

How to Live Boldly Free

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[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.! For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

Acts chapter 15, continue our series of studying how the acts of Jesus from heaven on earth, how Jesus gets things done from heaven on earth for His glory.

And we're going to study this passage this morning. So Acts 15, if you look with me in verse 1, I'll start reading there. 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.

And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the elders who were 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 Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles.

[1 : 18] That's what we spent time talking about in Acts 13 and 14 last week. And brought great joy to the brothers. 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.

But some believers who belonged 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.

Verse 6. Verse 6. The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by his mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.

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 the faith.

Verse 10. 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?

[2 : 46] But we believe that we are saved through the grace of our Lord Jesus just as they will. And all the assembly fell silent.

They listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. And after they had finished speaking, James said, Brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles to take from them a people for his name. And with this, the words of the prophet agreed, 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 ruin 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. Therefore, my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write them to abstain from the things polluted by idols and from sexual immorality and from what has been strangled and from blood.

[3 : 58] For from ancient generations, Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him. For he has read every Sabbath, every Sabbath in the synagogues. Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders with the whole church to choose men from them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.

And they sent Judas called Barsabbas and Silas, leading men among the brothers with a letter. We're just going to stop reading right there.

This is the Word of God. The only authoritative Word. You know, most days we slowly roll out of bed, especially night owls like myself.

But have you ever noticed that some days we literally jump out? Perhaps it's because of an interview that we have that day, or a big date, or a friend's birthday, or perhaps a wedding, or maybe the beginning of a trip, or maybe it's just Saturday in the fall and it's game day. Whatever the occasion, we approach these days differently because they seem more important than the other days of the week. All the details of the day, of this important day, are carefully organized.

[5 : 19] We think about what we're going to wear. For most dudes, that's not a thought they have the day before. We think about what we're going to eat. We think about when we're going to eat. We think about what we need to get done.

You know how it is right before a vacation. You get more work done in the day before a vacation than you get done in weeks. We all work that day. Or if we all work that way, we would get a bunch of stuff done.

But most days we mosey through it, right? Right? But not those days. Similarly, in the book of Acts, we come to a most important day in this chapter.

There's really no more important day in the book of Acts than this one right here. I think it's more important than what goes on in Acts 2 at Pentecost. And the ramifications are more important for us.

I don't know whether Paul and Barnabas sprung out of bed that morning for taking their steps to Jerusalem. But there was no doubt Luke wanted us to see the importance of this day. It's placed right in the center of this book.

[6 : 24] There's about 12,000 words prior to this. So that means we're 12,000 down. And there's about 12,000 after this in the book of Acts.

So it's right there in the center. And all the players are in one place. It's kind of like LeBron got together with the big three down in Miami. Well, this is the big four.

I'm trying to think. You know, the big four. I was trying to think of a name for the big four. But I got the fabulous four or something like that. But it's Paul and Barnabas and Peter and James and all the other apostles and elders in Jerusalem are right there.

It's been about 10, 15 years since they gathered like that. And it's gathered and focused around the most important issue of Acts. Ray Ortlund sums this up for us. He says, The book of Acts was written to answer a question.

And that's what comes to the nub of the matter in this chapter. The book of Acts started in Jerusalem, the capital city of the Jews. And it ends in Rome, the capital city of the Gentiles. It starts with a renewal movement within Judaism.

[7 : 26] Just the people of Israel, the work of the law. And it ends as a Gentile revival. It starts with Peter, the apostle of the Jews, as the primary leader. And it ends with Paul, the apostle of the Gentiles, as the primary leader.

Why? Why? What's going on? Why? And all of it comes to head in this passage. One writer said chapter 15 is the turning point, the centerpiece, the watershed of the book.

At first, as you know, we've been studying. It was all fun and games when a couple of these Gentiles began to get converted. Cornelius got converted and people were responding to the faith. And it was all happy and great.

But then when Paul started bringing in droves of Gentiles, the questions came. What should be done about these guys? We are all Jews who are obeying the law. And should they become like us?

Should they eat what we eat? Should they avoid what we avoid? Should they be circumcised? Underneath this was that larger question, is the gospel a reform movement within Judaism?

[8 : 32] Or is it a whole other thing? It's meant to go to the end of the world. What they discuss and decide changes the course of the book of Acts and church history.

So much is at stake. I trust you'll see that in a moment. This morning, we're going to break it out in four points. Four points and lay out some implications for us as well.

The first is the conflict. The conflict. You know, it's obvious what the conflict is about. You know, our text begins in Antioch. That's where we've kind of been, north of Jerusalem, down the hill though.

can raise sons of Abraham from these stones. I don't care whose blood you got in you. I care that you're born again. He's making a new people. Do you see? That's what's going on. It's incredible. You're not special because of your bloodline. We can apply that to our saying, you're not special because your parents were Christians. It is a nice influence. It's a blessing, all that type of stuff. But, but it doesn't make you special in God's eyes. You're, you're special when you're born again. It doesn't matter what your background looks like or feels like or was.

Thirdly, the decision. So the conflict, the discussion, the decision. You know, after all the debate, the apostles make a decision. At first glance, it seems simple and obvious. But upon closer look, it's deeply wise.

And so where I cut us off, they, they decided, hey, we're going to send a letter to the churches. And I want you to see what they say. They're going to send this letter. They made a decision, you know, Antioch was entrusting. They're making this decision. Then they're going to send this letter out. This is the verdict. This is where we landed. This is what you need to observe.

[20 : 49] This is what you need to obey. And look down there in verse 28. This is all the apostles and elders write in this letter. For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements. Now that may not zing to you.

Let me explain. On the one hand, with that statement, they uphold gospel doctrine. They say, we don't want to lay on you a greater burden. What they're saying there is we don't want to add to the gospel. We refuse to add to the gospel. We refuse to say you must be circumcised in order to have saving faith in Jesus Christ. That's what that little phrase means.

They were presented, as we said, with two options. Either God saves those who clean themselves up, or God cleans up those who are saved. Either God saves those who prepare themselves for him, or, not and, or, just or, God saves and prepares those people for himself.

Now, that's the point. So they reject that teaching from Judea and the Pharisees that you must obey the law. They agree with Peter. Look down in verse 11.

Peter says, but we believe, we don't believe what they believe. We believe that we will be saved through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, just as they will. Same grace that saves us, the grace that saves them.

[22 : 27] They uphold what's being taught. I mean, Galatians 2, 16 says, we know that a person is not justified by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ.

That's the good news of the gospel. In a word, what they say is the gospel makes all people clean and free by grace alone. The gospel makes all people clean and free by grace alone.

And I know we know this, but you've got to understand this context. This is incredible. A preacher I was reading about this week named Donald Gray Barnhouse was once preaching as a guest in a church.

And before he was to preach, a lady sang a solo. That happens. The chorus, you know, in traditional churches, I guess, we don't have too many of those. The chorus goes, is my master satisfied?

Is he satisfied with me? I am satisfied with Jesus. Is he satisfied with me?

[23 : 27] Now, you can imagine that church, you know, a song like that being sung. Is my master satisfied? Is he satisfied with me? Does he love me? Does he love me not? Does he love me? You know, I am satisfied with Jesus.

Is he satisfied with me? And then Barnhouse stepped into the pulpit and shouted, yes, he is. Standing on the authority.

That's why I need a real pulpit. Standing on the authority of God. Not this, whatever this is. Standing on the authority of the gospel and God's word. This letter declares that God welcomes, accepts, and completely is completely satisfied with sinners who have done nothing good but rest in Jesus Christ alone.

That's what it says. He is satisfied. He doesn't need your work. He doesn't want them. He doesn't care if you come from a family that had it all together.

If you come from one that didn't. He doesn't care if you read your Bible this week or you just stumbled through it. He doesn't care if you have a good reputation or the worst one in town. He only cares that you understand that he's satisfied with you solely and only because of Jesus Christ.

[24 : 35] That's the gospel. That's what they uphold. That's what they uphold. It upholds gospel doctrine. It upholds what the theologians call justification by faith alone.

That I am justified. I am declared righteous and accepted by God because of faith alone. I'll never forget in the January of 2001. I was in a sermon and I heard those words and those words. They changed my life. That's not an overstatement. People are not changed by books or by paragraphs. They're changed by sentences, by phrases. And those those words changed my life so that I could put in the rear view forever that God is up in the heavens and frowning on me. You can wake up tomorrow morning, look yourself in the mirror and say, I'm accepted in Jesus Christ. I don't care if alcohol is still on your breath. I'm accepted through Jesus Christ. I got to fix that thing. I'm accepted through Jesus Christ. I don't care if you've been stumbling through the week. This is the truth of the gospel. I'm accepted through Jesus Christ.

[25 : 40] Don't add something to what Jesus did. Don't nullify the grace of God is what Paul would say. I'm accepted. Grab yourself out of shirt in the morning and say it.

I don't know what you women would do. Maybe you wouldn't do that. But I'm accepted. God doesn't. He's not just tolerating me. He loves me.

You know, Luther used to say. When the devil tells you. You're a sinner. You don't belong in Jesus Christ. You know, he's the accuser, right? That's what Revelation says.

He's the accuser. He comes around. Trying to find somebody to devour. That's what he did to Peter. That's why Peter was upheld. And I love it when the Lord said. The devil tried to get you. But I prayed for you. He tried to sift you like wheat. But he comes around. And Luther says. When the devil says. You're just a sinner. You don't belong in Jesus Christ.

[26 : 42] You come back to him. Say, yes, I am a sinner. But I've taken all my sin to Jesus Christ. That's why I belong there. I am a sinner. That's right. Guilty as charged.

But all my sins have been laid on him. Isn't that incredible? That's what they uphold. But they don't just uphold gospel doctrine. They hold forth and call forth a gospel culture.

Now, I threw my Bible down. And I have to find. Where were you at? I don't throw Bibles for the record. It happened.

I knew a preaching friend that had a throwing Bible. And we were like, bro, you can't have a throwing Bible. We're not throwing the Bible. All right? No throwing Bibles.

All right? Those don't go together, you know? Yeah. If a sibling comes in, you don't throw the Bible at them. Find something else. A stick or something. Leave the Bible out of this.

[27 : 41] But verse 29. So he said, It seemed good that the Holy Spirit lay on them no greater burden than 29, that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idol and from blood and from what's been strangled and from sexual immorality.

If you keep these things, you'll do well. Farewell. Wow. What in the world does that mean?

Each of these prohibitions, they're things that you not do, are things particularly sensitive to Jews. So idol food. In that culture, eating foods, it's just not like our culture at all.

Eating food sacrificed to idols was hard to prevent. You know, whether you went to a banquet or a family celebration or other social obligations, you offer things to idols. My wife is Vietnamese and her family, they worship ancestry.

And that's a lot of way those different cultures are like. And they're worshiping an idol. And so essentially what he's saying is, Don't eat that food at those idol celebrations.

[28 : 44] That's one thing. The second one is blood and what is strangled. I think theologians say this refers to the same thing. Just types of meat and how meat is prepared was a big deal to Jews.

And so they asked them to make sure the blood's drained out, make sure the meat is properly butchered and cared for. And so that's what they mean by that. And I'm going to explain this a little bit more in a moment. Then sexual immorality.

So Gentiles that were coming to the faith were coming from a very aggressive sexual culture. Like we think ours is a very out there sexual culture. Well, it was even more so in that day.

I mean, they have temples to Aphrodite, the sex god. And so premarital sex, adultery, prostitution, lust were just rampant. And so they asked them to refrain.

Now there's so much. We could have a whole message on this verse. I think the main point is, These things matter significantly to the Jews.

[29 : 44] And continuing in them would be a stumbling block to them. Okay? So these things matter significantly to the Jews. And so in the church where the Jews and Gentiles are brought together, the Gentiles must give these things up so as not to be a stumbling block.

I think the point is, You're free from obeying the law, but you aren't free from love. I think that's the main point.

You're free from obeying the law, but you aren't free from love. Do you remember how our Lord said it? By this all people know that you are my disciples. If you have love for one another, they'll know that you're my disciples.

Not by your love for the world, which is great. Not by your love for the lost, which is great. Not by your love for great causes. Also great.

They'll know you're my disciples by your love for one another. That's why churches that bite and devour one another don't say much about Jesus Christ. Here's the deal. It's not enough to know the right things.

[30 : 48] Knowing the right things. And that alone is just hypocrisy. It's a noisy gong, a clanging cymbal, as 1 Corinthians 13 says. And it's not enough to just do the right things. Doing the right things without true heart change is formalism.

It's empty. It's hollow. So what they're calling for is this merging of gospel doctrine and gospel culture. This idea that gospel doctrine should produce a gospel culture.

Gospel doctrine, what we believe should produce a culture, a people where the gospel is highlighted in how we live, how we love, how we relate to one another. And so the gospel welcomes lost people into the family of God.

So we should be the most welcoming people on the planet. The gospel brings dead people to life. So we should not think we're better than anybody else on the planet. You were dead.

Like you contributed zilch. The gospel claims love that gave everything away. So it sets us free from cold hearted, closed minded, tight fisted living.

[31 : 50] The gospel is the good news of great joy. The idea is that gospel doctrine is meant to produce a gospel culture, a people that are the most loving, joyful, humble, self-giving people in the world.

Does that make sense? William Tyndale, who translated most of the Bible that we read, he said, euangelion, evangelion, which what we call the gospel, is a Greek word signifying good, merry, glad, and joyful news.

That makes a man's heart glad and makes him sing, dance, and leap for joy. The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking. It's a matter of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Grumpy Christianity is not Christianity. Christianity. So it's this gospel takes shape in this culture that reflects it.

So, fourthly, the significance for us. The significance for us, and this is where I've got to start moving a bit. First is, and I'm really encouraged with what the Lord seemed to be building here.

[33 : 07] And, well, the culture, you know, which is a big deal. Point A, or underneath this, we must persistently pursue joy.

Christianity must never become what we do. We must continually be aware of our tendency to just go through the motions. I mean, Psalm 100 always reproves me, serve the Lord with gladness.

There is a, supposed to be an emotional effect in my heart to serve in the Lord. And when it's not there, when the joy is not there, we have some wonderful work to do.

Joy comes, joy does not come from everything being in the right place. It does not come from having your best life now. Joy comes from the truth about God revealing the gospel.

Joy does not come from prayers being answered, a satisfying job, an attentive spouse, and obedient children, financial stability. Joy comes from continually rehearsing the gospel and remembering the distance between our deservings and our receivings.

[34 : 18] It comes from continuing to measure that out and live in light. I got to read this quote by Lewis Allen. It just is just so great.

What do we reserve from God? Nothing. All our gifts. All we have is by grace. A sense of entitlement feeds a greedy heart, but a keen awareness that we deserve nothing, but have all of God's love in Christ will humble us and satisfy us.

Then all the gifts in our lives, people, circumstances, privileges, ministries will be seen for what they are, stunning blessings from God to be counted up and treasured with thanksgiving.

Don't be satisfied with duty. Don't be satisfied with grumpy Christianity. Don't be satisfied with begrudging obedience. It's not just about your joy.

It's about glorifying God. Point two, we must insist on one another's liberty and everything non-essential. We must insist on one another's liberty and everything non-essential.

[35 : 26] When we begin to talk about liberty, relationships splinter and churches split, there are a few essentials in the Christian life. Love God, be pure, be committed to the local church, love your neighbor, a few things like that, but there are many things, most things, are non-essential.

And for brothers and sisters in the Church of Jesus Christ, we must insist on freedom of conscience in all those things. That seems easy, right? No.

Sadly, instead of insisting on one another's freedoms, we often insist on conformity. You know, when someone becomes a Christian or when a little culture is built, often without knowing, we tell them how to eat, how to dress, what music to listen to, what to drink and what not to drink, what to watch and what not to watch, how to spend your money.

And, you know, there's surely biblical principles in there, but we, you know, we do that because maybe it worked for us, but we also do it because we're more concerned with people abusing their freedom than guarding it.

After all, freedom is scary. So we add rules to the gospel that, though unbiblical, they make us feel safe and in control.

[36 : 43] That's a great question for parents. Are you more concerned about your children abusing their freedom, or are you more concerned about guarding it for them? And does the way you parent make that clear? Are you growing them up into a way of life where you dictate everything for them or growing them up into a way of life where they walk out these gray matters carefully?

So these rules are about hot-button issues like alcohol, movies, tobacco, dancing, dating, politics, Halloween. But these rules can be about anything.

I read this interesting story about a family on the mission field that was forced off the mission field because of peanut butter. That's all it would take for me. You take away my peanut butter, I'm out. I love Jesus. But they were sent to a place where peanut butter was not available. I pray for those places. Just kidding. They had friends and family back in the States that would mail them peanut butter.

The problem was the other missionaries serving with them considered it more spiritual to not have peanut butter. To be, to, you know, maybe endure it, grit it out. No peanut butter.

[37 : 50] The new family continued. They just said, this is a difference of opinions, and so we're going to continue. We're going to keep eating our peanut butter. In the end, the pressure from the other missionaries to conform became so intense that they left the mission field for home.

Now, obviously, maybe we wouldn't fight about peanut butter, but we could be just as vulnerable. We must insist on one another's liberty and everything non-essential, and we must resist at all cost the temptation to police one another, to add more rules to one another, and to insist on things the Bible does not insist on.

We'd be helped to remember some of the one another's not in the Bible. Ray Orlin has this for us. Go to the next quote. Sorry. Oh, is it not in there?

Okay. Sorry. Yeah, so these are the ones he added. He said, these are the one another's, so there's 31 one another's in the Bible. These are the ones that are not in there, according to him. Humble one another. Scrutinize one another.

[39 : 07] Pressure one another. Embarrass one another. Corner one another. Interrupt one another. Defeat one another. Disapprove of one another. Run one another's life. Confess one another's sins.

Point out one another's failings. They're not in there. And so we should insist on liberty. People shouldn't feel managed when they're around us.

Thirdly, we must resist allowing liberty to surpass love. We must resist allowing liberty to pass love. We must insist on one another's liberty in all things nonessential, but we must not allow liberty to surpass love. You know, the rest of this chapter is very interesting. Paul and Barnabas, he gets in a little spat with John Mark.

I wish we had time to discover that. Then he goes to Lister and he meets Timothy, who we read more about. But look down there, verse 16, 1. Paul came to Derbe and to Lystra, a disciple there named Timothy, the son of a Jewish believer, a woman who was a believer, but a father who was Greek.

[40 : 08] Point three, or verse three, Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews that were in those places. Now, that is crazy.

What's going on here? You just fought tooth and nail for circumcision to not be a requirement. What's going on is when love demands it, we give up our rights.

That's what's going on with Paul. So he said, you know, this guy's got a Greek father. If I go into these Jewish lands and this guy's a Greek father, it's going to compromise our ability to preach the gospel. He said, I want to become all things to all people.

Remember 1 Corinthians 9. So he says, circumcise. That's crazy. Listen.

Now, while the Bible never gives us the right to police one another's liberties for fear of some weaker brother out there somewhere, it does call us to give up our rights when insisting on our rights would tempt another brother.

[41 : 16] The Bible never calls us to police another's liberty for fear of some weaker brother roaming the halls out there or something like that. But it does call us to give up our rights when insisting on them would tempt another brother.

There's a lot there. So the idea is that you're free to eat pork. But in love, you should refrain when you have a family over that doesn't. You're free to vote however you want.

I mean, be guided by biblical principles. That's a messy world out there. But in love, you should refrain from talking about it all the time and judging those who vote differently. God does not align himself with one party line.

I'm sorry, but that's what I believe. You're free to enjoy alcohol in moderation, but in love, you should refrain when someone has misused it in the path and they're coming over.

Obviously, you're not required to use it anyway. I'll never forget when I became a Christian in the fall of 2001. This story may tell you a lot about me. I basically, I smoked marijuana nightly from seventh grade until I was 21 years old.

[42 : 26] I used to tell my dad it was cigarettes out the window. The first person I talked to, you know, I was talking to a brother, one of my closest friends now, about smoking.

I got saved. I know what the Lord thought about marijuana. I just learned who Jesus was, you know. I had no clue. So I said, I asked a friend, can I smoke marijuana?

This is the revealing part. Now, you know, he probably could have made a good argument. No, you shouldn't. It's illegal. Respect the laws of the land. But he didn't. I'm really thankful he didn't. And he said, is it loving to do it if other people have come out of it and quit so it would tempt them?

I said, whoa, that's a killer question. I wrestled with it for weeks and kept smoking. And October 20th, 2001, I bent down on the knees in my little apartment in the fort of Knoxville.

I said, Lord, I'll never smoke marijuana again if it tempts a brother. And I haven't. Just like that, it was gone. I just assumed I'd smoke weed until I was buried. It was so much a part of my life.

[43 : 42] But I think that's the way Christian life is. Now, just for the record, don't go smoke marijuana. I am against that. All right?

We're clear on that? But that's the way the Christian life is. Like, in so many ways, it's not, you cannot do that.

It's what is loving. So this is just a vital day. Look down there in verse 16, 5. So they take this letter out.

All the churches are so encouraged. Verse 5 says, so the churches were strengthened in the faith. And they increased in numbers daily. Man, the apostles did it.

Guided by the Holy Spirit. They kept the gospel. That's the gospel we believe. If you've never trusted in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, I stand here and announce it to you.

[44 : 46] The gospel is the good news of great joy that God has sent a Savior to rescue us. It is, it is, it does tell us bad news that we were so sick and so sinful and so straying from Him that He did not spare but chose to send His Son to die in our place.

The gospel sets us free because Jesus Christ on the cross took all of our sin on Himself and became sin, the text says, for us so that in Him we might be righteous and be accepted by God.

And they proclaimed it and they called us to live it out, to be the most joyful, that's what I want this church to be, the most joyful, loving, humble, self-giving people in Athens, Tennessee.

That's what I want to be. I don't want to be known for pushing people around. I want to be known for that. Amen. Let us pray. You've been listening to a message given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.

For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at trinitygraceathens.com.