

## Sermon Notes

# WORSHIP SERVICE - 9.21.2025

## PART 33 - GRACE ALONE

### I. INTRODUCTION

- Grace plus nothing is the heartbeat of the gospel.
- A repeated challenge to that truth was the issue of what do Gentiles need to do to be saved?
- Do Gentiles need to become Jews first in order to be saved?
- We've already seen this issue with Peter and Cornelius, but it wasn't fully settled.
- In Acts 15, it comes to a head—and the gospel itself is on trial.
- What was at stake was the very character of the gospel.
- Is it a message of grace alone or is it grace plus something else?
- We will see how the early church defended the heart of the gospel and how we too must protect the good news that salvation is grace plus nothing.

Acts 15:1-21

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." 2 And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. 3 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. 4 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. 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."

6 The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. 7 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."

12 And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. 13 After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brothers, listen to me. 14 Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. 15 And with this the words of the prophets agree, 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 ruins,

and I will restore it,

17 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 18 known from of old.’

19 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.”

## II. THE CONFLICT

- The opening verses of the chapter detail for us the conflict that arose. “Some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers...”
- From Judea indicates that these were likely brothers from the Jerusalem church. These were men who believed the gospel as the apostles taught it.
- The problem was what they were teaching. “*Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.*”
- What they were teaching had grave salvific consequences.
- A fiery dispute arose. Paul and Barnabas challenge these men.
- These were fellow believers who were teaching grace plus works.
- Paul and Barnabas defended the gospel of grace alone apart from the law of Moses.
- Paul had to address these same things in his letter to the church in Galatia.
- The decision is made by the leadership at Antioch to send Paul and Barnabas along with some other brothers to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders to have this matter settled.
- Do Gentiles need to become Jews in order to be saved or can Gentiles be saved as Gentiles and remain Gentiles?
- They head out towards Jerusalem and everywhere they go they are sharing about how the Gentiles are being converted, and there is great joy and enthusiasm among all those who came to faith in those regions.
- They arrive in Jerusalem, they are welcomed by the brothers, all of the church warmly receives them, as do the apostles and the elders.
- And Paul and Barnabas share with them all that God had done through them and how God’s grace came upon the Gentiles in all of the places they had travelled.
- As they shared their exploits, some of the party of the Pharisees added their commentary.
- These were Jewish believers who previously belonged to the Pharisaic movement, not unbelieving Pharisees.

- “Make sure you’re reminding these Gentiles they need to obey the law of Moses, and that they need to be circumcised.”
- Ultimately the conflict was not centered around whether or not Gentiles could be saved, that matter had been settled. But rather, how Gentiles come to be saved.
- Do Gentiles have to take the Jewish path or can they bypass that completely?
- Is it grace alone or is it grace plus keeping the law and circumcision?

## EXAMPLES FROM CHURCH HISTORY

- Extreme ascetic practices like intense fasting and severe penance.
- During the Medieval church period, the Roman Catholic Church taught that salvation required not only Christ but also the sacraments administered by the church. These were presented as necessary for grace to be conveyed.
- At the Council of Trent (16th century,) the Roman Catholic Church reaffirmed that justification requires faith PLUS sacraments and cooperation with infused grace.
- In some of the Puritan and Pietist circles, strict moral standards had to be met before being welcomed as true believers.

## MODERN EXAMPLES

- Legalism—You have to get your life together before coming to Christ.
- Charismatic extremes—you have to have a second baptism in the Spirit with the evidence of tongues.
- Jesus + something else = salvation to be welcomed into the church

## Ligonier’s 2025 State of Theology survey

- Statement 14 - God counts a person as righteous not because of one's works but only because of one's faith in Jesus Christ.
- That is a true statement - but only a little over half of those surveyed strongly or somewhat agree with that statement.

## III. THE COUNCIL

- Two questions need to be answered.
- First, do Gentiles need to become Jews in order to be saved?
- Second, If we’re not demanding Gentiles to get circumcised and obey the law of Moses, how can Gentiles and Jews fellowship together?
- The party of the Pharisees, the Jews thought they had the simple solution, make the Gentiles get the covenant sign of circumcision and order them to obey the law of Moses.
- That’s what this first church council is about.
- Peter stands up and rehearses an event that took place some 13-14 years prior with the conversion of Cornelius and his household.
- And he reminds them, “*God made no distinction between us and them.*”
- “*At Pentecost, we received the Spirit, we spoke in tongues, and at Cornelius’ house they received the Spirit and they spoke in tongues, just as we did.*”
- Notice what Peter appeals to—God’s sovereign activity.
- It was God who sent him to preach the gospel to the Gentiles.
- It was God who cleansed their hearts by grace through faith.
- It was God who poured out His Spirit upon the Gentiles.

- Peter warns them, *“Why are you challenging God by questioning his gracious gospel? You’re putting a heavy burden on the neck of the disciples that we couldn’t even bear?”*
- The legalistic demands of the law were a heavy weight which even the most faithful Jew could not bear and they were expecting Gentiles to shoulder that burden!
- This is the key verse—v11 But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.
- Not one of the Jewish believers had been saved by law-keeping, why then require law-keeping of the Gentiles?
- There is only one way of salvation, that is through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- Paul and Barnabas testify to the signs God worked through them among the Gentiles.
- God’s stamp of approval was on their ministry and their message of grace alone.
- Apostolic witness and the evidence of the Spirit saving Gentiles and coming upon them just as he had upon the believing Jews, constitute all of the necessary proof.

## IV. THE CONCLUSION

- James, the Lord’s brother, steps up and issues the final verdict.
- *“Peter has given his own testimony of how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name.”*
- He quotes the prophets, Amos 9:11-12 which is about the Gentiles coming in and being welcomed into God’s family.
- v19 Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God...
- We’re not going to lay the heavy burden of the law on the Gentiles that we ourselves could not bear.
- The Judaizers were forbidden from troubling the Gentiles.
- That answers the first question that was before the council.
- Gentiles will be saved as Gentiles without first becoming Jews. It’s grace alone!
- James preserved the purity of the gospel message.
- And in order to address the second question, how can Jews and Gentiles be in fellowship together and celebrate together in a church service, in the letter he will present a small list of practical requirements to preserve unity and conscience in mixed gatherings.
- V19b ... 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.
- These are not conditions of salvation but conditions of fellowship.
- *The main point was: Don’t use your freedom in Christ to offend your Jewish brothers.*
- These are practical matters to keep unity, not conditions for salvation.
- Paul addressed these same things in 1 Corinthians 8.
- Freedom in Christ does not grant the right to sin or to offend another believer.
- Jews can practice the faith in their way and Gentiles can as well but they should be compassionate and understanding towards one another.
- We are one in Christ. People will know we are Christians by our love for one another.
- Never use your Christian liberty in such a way that offends or causes a weaker brother to stumble.

- The council was able to distinguish between what is essential for salvation and non-essentials, such as table practices for fellowship.
- They were able to uphold truth without creating needless barriers in coming to Christ.
- The church may not agree on everything, but it must act in love and humility.
- *"In essentials unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."* - Rupertus Meldenius

## THE MESSAGE DELIVERED TO GENTILE BELIEVERS

- Acts 15:22-23 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 with the following letter...
- The letter delivered the good news:
- Acts 15:28 For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements...
- Upon their arrival in Antioch, the church is gathered, the letter is delivered, and it is read to the whole church.
- The result—the whole church rejoiced because of its encouragement.
- Their salvation experience was valid.
- They didn't need to have the heavy burden of the law added to them.
- The church moves forward in peace.
- Judas and Silas encouraged and strengthened the brothers with prophetic words.
- And Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch for some time, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord.
- The Jerusalem Council settled it once for all, salvation is by grace alone.
- We are not saved by works, we're only saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus.
- If you are trusting in anything today other than Christ, your good deeds, good behavior, your Christian upbringing, your record of performance, or anything else, none of that will save you. It's grace alone by faith alone in Christ alone.
- Salvation is a gracious gift, you can't earn it.
- As you share the good news with others, don't add anything else to the pure gospel message.
- Keep the gospel central message of the gospel intact—its grace alone!
- When we add words to the gospel, we strap the burden back on. We load people down with rules, traditions, and requirements God never gave. And that is crushing!
- John Bunyan gave us a lasting picture of this in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Christian carried a heavy burden of sin on his back until he came to the cross. There his burden fell off and rolled away. That is the gospel—Christ takes the whole weight of our sin.
- Don't weigh people down with anything more than Jesus Christ and Him crucified.
- We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus...
- That's the gospel we must believe, protect, and proclaim, grace plus nothing.

## APPLICATION AND REFLECTION

In light of today's message....

- What did I learn about the gospel?
- How can I apply what I learned about the gospel to my life?
- With whom can I share the gospel this week?