

The Gospel of Grace

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Date: 03 September 2023

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[0:00] Good morning. Please keep your Bibles open to Acts 15. As Andrew said, we are starting a new sermon series today. We're going to be looking at the book of Acts, and we're starting with chapter 15. But perhaps a brief overview of the events leading up to chapter 15 will be helpful, because we looked at it, we started looking at the book of Acts two years ago, so we might need to refresh our memory. So Acts starts with the resurrection of Jesus and his ascension to heaven. But before he ascended to heaven, he told his disciples that they would go and be his witnesses in Jerusalem, and then to Judea, and then Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. And so the rest of the book of Acts really tells how the gospel spreads from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. And in the early chapters of the book, the

Holy Spirit came at Pentecost and filled the disciples of Jesus and empowered them for the gospel. And then through the power of the Holy Spirit, the disciples proclaimed the gospel, again from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria. And by the end of the book, the gospel reached Rome, the center of the Roman Empire. But the further they went from Jerusalem, the more Gentiles heard the gospel and the Gentiles believed. Gentiles are non-Jews. But as a lot of Gentiles believed the gospel of Jesus, a question appeared. What does it mean for the Gentiles to be included into the people of God? Because throughout the Old Testament, the people of God had always been Jewish. So does that mean that the Gentiles are grafted into God's covenant people of Israel? And therefore, they had to become Jews? And so chapter 15, our passage, is some sort of turning point. It provides an answer to the question that will impact the development of Christianity in the next 2,000 years.

And so if you read in the passage in verse 1, we see the problem that arises. 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. Today it would be easy for us to say preposterous to this claim, but imagine living as a first-generation Jewish Christian. In its earliest days, Christianity was seen as a Jewish sect because, well, Jesus was a Jew, and he was the Jewish Messiah, and he fulfilled the Jewish scriptures, the Old Testament. And so if in the Old Testament to worship Yahweh meant that they had to become a Jew, and Jesus was Yahweh's Messiah, then surely to follow him would mean being circumcised.

And according to verse 5, not only circumcised, but also to follow the whole law of Moses. And so some people in verse 1 are saying that, well, if you're not circumcised, then you don't really follow Jesus.

Because he was circumcised. And so, because you don't really follow Jesus, then you cannot be saved. And so in addition to faith in Jesus, for these people, salvation also required obedience to the law of Moses in the Old Testament.

[4:12] Perhaps it's difficult for us to understand such thinking today. But actually, we might have the same tendency.

Sometimes, maybe there are some of us who think that those who are not Reformed or Evangelical or Conservative or Anglican cannot be real Christians.

Or those who worship in a certain way or those who don't practice certain things that we practice cannot be proper Christians.

It's very easy to fall into the temptation to tie Jesus to a particular group or to tie him to particular practices. That we often end up believing, even without saying, that unless you believe in Jesus and you do such and such, or be a part of such and such group, then you're not really a Christian.

Now, don't get me wrong. I believe that some doctrines and some practices are biblical and some others are not. But those things should arise as the fruit of our faith in Jesus, not as the root, not as a requirement for salvation.

[5:38] And so the formula should be, we believe in Jesus, so we are saved, and therefore we do such and such. Not, we believe in Jesus, and we do such and such, and therefore we're saved.

Hopefully now you can see why the issue in this passage was so divisive. The fact that in my illustration I had to tread a bit carefully and give you caveats, shows how sensitive this kind of things can become.

And so, we should not be surprised that the issue of grace was also divisive for the church back then. In verse 2, it says, this brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them.

This was a massive issue that they could not settle locally, so in verse 2 to 4, they had to bring the matter to the apostles in Jerusalem.

But look at what happened. Despite the divisive and difficult nature of the issue, they did not talk about it on the way to Jerusalem with the other churches.

[6:57] Instead, they talked about the victory of the gospel, and how God had used them to bring a lot of Gentiles to Jesus.

And when they saw the leaders in Jerusalem, even though it's obvious from verse 5 that, might be there, yep, it's obvious from verse 5 that there were some leaders who disagreed with them.

In verse 4, they were still welcomed by the church, and the church still rejoiced with them. Despite disagreements, their priority was obvious.

The gospel of Jesus to the ends of the earth, just like what Jesus said in chapter 1. And in verse 3, it made all the believers very glad.

So the council started in verse 5 to 6. Remember, at this time, the New Testament had not been written. They could not have looked up Acts 15 to find a solution to their problem.

[8:09] What they had was the Old Testament and the teaching of Jesus through the apostles. But we can see how they handled the issue. First, they talked about it.

There's no authoritarian decision here. And second, they talked about it using evidence. And here we can see two kinds of evidence.

The first one is the testimony of the Holy Spirit through conversion. In verse 7 to 9, Peter recounts Cornelius' conversion.

So in Acts 10, there's this story of Cornelius. Cornelius was a Gentile, and Peter was told by God to tell Cornelius about the gospel.

At first, he didn't want to because Cornelius was a Gentile, and it's against the law, against the Old Testament law for Jews to associate with the Gentiles. But then, as he did, as he talked about the gospel with Cornelius and his friends, surprisingly, Cornelius and all who were with him believed, and the Holy Spirit came on all of them.

[9 : 28] And so in this passage, in Acts 15, Peter argued that this event proved to him that first, the Gentiles really did believe the gospel, and second, God gave the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles even without being circumcised, indicating that he approved of the Gentiles not because of circumcision, but because of their faith and faith only.

So Peter is saying here, look, if the Holy Spirit himself approved these Gentiles, Gentiles, even though they don't obey the law of Moses, who are we to say otherwise?

In fact, in verse 10, in verse 10, to say otherwise would be like testing God.

This language echoes Exodus 17, where Moses says, do not test God, where the Israelites grumbled because there's no water, even though they have seen what God could do with the Red Sea, and what God could provide through the manna.

And so, testing God here means lacking trust. Here, Peter is saying that some people are showing lack of trust towards God, that what, because if they say that the Gentiles need to obey the law, then they're saying that what God is doing is wrong, because he approves the Gentiles, even though they don't obey the law.

[11 : 11] And also, by insisting that, in verse 10, by insisting that, the Jews are putting a burden on the Gentiles, which even the Jews themselves cannot carry.

By doing so, they insist that what Jesus has done is not sufficient. And then what Peter says in verse 11, is that, we are saved by grace alone.

We believe it is through the grace or the gift of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as the Gentiles are. Not because of obedience to the law, but only by grace.

And then in verse 12, Paul and Barnabas respond to this by telling them what God has done among the Gentiles, again, even without being circumcised.

And so, in answer to the question, what does it mean for the Gentiles to be included into the people of God? Does it mean that they are grafted into God's covenant people of Israel?

[12 : 26] Peter, Paul, and Barnabas are arguing here. Christians are saved not because they are grafted into Moses, but into Christ and Christ alone.

So, that's the first evidence, the testimony of the Holy Spirit through conversion. Now, the second evidence is the scriptures, and in this case, the Old Testament.

In verse 13 to 18, James starts his speech and he says, here it is, the prophet Amos in the Old Testament, when he predicts the destruction of Israel, also predicts its resurrection.

And when the restoration happens, it's not only Jews who will join, but also the Gentiles and in verse 17, also the rest of mankind may seek the Lord.

In other words, James is saying, the scriptures are in agreement with what's going on. subjective experience of the work of the Holy Spirit and the objective testimony of the scriptures are aligned.

[13 : 50] And so, based on those two kinds of evidence, they make a decision. And I think this is probably the most difficult part of the passage. James says, it is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.

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.

For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath. in its most basic message, the decision is simple.

In verse 19, God is working to save the Gentiles, so we should not add more requirements. We should not make it harder for them to turn to God.

They're saved by grace through faith. That's it. But in verse 20, James did add four more requirements.

[14:58] Abstaining from food, sacrifice to idols, from sexual immorality, from meat of strangled animals, and from blood. Now, I think this poses a dilemma for us in the modern world, because if we say that we can eat rare steak with blood in it, are we saying that these requirements don't apply to us anymore?

But then, if we're saying that, does that mean that we can also commit sexual immorality? But if the decision is still binding, then why do we eat rare steak?

I'm not trying to defend my right to eat rare steak, by the way. If we're not allowed to eat rare steak, then we can't eat rare steak. But I'm just trying to present the difficulty in understanding this passage for us today.

And I think the explanation is applied in verse 21. Because the law of Moses was preached in the synagogues, and during that time, the early Christians still went to synagogues for worship, then it's necessary for them to work out their grace in love, by considering the Jews around them.

So, the requirements here were given primarily for the Christians when they met Jews in the synagogues to avoid being a stumbling block. In fact, we can see how Paul worked out these requirements in many of his letters.

[16:36] Just one example in Romans 14, he says, let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food.

All food is clean. No requirements. But it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat.

He's not saying it is better to not eat meat with blood. It is better to not eat meat at all or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall.

When I was studying at Ridley, I was a member of the student committee and one of the issues that came up during this time involved this particular issue.

During that time, Ridley always offered wine at their events. But some students from other countries were uncomfortable with this.

[17:44] So they did not want to join any of the events. So the student committee met and they decided to petition. And since then, until now, I think, Ridley doesn't do alcohol anymore for the sake of others.

We believe that we can drink wine. It's okay. But for the sake of others, so that we don't become stumbling blocks, why not give up wine? So I think primarily these requirements are given not to put another requirement for salvation, but they're given so that the Christians could express their faith in love towards the Jews that lived alongside them.

So, by giving these requirements, the apostles did not add again, did not add to the requirement of salvation.

They were there to help both the Jews and the Gentiles to live together side by side in peace without being stumbling blocks. So, in conclusion, we can see at least or we can take away two things from this passage.

First, the victory of God's grace. God saved us Gentiles. I think most of us here in this room would be Gentiles, non-Jews.

[19:15] God saves us Gentiles not through being circumcised or doing the Levitical offerings or any other good deeds. Thank God for this.

Thank God for His grace. Because as Peter says in verse 10, no one can bear that burden. No one can satisfy the requirements of the law.

No one can be unblemished. Everyone sins and thank God that He saves us only by our faith in Jesus as a gift.

Grace. Period. Nothing more. What Jesus did is sufficient. Let's not forget the greatness of His grace.

And I think this is what makes Christianity unique. it's the only religion among others that insists that God is not appeased by human performance. Because human performance is so puny.

[20 : 20] No, instead, He gives us abundantly. He gives us His love and even His own Son so that we might reach Him.

That's the heart of the gospel, right? The heart of grace. No matter how high a man or a person can jump, we cannot reach the Son.

But what if the Son comes down here to reach us? And that's Jesus. And second, flowing from that, I think we need to ask how we can express the grace that we have received through love.

in this passage, even from the start, when Paul and Barnabas were quarreling with those in Antioch, they brought the matter to the wider body to ensure unity of decision.

And then the decision itself was done in a manner that ensured love and unity through a council by talking together. And despite the disagreement that they had, the church welcomed them with gladness and rejoiced over them, over what they had done among the Gentiles, they did not say, oh, we disagree with you, so those conversions that you enabled must be false.

[21 : 46] No, they did not say that. And in the end, the decision was made with consideration for both the Gentiles and the Jews so they both may live together in love.

I think we need to ask what this looks like in our own lives and in our church. How do we rejoice together in love over the victory of the gospel, even when we do disagree and sometimes argue?

every time I get together with my friends who are pastors or people who go to different churches or different denominations, I get reminded that there are other Christians who practice different things and we may disagree.

For example, with my Baptist friends, we disagree and we talk about whether we're allowed to practice infant baptism or not, or whether water baptism needs to be sprinkled or through dunking.

We do disagree and sometimes we do argue, but I also rejoice when through their ministries the gospel wins people. perhaps in our interactions with Christians that we disagree with, we need to have more conversations.

[23 : 16] Ask them what they mean. What do you mean when you say that? Ask them how they see Jesus, his death and resurrection and God's grace.

Sit down with the Bibles open together before judging each other. nonetheless, the charity and love that we have must not sacrifice the truth.

And we can see that in this passage as well. Though they show grace and love towards each other, they still argue. And it's good. They fight for the primacy of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And they fight for the grace of God. Because it is the power of God that saves. So we need to ask ourselves, how can we do that in our own personal lives, when we bump into friends from other churches, but also in the life of our church as well.

Let's pray so God might help us. Lord of grace, you have saved us by your grace through your son Jesus.

[24 : 32] And so you have freed us from the bondage of having to prove ourselves. And as you have given us your grace, help us to be gracious towards others, especially towards those who also along with us believe in Jesus and confess him as Lord.

for as your son Jesus said, it is by your love, it is by our love towards each other that the world will know that we are his disciples.

May your Holy Spirit work in us so we can bear much fruit for your glory. In Jesus' name, Amen.