

Grace Alone
Acts 15:1-35
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Recently, Beth and I stopped by a grocery store to pick up a few items. To save time, we decided to use the self-checkout option [I normally go to a cashier as a way to support jobs]. When I tried to scan the first item, the machine sounded an alarm, and the screen showed an error. As I waited patiently for the worker to come over, I assumed it would be a simple fix. She typed a few things into the keypad, and I tried again.

After scanning our five items, the screen showed we didn't owe anything, and another error message flashed at us. I was starting to get exasperated. The worker came over again and explained we weren't putting things in the bag correctly, so the machine thought we were shoplifting. She asked us to try again while she watched carefully. She was kind but I could tell she assumed we were too old to understand technology because she started to explain the whole process to us very slowly. Finally, I just asked her to scan everything for us.

What was supposed to be simple, had somehow become extremely complicated. Because we didn't understand the process, we (meaning me) became frustrated and just wanted to leave our items behind.

In our text today, we're going to see some Jewish background believers were making salvation extremely complicated, leaving many Gentile background believers exasperated and confused. The leaders in the early church sounded an alarm, clarifying and carefully explaining the good news of the gospel in a way that was easy to understand and embrace.

Five years ago, I preached a sermon called, "Engage with the Reformation" as we studied five simple sayings, which became the battle cry for the gospel.

By Grace Alone – not grace + merit
Through Faith Alone – not faith + works
In Christ Alone – not Christ + me
According to Scripture Alone – not Scripture + tradition
For God's Glory Alone – not God's glory + mine

We could summarize it this way: *Jesus + Nothing = EVERYTHING!*

Last week, we summarized Acts 14 this way: *Live on mission even when ministry is messy*. After evangelizing, discipling, and enfolding believers into reproducing churches, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch to celebrate what God had done over the past year. You can hear their unbridled enthusiasm in Acts 14:27: ***“And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.”*** At the end of the service, we’ll follow this same practice as we hear a report from Phil and Pattie Eager, our Go Team partners in Mexico.

Acts 15:1 begins with a group of people trying to add something to salvation: ***“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.’”*** Just when things were going great with gospel expansion, the early church was faced with a doctrinal dilemma. In essence, these false teachers were insisting Gentiles must first become Jews and obey Jewish ceremonial laws to be saved.

We’ll follow this outline to help us understand and embrace the simplicity of salvation.

- **Dissension** (1-5)
- **Discussion** (6-21)
- **Decision** (22-35)

1. Dissension (1-5). Paul and Barnabas realized this issue was a serious threat to the gospel so verse 2 tells us they ***“had no small dissension and debate with them.”*** The word ***“dissension”*** means, *“to stand against.”* They disputed the doctrine of works and debated with those who propagated it.

Because it was such a big issue, they, and others ***“were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders about this question.”*** By the way, even though Jerusalem is south of Antioch, we read they ***“go up”*** because Jerusalem has a very high elevation. Jerusalem was where the church was launched so it makes sense to gather all the leaders together to decide what to do.

Verse 3 makes me smile because it shows even though they are focused on defending the faith, they take the time to celebrate salvation: ***“So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers.”*** Phoenicia was a pagan area and Samaria was where the hated

enemies of Israel lived. We're reminded how Acts 1:8 was being fulfilled: ***“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”***

When it says they were ***“describing in detail,”*** it means they were *“fully telling forth.”* This led to ***“great”*** joy, which is the Greek word, *“megas,”* meaning their joy was over-the-top.

When they arrived in Jerusalem, verse 4 tells us they were ***“welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them.”*** They were given a warm welcome and an exuberant embrace. Notice again how they gave God the glory for His work of grace. *Soli Deo Gloria!*

The dissension is described in verse 5: ***“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.’”*** The word ***“necessary”*** refers to something that *“absolutely must be done.”* They were teaching a “Jesus plus something else” gospel. To clarify, these individuals were born-again believers who were members of the Pharisees. Instead of giving God the glory for the gospel of grace, they were insisting Christians needed to be circumcised and follow the Old Testament laws. The words they used were strong – they *commanded* Christians to *obey* the law of Moses.

In other words, while they believed in Jesus, they were convinced it was necessary for Gentiles to first become Jews. They added a layer of works to the work of salvation.

How many of you have two doors into your house? We have a storm door and a wooden door. These Judaizers believed in two doors to salvation – they taught people first needed to come through the outer door of Judaism and then through the inner door of Jesus.

This is an extremely important issue because if you don't get the gospel right, it will affect whether your sins are forgiven and whether you will go to Heaven or to Hell when you die.

The wrong gospel will also kill the church. Zane Pratt tells the story of how Christianity died in Asia around the year 1400. Spiritually speaking, he attributed this to the *loss of the gospel*. As an example, a Turkic Chieftain wrote a letter to a

bishop asking how to become a Christian. The bishop's response was nothing about the gospel, but instead presented a number of *rituals and ascetic practices* he should keep. Pratt concludes: "*God was pleased to allow it [Christianity in Asia] to be taken out, because the gospel itself was no longer being proclaimed.*"

In Erwin Lutzer's book called, *The Church in Babylon: Heeding the Call to Be a Light in the Darkness*, he lists some false gospels found in the evangelical church. I'll list four of his and add six others I thought of.

- The gospel of permissive grace.
- The gospel of social action.
- The gospel of new age spirituality.
- The gospel of my sexual or gender preference.
- The gospel of self-help.
- The gospel of easy believism.
- The gospel of prosperity.
- The gospel of progressivism.
- The gospel of politics.
- The gospel of therapeutic moralistic deism.

We must hold to this truth: *Jesus + Nothing = EVERYTHING!*

2. Discussion. As they gathered to consider the matter, the leaders of the church gave three different speeches. Peter spoke first, followed by Paul and Barnabas, and then James, the half-brother of Jesus, wrapped it all up with a compelling conclusion.

Peter had a spiritual mic drop moment in verses 7-11: "*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 my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. ⁸ And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, ⁹ and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.*

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?

¹¹ But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

Here are the main points of Peter's defense of the gospel of grace.

- **He was chosen to take the gospel to Gentiles.** This took place ten years earlier and is spelled out in Acts 10. After receiving a vision showing God had declared all foods clean (in contrast to the Old Testament laws), Peter, a man with a strong Jewish pedigree, got up to preach and Cornelius and his family were saved even before he finished his sermon.
- **Gentiles were given the Holy Spirit when they were converted.** Here's an excerpt from Peter's sermon in Acts 10:43-44: *“To Him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.’ While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word.”*
- **There is no distinction in Christ between Jewish background believers and Gentile background believers.** Everyone who comes to Christ has their heart cleansed *by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone*. Romans 3:30: *“Since God is one—who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.”*
- **Requiring obedience to the Old Testament law was an unbearable burden.** The rabbis often used the metaphor of a yoke with reference to the Mosaic law. Jesus said something similar about the Pharisees' teaching in Matthew 23:4: *“They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.”* Peter pointed out the Pharisees weren't keeping the law they were requiring others to keep. This was further developed in Romans 2:23: *“You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law.”*
- **Salvation is by grace alone.** Peter's conclusion in verse 11 is crystal clear: *“But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”* Jews were used to thinking that people had to be saved like they were, but Peter said Jews had to be saved the same way Gentiles were saved, *by faith alone through grace alone in Christ alone*.

I love the response to Peter's preaching as seen in the first part of verse 12: *“And all the assembly fell silent...”* The word for *“silent”* is *“muzzled or muted.”* They couldn't argue with the evidence. Here's what I wrote down: *When you truly grasp God's grace, it will render you speechless.* Let's take a moment to be silent right now.

Barnabas and Paul speak next and *“related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.”* Jewish people were used to God doing signs so when these miracles took place among the Gentiles, it was a powerful witness of

His work. 1 Corinthians 1:22 says, ***“For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom.”*** Note again they declare what ***“God had done.”***

After they finished speaking, James aligned himself with Peter, Paul, and Barnabas by making two powerful points:

- **Experience of Simon Peter.** Look at verse 13: ***“Brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for His name.”*** After he established a relationship by calling them ***“brothers,”*** he reminded them of Peter’s experience. Interestingly, the name ***“Simeon”*** is the Hebrew name for Simon, which shows how Peter was named after one of the twelve tribes (By the way, we have a grandson named Simeon). They couldn’t readily discount Peter. Also notice how God was making the Gentiles a ***“people for His name,”*** a title previously reserved for Jews alone.
- **Exposition of Scripture.** Experience is powerful but we must always find our foundation in the exposition of Scripture. In verse 15, James said, ***“And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written.”*** By mentioning the ***“prophets,”*** James was showing he could appeal to more than one Old Testament text to defend the inclusion of Gentiles by faith alone.

James showed his belief in *Sola Scriptura* by quoting from the last chapter of the Book of Amos in verses 16-18: ***“After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, 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.”***

James concluded his sermon in verses 19-21: ***“Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God,²⁰ but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood.²¹ For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.”***

The word ***“trouble”*** means, ***“to annoy, vex, or disturb.”*** I like how another translation renders this: ***“We should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are***

turning to God.” Because the gospel is a gospel of grace, these Gentiles were not to be burdened with additional performance expectations.

These puzzling prohibitions were a common part of heathen rituals these new believers may have participated in, so it made sense they were told to abstain from them. In addition, since these were stumbling blocks for those raised on a kosher diet, it was a way for Gentile background believers to love Jewish background believers. In other words, it was a missiological consideration.

Warren Wiersbe explains:

“The legalistic Jews willingly gave up insisting that the Gentiles had to be circumcised to be saved, and the Gentiles willingly accepted a change in their eating habits. It was a loving compromise...this kept the church from splitting into extreme ‘law’ and ‘grace’ groups.”

James proposed a discipleship response which focused on personal holiness demonstrated by avoiding idolatry and immorality. He also established the importance of harmony by urging them to limit their liberties for the sake of love. One pastor put it like this: *“The early church leaders were concerned about doctrinal integrity and relational health.”* By the way, these concessions appear to be contextually sensitive because in 1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1 the believers *are* allowed to eat food sacrificed to idols.

Jesus + Nothing = EVERYTHING!

This chapter begins with dissension and after detailed discussion, the leaders deliver their decision.

3. Decision. Because God enabled the apostles, the elders, and the whole church to reach a unanimous decision, in verse 22 they sent two men to accompany Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch. Wisely, one was a Jewish man named Judas (not that Judas) and the other a Greek named Silas. They represented the makeup of the church: *“Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers.”*

After careful consideration, they put their conclusion in a letter. Listen to verses 23-27: *“The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are*

of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. ²⁴ Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, ²⁵ it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶ men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth.”

The introduction of the letter acknowledged how this false teaching had stirred up, unsettled, and agitated these Gentile believers. Written around this same time, Paul had some very strong words in the Book of Galatians for those who were leading believers astray. Let’s look at three primary passages.

- Galatians 1:6-9: *“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ...If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.”*
- Galatians 2:15-16: *“We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.”*
- Galatians 5:1-4: *“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.”*

We could summarize the teaching of Galatians this way: *Jesus + Nothing = EVERYTHING!*

Acts 15:28 shows how the Holy Spirit led the leaders to this decision: *“For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements...”* The word for “burden” means, “weight or load.”

According to verse 29, the council adopted the recommendations of James: ***“that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality.”***

We see in verse 31 how the gospel of grace resulted in great rejoicing: ***“And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.”*** In verse 32, we read Judas and Silas ***“encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words.”*** BTW, this is my rationale for preaching sermons with many words! Verse 33 says they not only proclaimed the gospel, they were also present with the people before being sent back to Jerusalem: ***“And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them.”***

Showing again the need for believers to be discipled, verse 35 reads: ***“But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.”*** Teaching provides information and preaching focuses on life transformation.

Action Steps

1. If you’re in conflict with someone, follow the dissension-discussion-decision process outlined in Acts 15. When dissension happens between you and someone else, have a discussion together and then make a biblically informed and Spirit-led decision. This isn’t always possible, but we should always strive for peace as stated in Romans 12:18: ***“If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”***

2. Limit your liberty out of love for another believer. Is there something you can do, or not do, to demonstrate love for a fellow follower of Christ? I’m not saying you should compromise your convictions, but some of us could stand to ease up on our preferences for the sake of harmony as taught in 1 Corinthians 8:9-13: ***“But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak... Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.”***

3. Discern error and defend the gospel of grace at all cost. The word “gospel” literally means the announcement of good news. This message of good news is that salvation is by grace through faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross and His resurrection from the dead, whereby our sins are transferred to Christ and His righteousness is transferred to us. Listen to how the Apostle Paul defines the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4: ***“For I delivered to you as of first importance***

what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.” Jude 3 calls us to defend and contend for the gospel: “Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.”

4. If you’re not saved yet, now is the day of salvation (2 Corinthians 6:2).

- We all have the same *problem*. Romans 3:23: *“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*
- We all have the same *provision*. Romans 3:24: *“And are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”*
- We all have the same *prescription*. Romans 10:12-13: *“For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’”*

In contrast to the burdensome yoke of the law, Jesus promised a new yoke of love and liberty in Matthew 11:28-30: *“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”*

You don’t need a self-checkout salvation because everything has already been paid for you. It’s time to repent of your sins and receive the free gift of eternal life purchased for you through the shed blood of Jesus Christ on the cross and His glorious resurrection.

Invitation

The decision reached in Acts 15 allowed Gentile evangelism and gospel expansion to explode and eventually encircle the entire globe. Because Edgewood is a gospel-preaching church, we are a gospel-sending church. I want to invite Phil and Pattie Eager up now.

Interview with Phil and Pattie Eager

1. Can you share how God called each of you into cross-cultural gospel ministry? [both answer]

2. Please give us an update on your family.
3. What kind of ministry has God called you to in Mexico?
4. Why would you say it's so important to get the gospel right?
5. Can you share a story of how the gospel of grace has impacted someone?
6. How can we pray for you?