

The Grace You Must Embrace | Acts 15:1-35 (NIV)

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Faith Manhattan Church

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Acts 15 begins by dropping us right into the midst of one of the most important events in all of church history.

It says that a group of people traveled from Judea (either from the city of Jerusalem or from somewhere nearby) all the way to the city of Antioch, in order to deliver a message to the rapidly growing church – of mostly Gentile believers – that had been established by the Apostle Paul and his partner in ministry, Barnabas.

Over the past few chapters we've seen how these two men set out on a journey that gave them many opportunities to preach the Gospel to Jews AND to Gentiles. New believers were found from both groups of people, and the success of this missionary journey only added to the increasing evidence that God really did intend to include *everyone who accepted Christ* among His beloved people. The Gospel was proving to be hope and life for all who would listen and believe.

However, the power and sufficiency of that very Gospel is called into question by the visitors from Judea in Acts 15. Their claim – which sent Paul and Barnabas into “sharp dispute and debate with them – and eventually results in the first major theological council in church history – is introduced in v1:

I 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.”

These people from Judea were **not** arguing over whether or not Gentiles could not be saved. That debate was settled back in Acts 10-11, when God led Peter to preach the Gospel to a Gentile named Cornelius and witness God's gift of the Holy Spirit filling Cornelius and his entire (Gentile) household. Ever since then, it had become well known that Gentiles were indeed being blessed by true faith in Christ.

However, among some Jews a question remained over **how** Gentiles could be saved. Many Jewish Christians still valued, revered, and obeyed the Law of Moses (just as they do today). They'd grown up with it their entire lives. Generation after generation of their family had passed down the rules, rituals, and traditions of what it means to be the people of God. For these Jewish believers, a devout life was not possible without certain practices and acts of faithfulness – one of which was circumcision. There was no category for an uncircumcised true believer in their minds, hearts, or theology.

So in order to correct what they see as a deficiency in the lives and faith of the new Gentile people of God, they arrive in Antioch and say “*There is more you need to do if you really want to be saved.*”

And it's that last little clause – “*if you really want to be saved*” – that prompted the strong rebuke and fierce debate from Paul and Barnabas. Because what these visitors from Judea were really saying was this: “**Jesus is not enough.**” Something other than Jesus, more than Jesus, in addition to the work and love and sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus is required for you to really be saved.

When talk like that is allowed to take root, it quickly erodes the foundation of the Church and of the Christian faith. Which is why Paul and Barnabas took immediate action to get this all sorted out. V2-4 tells us that the church in Antioch quickly sent them to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles and disciples there and settle the matter. Once they arrived the question of how Gentiles are saved was voiced once again:

5 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."

So the **conflict** brought before the church – from within the Church – is this: ***What is necessary for salvation? What is required of us? Are the rules different for Jews and Gentiles? What must be done, and what must we do, to be saved?***

Before we get into exploring the answer in the text, I want you to consider whether or not you've ever heard someone say salvation is only possible if you believe in Jesus...*and do something more*. These days we probably don't often hear people saying that you must be circumcised and strictly obey all the Laws found in the Old Testament. But perhaps other similar statements do sound familiar...

"Unless you clean up your life, act right, look perfect, and go to church every Sunday you cannot be saved."

"Unless you vote for this political candidate, or unless you support this political party, you cannot really call yourself a Christian."

"Unless you care about this social issue the same way I do, you can't really think you are a believer in Jesus"

"Unless you add this or that to what Christ did for you, your faith doesn't really count. It doesn't really save you. You need to do better if you really want to be in this little club we call the Church."

You have probably heard things like this said. You have probably had them said to you. And, I'm sure many of us have been the ones saying them to others. Lord knows all three have been true of me.

What I hope we can all see by the end of our time is how wrong and deeply damaging these sort of statements often are.. Because ultimately all they do is obscure and cast doubt on the Gospel. They make people believe their salvation depends on them, on what they can do, and whether or not they can measure up to a standard...that really doesn't have much to do with the Gospel, or with Jesus, at all.

All this does is lead people further away from what they really need: a life based not on their own works, *but on the grace of God, and on His grace alone*.

What is truly necessary for salvation? Let's see how the early church answered this critically important question.

In response to this **conflict**, the believers in Jerusalem gather and hold what has come to be known as the Jerusalem Council – the first ever meeting a congregation of Christ followers for the purpose of settling a theological issue with massive practical ramifications.

For a while everyone gets to chip in their 2 cents on the subject, until finally, Peter stands up and gives his thoughts on the matter.

First, he makes it clear that everything in relation to the salvation of the Gentiles has been due to the **work and sovereign will of God** all along:

7 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.

8 God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us.

9 He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.

In v 7 he says it was GOD’S choice that the Gentiles get the chance to hear and believe the gospel.

In v 8 he says it was GOD, who knows all that is really in the hearts of all people, that proved his acceptance of the Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he had with the Jewish believers.

In v 9 he says it was GOD who did not discriminate between Jew and Gentile, but instead purified the Gentiles' hearts by faith. God himself made the Gentiles into people who could hear, believe, repent, and be saved.

Peter is doing something subtle and incredible with this argument. The question that was being debated was “What is necessary for salvation? ***What must we do?***” But Peter’s answer reveals that there is a problem with that question. It assumes our salvation is up to us. It looks for what work we must do in order to secure our own forgiveness and earn our own place before God.

But the Gospel of Jesus Christ isn’t about what we must do. The Good News of salvation by grace through faith in Christ is all about what God has already done. It’s all about God’s own desire to see His Name, His fame, and His love for people spread throughout the world.

The first thing that is necessary for salvation, says Peter, is to realize with awestruck wonder all that God is doing on our behalf. Not just for some. Not just for a select few. For all who hear and believe.

Peter next points out that what these Jewish believers are demanding of the Gentiles – that they must be circumcised and follow the Law of Moses – is something that they themselves (both individually and collectively) have never been to do.

10 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?

The accusation that the pro-circumcision/law group was “test[ing] God” is no small thing. To “test God” means to insist on something that is against God’s will and stretches his patience to the point of breaking and bringing on judgment.

Circumcision had indeed once been required of the people of God. The Mosaic Law had indeed been something God wanted his people to follow. But these burdens proved too much, and human beings proved too incapable of obedience to be saved in this way. Peter says *we can't demand of others what God himself does not require.*

The Gospel is something different than all that. It is something greater, sweeter, and more amazing. It is what Peter declares in v11:

11 No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

And here it is, the answer we've been seeking, the brilliance of this theological council, and the beauty of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We believe that all who are saved are saved by grace, and grace alone.

What is necessary for salvation? Recognize God's grace. Receive God's grace. Have your life completely changed by God's grace. Our salvation is not about what we do. It's about how much God loves us, and all He has done for us. *We believe that all who are saved are saved by grace, and grace alone.*

The simplest definition is that grace is "undeserved favor". It's kindness, love, compassion, forgiveness, and blessings you did not, and cannot earn.

The fundamental, non negotiable, essential truth of Christianity is that not a single one of us deserves a relationship with God. We were given the gift of being close to our Creator. We are blessed by love, by sacrifice, and by the miraculous power of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We must not make the mistake of believing or preaching, "you are saved by Jesus and by your own effort". That's not the Gospel. You are saved by grace through faith in Christ alone, and your life changes in profound ways as a result of that saving grace.

Friends, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ invites you to abandon your burdens and instead take up your worship. Your God is not demanding a perfect obedience. He is offering His own perfect love. Stop trying to earn your keep. Stop demanding others try to earn their way to God. Start enjoying all Christ has earned by his work and given to you through his love.

After Peter's speech, the council listens to the report of Paul and Barnabas, who confirm by way of their experiences all Peter has argued for and defended: God is accepting the Gentiles. The Holy Spirit is transforming them. Faith in Christ is saving all who hear and believe.

After this, the Apostle James spoke and gave voice to the **final decision on the matter at hand**. He agrees with the testimony of Peter, Paul, and Barnabas. In v16-19 he also draws on the words of Amos, a prophet of Israel, and affirms that it has always been God's plan to include the Gentiles – indeed, to include the whole world – in His invitation to salvation:

With all this in mind, James declares,

19 *“It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.*

I love this decision. Let’s not make it harder than it needs to be on those who are turning to God. Let’s not add burdens they cannot endure. Let’s not get the Gospel wrong by making it about our work. Let’s share the grace of Christ with all who come seeking it, and celebrate every single person who chooses to believe.

And then James seems to immediately do the exact opposite of what he’s decided, saying that there are somethings the Gentiles must do, or more specifically not do, in order to remain in good standing with the church and their faith:

20 *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.*

21 *For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.”*

Why did James tell the Gentiles to abstain from these four things: *food “polluted by” (sacrificed to) idols, sexual immorality, consuming the meat of animals that had been strangled, or consuming any blood.*

Here is my best guess as to why these things were such a big issue: all four of these practices were part of various pagan temple feasts and celebrations. Gentiles who decided to follow Jesus may still have felt like they could participate in those feasts and festivals and retain their faith. James is warning them about how unlikely that is. Furthermore, even if a Gentile believer could somehow manage to go to the barbecue over in the Greek temple district and some of the food that had been offered up to a god without being swept up in sinful and immoral behavior...it would have been impossible for Jews to have any fellowship with them after that. Everything about Greek temple worship was abominable to the Jewish conscience and the Christian way of life.

So James is basically saying this: “We’re not going to hold you to our old customs or traditions. We don’t think God will require anything like that from you, so we won’t either. God’s grace to us is God’s grace to you, too. HOWEVER...we hope you’ll meet us halfway, and keep away from such things that we believe to be spiritually dangerous and objectively evil. Please don’t go to those temple celebrations. It will only cause you trouble and wound our fellowship.”

We are indeed saved by grace. But that grace should also begin to reshape our lives, change the things we do, and influence what we choose to get involved with. James’ advice to Gentile believers was this: *walk away from evil things of your previous life.* Choose fellowship with your new brothers and sisters in the church. (It’s good advice for us today, too.)

The rest of the passage (v22-35) goes on to describe how a letter was crafted by the council and sent throughout all the churches in the Roman Empire, sharing the decision. We are told it was received with gladness and

encouraged many. The chapter ends with Paul and Barnabas returning to Antioch and continuing their ministry there.

As we reflect on this passage as a whole, I think there are two important takeaways that would benefit us to reflect on and seek to apply to our lives.

The first is this: since ***we believe that we are saved by grace, and grace alone*** then ***we need to accept this gift***. We need to embrace this grace by which we are saved. We need to treasure what Christ has done for us. And we should live our lives in response to that grace.

This can, admittedly, be a hard thing to do. The idea of “receiving grace” seems a little bit intangible at times. So try this: spend some time reflecting on how your life is different because you believe in Jesus Christ. What kind of person have you become as you have walked further along in your faith?

- Do you find that you have peace in your heart, even in the midst of crisis and chaos?
- Are you able to share wisdom and truth with others in loving ways?
- Do you often feel compelled to act kindly, justly, and compassionately toward others even when – ESPECIALLY WHEN – it costs you something to do so?
- Can you recall the lightness and gladness in your heart when you know you’ve been forgiven for a wrongdoing you have confessed?

Let these questions, and others like them, stir up gratitude within you for all God has done for you and given to you. And then, with that gratitude filling your heart, ask yourself this:

How can you embrace the grace of Jesus Christ this week?

How can you pray to him, praise him, and thank him for all he has done?

How can you make changes in your life that honor God’s grace, and show how it is influencing and transforming who you are and what you do?

How can you share the saving grace of Christ with others? Who, specifically, in your life needs to hear about the goodness of the Gospel that has saved you?

Or, if you are not yet a believer, I would ask you this: does any of this sound good to you? Does it sound like something you want to know more about? Does it sound like something you want to be a part of? If so, then I hope you are encouraged and excited to hear that the only thing that stands between you experiencing this grace is a genuine, heartfelt, honest confession of your need for Jesus to be your Savior. No work required...just faith. And if that’s something you want to do, then by all means, do it today. Accept God’s grace through faith in Christ. It is for you, just as much as it is for anyone else here. No matter your past. No matter your concerns. The grace of Jesus Christ is for you.

The second thing we need to do in light of this passage is to let go of all things in our lives that lack grace.

As a follower of Jesus, there is no need to be cruel to yourself. And there is no need to be cruel to others. If Jesus Christ Himself looks at you and looks at your neighbors and looks at the people of this world and in love lavishly favors us all with forgiveness and new, everlasting life...why on earth would we ever want to make little of that love or try to diminish any life with evil actions and intentions?

Let go and be rid of all things that are characterized by selfishness, greed, and immorality. Let go of your judgment of others. Let go of expectations, rules, and regulations that add to the burdens of this life. Faith in Christ is meant to be a blessing. If you find it to be otherwise, then I'd suggest you seek the ways in which you are pursuing self-righteousness instead of God's pure, unearned, grace-given love.

In what ways might you let go and repent of a lack of grace for yourself or for others?

We believe that all who are saved are saved by grace, and grace alone.

Thank God, and praise Him, for this incredible gift.