

Jesus Plus Nothing

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 08 March 2026

Preacher: Craig Dowling

[0 : 00] I'm reading from Acts chapter 15, and it's verses 1 to 21, and I'm reading from the NIV. The heading in my Bible is the Council at Jerusalem.

Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers, unless you're circumstantized, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.

This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.

The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers.

When they came to Jerusalem, they were appointed or welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.

[1 : 14] The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them. Brothers, you know that some time ago, God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe.

God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.

Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear?

No, we believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are. The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.

When they finished, James spoke up. Brothers, he said, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles.

[2 : 32] The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written. After this, I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent.

Its ruins I will rebuild. And I will restore it, that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord who does these things.

Things known from long ago. 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. Amen. Amen. Thank you, Celia.

Thank you, Rosie, for your prayers. Thank you, guys, for your songs. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we seek you now over your word.

[3 : 52] That you would open our ears, Lord, and help us reflect and learn. I know you're leading. Lord, we thank you for your grace and your forgiveness.

And as we approach communion, Lord, throughout this sermon, prepare our hearts. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So, what do I have to do?

What do I need to give? How much? What achievements, statuses, works, or whatever else?

Simply. Simply put, what do I need to do to be accepted by God?

To be at one with God? To receive God's forgiveness. How can it be that 2,000 years since Jesus, folks, folks, all over the world are still asking the same question?

[5 : 22] The answer to the question, what do I need to do? was all tidied up and dealt with centuries ago?

And the answer was neatly detailed in pure writing, in the Bible, for all to see.

So, if there is one question, we never need to wrestle for the answer to.

It's how does one receive God's forgiveness? It's in there. It's in there. Plain and clear. For all to see. But, humanity certainly does needlessly wrestle with that question.

for no other reason than than because God's enemy, Satan, works hard, very hard, to keep everyone away from the Bible and finding the answer.

[6 : 55] And back here in the book of Acts, the very same question is being wrestled with. We're now halfway through the book of Acts.

And we have journeyed right through and seen how Holy Spirit took a handful of disciples in one area and bit by bit turned and multiplied it all into a world wide multinational church.

And so, by the 15th chapter here, it's taken off so well and it's went so far and it's reached so many different cultures and nationalities that the Jewish roots where it originally stemmed from are slowly but surely beginning to take more of a background feet.

And soon, if not already by this point, Gentile folk would well outnumber the Jewish folk within the Christian church.

church. And they are aware of this. They're really aware of this. They feel the squeeze.

[8 : 48] And although they are pleased and they're rejoicing in how God is reaching and saving all the nations, there are still certain folk, particularly from Judea, who struggled desperately to really believe, to really believe that God would and God is just simply saving and forgiving everyone and anyone from every tribe, from every nation, just because they simply believe in Jesus.

My, how I wish I could indeed say here, well, at least humanity has overcome that and sorted that out. But as we started out with, that wouldn't be true.

Because still today, as with these folk from Judea, the very idea that God freely forgives and freely redeems, freely saves, is just as hard and difficult to accept.

The world and life is built upon trading. you give something to receive something back.

So the very thought that God just freely gives us his forgiveness for nothing in return is beyond our human understanding.

[10 : 47] the rich young ruler is a perfect example. It's an encounter Jesus has of a fellow when he's out preaching one day.

And it comes up in Mark's biography, in Mark's account of Jesus' life, which is the second one in the New Testament. Do you want to look at it with me? It's chapter 10 of that particular little book.

Chapter 10. Amen. On verse 17, it says, As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him.

Good teacher, he asked, what must I do to inherit eternal life? Why do you call me good?

Jesus answered, no one is good except God alone. You know the commandments. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal.

[12 : 25] You shall not give false testimony. You shall not defraud. Honor your father and mother. Teacher, he declared, all these I have kept since I was a boy. Jesus looked at him and loved him.

One thing you lack, he said. Go sell everything you have and give to the poor. And then you will have treasure in heaven.

And then come follow me. At this the man's face fell. He went away sad because he had great wealth. He, this guy, wants the forgiveness, the love, the life to the full, the home in heaven that Jesus offers and gives.

And he rightly summarizes it all up in the words eternal life. So he gets right to it.

Jesus, what do I have to do? Or what do I need to give? Or even how much do I need to pay to get this life you offer?

[13 : 57] As we have said, like any of us, he was used to giving something over to receive something back.

And Jesus takes him on this little journey. With the ultimate outcome being nothing.

Absolutely nothing. In fact, Jesus says, give all your money and possessions to the poor. I don't need them.

I don't want them. Give them to the poor. And you just come exactly as you are and be friends.

That's it. And then you will have eternal life. And he walks away completely confused. Did Jesus really say he doesn't want my money?

[15 : 02] He just wants to freely forgive me. And freely give me eternal life. And ironically, the answer is such good news.

That as for this particular guy, he just can't accept it. He just can't get his mind around it. And I wonder, I do wonder, if this is still the very same battle many people today still can't get over.

They never fully accept God because they just can't really accept that it's that simple.

That that's all you do. And you know something? The enemy loves it.

We said earlier, the devil works hard to keep people from finding this answer.

[16 : 28] But should people go looking, he has other tactics. As I've said before, his craftiness knows no limits.

As even he knows, it is only natural for humans to want to search for that something higher.

Travel to the deepest jungles of the Amazon rainforest and you'll find them worshipping something higher. It's natural to want and need to worship something higher.

And so to get around that, he has even devised a whole list of false religions where one can fabricate their search, their desires, but at the very same time they're told that they must work and strive and do to be accepted by God.

And so sadly within these false religions people can sort of settle that natural desire for God but they will be doing it on Satan's terms and never hear of the real and only true God.

[18 : 07] And never hear of the free gift of God. And that's what the enemy is doing here in the 15th chapter of Acts.

the enemy is once again on to it. Stirring up some folk. Planting seeds of deceit.

Can all these folk really, really just receive forgiveness like that? And they take the bait. And so they travel from Judea to Antioch with the sole purpose of telling people you can't just be forgiven for nothing.

You have to do something. You have to come on to at least part or at least some of the old law circumcision at least.

And a sharp dispute rightfully occurs. And it's so sharp, such a sharp topic that it results in the first church council.

[19 : 34] The missionaries, the apostles, the elders, a few groups from Ephesians, some Gentiles, all meet. And the only topic on the agenda is.

Is salvation, is God's forgiveness, is heaven really, really, definitely received by grace and grace alone? Or is there still some work, some form of work to do?

Is there a little regulation to abide by? Or perhaps one or two rules? From within the old law, that Jew and Gentile alike must abide by to be saved.

And I think Peter is at his absolute prime here. This is the last time in the Acts journey that we hear from Peter.

And what a triumphant one it is. I can sort of sense the tension with him. The council is in full swing. The big discussion is on.

[20 : 53] Should Gentile believers abide by the law of Moses? And there is lots of yes, yep, going all around.

And then verse 7, Peter has listened to just about enough of this. and after much discussion, Peter got up, he's on his feet, and addressed them.

Brothers, you know that some time ago, God made a choice among you, but the Gentiles married here from my lips, he has the personal experience direct from God.

remember? It was Peter who received the vision on the rooftop and went to Cornelius' home and saw everyone saved just because they believed.

And so Peter is rightfully claiming his place in God's kingdom here as the key holder. it was me, he says, the key holder.

[22 : 08] I told them that day in Cornelius' home the message of the gospel so that they may believe. God who knows the heart showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them just as he did to us.

He did not discriminate between us and them for he purified their hearts by faith. And then with some good, clean, righteous anger, he then says, now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear?

Verse 11, no, we believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved just as they are.

And that's it. Peter is clear. It is only by the grace of Jesus. No one can earn this, no one can pay for this, no one can work for it, no one can achieve it, you can just accept it.

That's it. And anyone, absolutely anyone, can accept it. I said this perhaps a month or so ago, and I'm going to say it again because the chapter calls for it.

[23 : 50] And I suppose the truth is the entire Bible has one message woven right through it from beginning to end, which of course is God's love for the world, God's grace.

And so hear this, the supreme force in God's forgiveness is God's grace.

I, God's forgiveness forgiveness not by our works, not by our talents, not by our feelings, not by our strength. Forgiveness is not dealt at the negotiating table where we barter our gifts in exchange for God's forgiveness.

Forgiveness is not an award to the most learned. It's not a prize given to the most disciplined. Paul wrote in Ephesians for it is by grace you have been saved, just as Peter said here.

It is the gift of God not by works. And we like Paul are aware of two things. One, we're aware we are great sinners and two, we are aware we need a great saviour.

[25 : 11] And the great saviour is Jesus and his forgiveness is genuinely fully free. and so today we really need to hold on to this.

Tell this and share it. For this is indeed the message Jesus taught and preached. And this is where the first church council got to and was able to conclude and send out a wonderful message to that effect.

Until before we conclude, if I wrap up on grace, this is Luke, the formal and factual report that was indeed sent out from the church council.

That concluded, that first church council there in verse 29, you are to abstain from food sacrifice to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality.

You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell. Nice little conclusion, eh? Farewell. This conclusion was first encouraged by Holy Spirit through James.

[26 : 36] And it has a very simple and a very direct twofold meaning. Amen. Amen. Amen. The first all relating to food, to meals.

Why? Well, as I have covered at length, it wasn't to be forgiven, and it wasn't to be saved, but because a major outcome of the saved is fellowship.

is hospitality, is meals together. And especially back in the first century, most, if not all, churches met in homes.

And more importantly, they met around the meal. This is what Jesus modeled there at the Last Supper. And he said, do likewise.

And so it was normal to meet and dine together. But in his godly wisdom, James knows, for all the apostles work on the new fresh message of Jesus, that old practices and old ways wouldn't just disappear overnight.

[28 : 22] need to do well. And so for the sake of church unity, James says, even though you don't technically need to, you would do well if you just didn't include such foods in our dining together.

together. It would just help cement relationships. It would help keep unity. It would help spread the love. So for the sake of gentle, good, Christian fellowship together, keep those things out of our meals.

It won't save you, no, it won't forgive you, no, but you're already forgiven and saved because of your belief in Jesus. It'll help our relationship. relationship. And the other, abstain from sexual immorality. Anything sexual with anyone outside of a biblical Christian marriage.

Folk today like to really believe they have discovered a new modern way of sexual freedom, not restrained by marriage.

[29 : 47] They haven't. It's as old as time itself, Solomon Gomorrah, and here in the first century. It's rife.

And again, it was destroying church unity. Folk from Gentile cultures were entering the faith with little boundary on their marriage.

And they approached Christian brothers and sisters in that way. And so the outcome, adultery, affairs, divorce, and more split Christian families. And so again, James says, no, for the sake of keeping together as Christians, don't chase another's wife, etc.

And of course, this is our James of the little book, which is written towards the end of the New Testament, where he is clear, you have been saved by grace, but when you have been saved by grace, you will act differently.

[31 : 03] You will live better. And this first little letter, voiced from James at the church council, is that same teaching of what you will begin to live like when you have truly accepted the true free gift of Jesus.

And so beyond the great first church council, the great missionary journeys now embark and continue and conclude. Details through to chapter 21.

Read them over the week if you can. These chapters tell of how the missionaries took the gospel far and wide. And the big thing, the message they went with, still the same today and sheer fear. No matter what Satan is telling people, no matter what religions are their followers, you can be assured that when it comes to the one true, there is zero requirement.

There is zero things to do, zero work to do, do anything to your any. You do not have to become good to get in and you're unlimited.

[32 : 26] Why? Because absolutely none of us can. Not one single to me and you today has ever been able to be good enough to make up for our wrongs and so on.

And as our creator God, he is fully aware of this. And he loves us far too much to leave us out on our own. And so he goes even further than we could possibly ever imagine when he tells us in his word that it's actually his will that no one should be punished.

So not only are we reading he will freely forgive and freely show grace, but we are also being told that in spite of how we humans have destroyed his world, in spite of how we have betrayed him, in spite of our self, that he, the one righteous clean God, doesn't even want to punish us.

Amen to that. Amen to that. And so as we approach communion, remember that, ponder that.

For as a fellowship, we are going to now spend time in communion. And if you know and love the Lord Jesus as described here today, then please freely join us.

[34 : 07] If you're not quite there yet, no worries? Feel free to ponder, reflect, try praying and see what God does.

And one more little thing, to gluten free loaf, which means that everyone will take part together from this gluten free loaf.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we thank you for what's before us.

Communion. But we thank you for what you did to bring it about. You're deaf on the cross.

And so as we ponder your sacrifice now, bless our hearts and minds to receive from you. In Jesus' name, Amen. If you're able to start