ.

[7 : 10] They were united in this beautiful diversity. So, that's the first thing. The apostles were saying, Greeks are free from cultural demands, but you don't have to give up your cultural heritage.

And then the third thing is that despite that mutual submission, the apostles did require the Greeks to abstain from sexual immorality.

Why? Why is sexual immorality different? I mean, there's ten commandments, right? Why did they just pick that one? Well, because sexual immorality was part of the Greek, it was one of the particular sins of the Greek culture.

Like our own American culture, the Greek culture was awash in sexual immorality. It was a very sexually permissive culture. It was also a culture that had a ton of sexual abuse.

Sexual abuse was rampant. Sex was something that was not just done for someone's own personal benefit, but it was used to enact power. And so, for the apostles, what they wanted to say was, look, you are free Greeks.

[8 : 25] You are free from any sort of cultural demands that you have to fulfill, but you are not to just look exactly like your culture.

You are to be distinct. Let me say it this way. You can be Greek, but you've got to be Greek Christians. You see the fine line that they're drawing here.

And here's the point. The point is, there is not one Christian culture out there. See, when people from every culture begin to come to Christ, they will reflect the beautiful aspects of their own culture without being enslaved to the particular cultural sins and particular cultural preferences that they bring to the table.

So Christians in Peru are going to look different and live different and follow Jesus in unique ways than Christians in Ukraine. And they're going to be different than Christians in Madagascar.

All with different... They're all following God's moral law, all following the truth of God's Word, and yet doing it with different sets of values and customs and ways of life.

[9 : 42] Each culture is free from cultural demands, but they're also free to have their own heritage, to stay in their own heritage, and they're free to be different from the culture.

Okay, that's what is happening here. That's what this letter is all about. And you saw that the Christians in Antioch loved this. Okay, it all sounds simple enough, but it really isn't.

See, here's a little bit of background. Paul was ready for this moment. You don't have it here in this text, but actually Peter had gone and visited the church in Antioch before the churchy people showed up.

He'd been there for a few weeks, maybe a few months. You can read about this in Galatians 2. He'd been there for a few weeks or maybe a few months, and while Peter was there by himself, everything was fine until the Jewish Christians arrived from Jerusalem.

And when they arrived, they started asking questions. And you know what Peter did? He backed away from the Gentile and Greek Christians. He stopped eating with them.

[10 : 57] He stopped spending time with them because you remember that as a part of Jewish culture, if someone was not circumcised, that meant that they were unclean.

If they were not Jewish, they were unclean. And if they were unclean, you couldn't eat with them. You couldn't... There were lots of social interactions you couldn't have with them. And so these Greek Christians, even though they were united by Christ, they are unclean.

And Peter pulled back. And because Peter pulled back, all of the other Jewish Christians pulled back, including Barnabas. Now, you can imagine how Paul handled this situation.

He was hot. He was mad. And he confronted Peter. He called Peter a hypocrite. He said that what Peter was doing was...

He asked Peter this question. He said, Peter, look, you've already torn down the demand for people to become Jewish by preaching Jesus alone for salvation.

[12 : 03] You've already torn that down. So now, if you begin to rebuild those cultural demands, how are you rebuilding it? You're rebuilding it by pulling away from the centrality of Christ.

You're tearing down Jesus in order to build up your cultural demands. What Paul was saying to Peter was, by demanding Jewishness, you are rejecting Jesus.

You're adding to the cross of Jesus. Essentially, Paul was asking the exact same question that I asked earlier from Jesus and John Wayne.

Peter, are we united by the things that we believe about Jesus? Or are we about creating a particular Christian culture? Which is it?

Because it can't be both. You know, we've always said that at Grace and Peace, we want to be a place where people who are coming from all kinds of cultures will find here a place that they can discover God's grace and His peace for them.

[13 : 09] You know, with Volkswagen, we want people who are from all over the world. We want people who are from the various cultures who live here. There are tons of different ways that people segment themselves in these neighborhoods.

And so the question is, will we confuse the gospel of Jesus with the particular cultural markers that are familiar to us?

If we do, we're going to reject Jesus. And we do this in a lot of different ways. Let me just roll out a couple of these and, you know, you might be offended by it, but be aware, we're all equal opportunity offenders.

We're all offended in this. You know, we could preach a southern culture gospel, couldn't we? A southern culture gospel where that niceness, that commitment to family, that commitment to tradition and to Chick-fil-A are the markers of what it means to be a Christian, right?

And in that southern culture gospel, it promises something good and beautiful. It promises to give you a secure place in the world.

[14 : 20] Isn't that what our southern culture does? It promises to tell you who you came from, where you're at home, what you can expect out of the world.

You have a place where you belong. That's good. But it's not the gospel. We could do this with an American culture gospel, right?

That American greatness is next to godliness. That winning in politics will answer all of our problems. That spiritual maturity happens to look a whole lot like succeeding at the American dream.

You know, this gospel promises that you can secure a better future for your children through the strength and the prospering of America.

Okay, how about this? We could also, on the opposite side of the political aisle, we could preach a progressive culture gospel, right? That the injustices currently filling up your social media feeds are obviously God's highest priorities for the world as well.

[15 : 30] It's the gospel that preaches that Jesus is just as angry with your enemies as you are with them. It promises something good and true as well.

It promises that we could develop by just the right policies and just the right politicians, we can develop a place where people won't get hurt or abused or forgotten anymore.

Or, we could even preach a white Christian culture. Now, I want to be clear here. Every church, every church reflects the culture of the people who come to the church, right?

We're a predominantly Anglo church. We are going to reflect some of that. And so, every church is reflecting the culture of its people, including grace and peace.

Grace and peace. We have a culture that we're developing. It's not, we're not culture neutral. Everybody else has their cultures, but we don't. No, we have a culture. Just ask anybody who is not kind of, you know, white, middle class, educated, coming from America, and they'll tell you that we have a particular culture.

[16 : 45] And that's not bad. It's not bad to have a culture, but it is a problem if we're not aware of it. Because if we're not aware of it, we can subtly preach that that culture is synonymous with spiritual maturity.

Think about how we do this in subtle ways. You know, when we got to 10 o'clock this morning and we hadn't started, everybody in the room, I saw like 10 people in the room start looking at the clock or looking at the time.

Because, you know, we like to honor time and order, right, and structure, and that's good. But if you are a Latino, you know, you're not interested generally in the time.

Even if you are on time, you're definitely not going to finish on time. Or think about, think about other ways that we do this. That restrained emotions, you know, kind of uprightness, respectability, is something that is often valued.

But in the African American church, restrained emotions actually communicates disingenuousness. It means you don't care.

[18 : 00] We could talk about this in a ton of different ways. We can talk about the way that we dress, what that communicates culturally. We can talk about our way of speaking, our way of disciplining children, our way of spending money, even a way of talking about theology.

And here's the problem, is that very often, we equate fitting in culturally to spiritual maturity. And it's not.

It's not. You may not say this explicitly, but far too often, whatever kind of culture gospel is most familiar and comfortable to you, you might think this thought, you probably wouldn't say it out loud, but you can't be a mature Christian if you do that.

You see, there is a persistent temptation for the church to preach a culture instead of preaching the gospel of Jesus. And we're great at baptizing it.

We put, we slap, you know, we slap Bible verses on our cultural things. We put a lot of Jesus talk around it, but it isn't Jesus.

[19 : 13] The gospel of Jesus proclaims that God Himself has broken into this sinful world through His Son Jesus. A world that is so sinful and broken that there is no person, there is no church, there is no culture that can possibly reflect Jesus perfectly.

We are so broken that at our best, we still need the grace of God, His alien righteousness to make us right before Him.

We can't reflect God on our own. Only the rescue of God through the perfect life and the sacrificial death and the victorious resurrection of Jesus can do that.

You see, when we preach the gospel of Jesus, what we see is that you are free from cultural demands. You're free of those cultural demands.

But you don't lose your heritage. You still retain those beautiful parts of your heritage, but you're called to not be enslaved to the sins of that heritage.

[20 : 28] You see, if your faith leads you into thinking, you can't be a Christian if, and it's anything but Jesus, then you're wrong.

We saw this explicitly, right, during the election. I mean, I read a number of Christians, faithful Christians, who said, you can't be a Christian and vote for a pro-life or a pro-choice candidate.

You can't do it. It's incompatible. Now, we can talk about the politics of abortion another time, but do you see how that very statement, well-intended to defend, to defend an anti-abortion stance, but do you see how that statement has added something to the gospel?

And every time we take these well-intentioned cultural ideas, we take away from the centrality of Jesus. And do you know what it is?

It's not only false, but it's idolatrous. It's hypocrisy. It is a betrayal of the gospel of Jesus Christ Himself.

[21 : 40] And the moment that you and I have thoughts that we judge other Christians according to our own cultural norms, the moment we say and judge people with our words, and the moment that we might just type out on social media these kinds of ideas, we have betrayed Jesus.

And some of you might need to repent of that. Of being more comfortable with promoting your cultural forms than of Jesus.

And we need to come back. We need to come back to the only one who can rescue this wicked and wayward world. See, here's the thing. Don't you see that the southern culture can't provide you with the secure place in the world?

It can't do it. It longs for something good, but the only way that we can provide a secure place for ourselves in the world is to find ourselves as God's children, His beloved children, who because of His fatherly care are secured in our place in the world.

America cannot promise you a legacy for your children that your children's lives will work out. Only the covenant promises of God through the history of the world being worked out, that's the only promise that we can say our children have hope.

[23 : 11] The King of King Jesus can do that in His kingdom. The familiarity and the comfort and the lack of being pushed that we long for in our kind of white evangelical spaces cannot make us more like Jesus.

It is only by living in the fullness of God's diverse and beautiful kingdom under His reign, submitting ourselves to other people who are different from us that we can actually find the resources to begin to grow, to begin to look more like Jesus because we find the fullness of Christ there.

The fullness of His gospel. Now, look, don't get me wrong, all of these cultural practices are worth pursuing. They're good. That's why our cultures love them.

That's why we proclaim them. It's because they're good and we should desire them. Everybody wants security. Everybody wants familiarity. Everybody wants clarity and goodness. But we have to be committed to the idea that they can only come through the rule and the reign and the gospel of Jesus.

That's it. And every effort is nothing to Jesus and His gospel. We can add nothing to Him. We can give Him nothing. We can receive everything.

[24 : 42] And when you do, you'll be totally free. Totally and completely free.

Free from the expectations that you can't live up to. Free from the cultures that can't give you what they promised Jesus has promised. That's what's at stake here in this passage.

And that's what we have to get in our heads. Jesus plus anything equals nothing. Jesus plus nothing gives us everything.

Amen. May that be true of us at Grace and Peace. Let me pray. Father, thank You for giving us Christ who has given us everything. Would You please, would You please help us to see it and to trust it?

Give us the courage to not find our security in these cultural forms no matter what they are. They're good. We love them. But they can't be ultimate for us.

[25 : 48] Help us to turn away and to turn to Christ. We ask it in His name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.