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ACTS 15:1-35

If you remember, as we finished up **chapter 14** of **Acts** last Sunday, it ended on a note of praise and rejoicing. Paul and Barnabas had come back to Antioch and they had gathered the church together and they had reported all they had seen God do while they were on their first missionary journey.

They were excited because the door of faith had been opened to the Gentiles.

The Gospel was being **preached** to the Gentiles...

The Gospel was being **heard** by the Gentiles...

The Gospel was being **believed** by the Gentiles...

Churches were being planted in Gentile areas. Gentile lives were being transformed. God was truly working among the Gentiles.

But one thing we've seen over and over in the **Book of Acts** is this...when God blesses...Satan attacks.

And Satan isn't limited in his attacks on the church by folks **outside** the church. Oh no...many times Satan uses folks **inside** the church to do his bidding.

Acts 15:1...

The hardest of all ideas for human beings to grasp is the **doctrine of salvation by grace alone**. Why? Because **man always wants to add his two cents' worth**. We just know there is something we can do to add to what God has already laid out for us.

Folks will say, "Of course, you need the grace of God to be saved. No one can save himself. But you still have to do something."

Some say this "extra something" is **baptism**.

Some say this "extra something" is belonging to a **particular church**.

Others want to add good works or some **ecstatic spiritual experience**.

Those are the things folks say today... Back then folks were saying something quite different, but the issue was the same.

The first believers were Jews. They had grown up in Judaism and they were deeply attached to their traditions. They had been taught that there were certain things they absolutely **had** to do to have a relationship with God.

These early Jewish Christians would have said that it is indeed wonderful that Jesus has come.

I mean, after all, they'd been looking for their Messiah for centuries. They would have confessed that indeed Jesus had died for their sin. Yet, they would also have said that no one can be saved without being a Jew first of all. And they believed the "**door to Jewishness**" was circumcision.

Now, in the early days of the church, the convictions of these Jewish Christians were not so serious a problem, because there weren't many Gentile believers...but as the size of the Gentile church grew it became a **much** more serious problem. The Jewish Christians had a real problem with the fact that the Gentiles **really were** relying on salvation by grace alone and were not submitting to the rite of circumcision. The Jewish believers were convinced that if the Gentiles were going to partake in this salvation, then they must also partake in circumcision.

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They just couldn't conceive that Gentile pagans could simply enter the church and immediately be on **an equal basis** with Jewish believers. That seemed unfair to them because after all, they had devoted their entire lives to keeping God's Law. They were also afraid that in a church that was becoming more and more Gentile that their Jewish culture and traditions and influence would be lost.

So...given all this...conflict between the Judaizers and the Gentiles was inevitable, wasn't it? As long as the Gentile converts were few, as we said earlier, the issue could be avoided, but by the time of the Jerusalem Council here in **chapter 15**, matters had come to a head.

The issue was not whether God wanted to save Gentiles, but **how** they were to be saved. Could they enter the kingdom of God directly...without coming through the Law of Moses?

Could these heathen, pagan Gentiles come into a relationship with Jehovah without adhering to the rules and rituals and regulations and legalism that the Law had required of the Jews all these centuries? I mean...are these folks just going to waltz into the presence of Almighty God simply through faith?

That was the question the Jerusalem Council convened to decide. And can you imagine how the Gentile believers felt? Hearing the Gospel...believing the Gospel...being saved and baptized and attempting to walk in God's will and then someone comes along and says, "Oh by the way, you're really not completely saved...you must also be circumcised."

It was imperative that this issue be settled once and for all!!

Verses 2-5...

Well, now in the space of only five verses, we've advanced from seeing circumcision required for salvation in **verse 1** to seeing circumcision and observing the Law of Moses required for salvation.

And, indeed that's the danger in false doctrine...it's sort of like the recounts going on in Florida...there's just no limit...there's just no stopping point...and we'll just make up the rules as we go along...

Let's look for just a moment at the other side of this. Let's think about exactly what was at stake if this teaching had been left to continue. What would this teaching have meant back then?

If it had been necessary that in order to be saved the Gentiles must keep the Law of Moses, it would have meant...

1) Paul and Barnabas were false teachers...

Paul taught that the Gentiles did **not** have to keep the Law of Moses to be saved. Paul taught the people of **that** day and he teaches the people of our day that it is **by grace through faith** that salvation comes to us... Paul also teaches us that God has ordained works for us to walk in **after** we're saved, but these works don't save us!!

True faith results in good deeds and I truly believe that our good deeds are evidence of our salvation...but Scripture makes it absolutely clear that absolutely nothing else is essential except our faith.

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If the teaching of the Judaizers was right and Paul was wrong, then the all book we have in the New Testament from the pen of the Apostle Paul are **not** divine revelation!!!

If it is necessary for the Gentiles to keep the Law of Moses to be saved, it also would have meant

2) our faith is not enough...

Let me ask you something...if our faith is not enough and we must add something else to it...when will we know when we've added enough? And if **good deeds** save us, it would make sense that **bad deeds** could unsave us, wouldn't it?

Think about it! Jesus set the example for the church when He accepted the faith of the thief on the Cross as being all that was needed for salvation. Was this man a Jew? Or was he a Gentile? We don't know...but we know this man wasn't saved by his words, was he? He didn't have to go be baptized or circumcised or speak in tongues...all he had to do was to believe the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ had the power to save him.

If keeping the Law of Moses is necessary for salvation, then it means

3) Gentiles throughout the whole world, both in the past and today, are not saved...

And this would mean that the folks we saw last week in Antioch and Iconium and Lystra and Derbe and the ones we'll see shortly in Macedonia and Athens and Corinth and Rome and the ones we see today in London and Atlanta and Memphis and all over the world who thought or think they are and were saved were and are lost.

This would mean all of the missionaries that we know are all wasting their time on the foreign field. This would mean that our pastors are wasting their time in the US.

This would mean that our preacher is wasting his time and it would mean that you and I are wasting our time and we could go on and on and on.

This would mean that all our parents and grandparents who claimed salvation by grace through faith died and went to hell.

But, Beloved, we're **not** wasting our time...and our ancestors who trusted in the grace of God to save them are not in hell...

"For by grace you have been saved through faith and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works"...(not as a result of **circumcision**, not as a result of **baptism**, not as a result of **speaking in tongues** or being **slain in the spirit**...not as a result of **anything** we could ever do!!)

Verse 6-9...

The first speaker was Peter and Peter began by reminding them of the early days of the church. He reminded them that it was God who had chosen **him** to take the Gospel to the Gentiles. Peter is referring back to his being sent to Cornelius to tell Cornelius and his household how to be saved.

The interesting thing here that I don't want us to miss is this...

Peter was called as the apostle to the Jew (Gal. 2:7-8).

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But in the case of Cornelius, a Gentile, it was Peter God chose to give the Gospel...and he goes on to say that God gave these Gentiles the Holy Spirit.

What Peter is saying is that God didn't make the slightest difference between the Jews and the Gentiles. They're both saved the same way! They both received the same Holy Spirit! God didn't send Peter to Cornelius' home to preach circumcision to the Gentiles, He sent Peter to Cornelius to preach salvation by grace through faith. The sheet God sent down to Peter represented all men from the four corners of the earth!!

Verse 9...How did God cleanse their hearts? By **circumcision**? By **baptism**? By **tongues**? By being **slain in the spirit**?

NO!! IT WAS BY FAITH!!

Well, don't you wish you could have seen the faces of the Judaizers when Peter was saying these things? But Peter's not through...

Verse 10...

The Law had become a burden. Jesus had described the Pharasaic traditions as "heavy burdens and grievous to be borne..." (**Matthew 23:4**)

Peter declared the Law as a yoke upon their necks...a yoke that neither they nor their fathers could bear.

Jesus said "Come unto Me and I will give you rest. Take **My** yoke upon you...**My** yoke is easy and **My** burden is light..." (**Matthew 11:28-30**)

Paul would later say that the Law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ. The Law never saved anybody! The Law was given so man could see they needed a Savior! Men were saved before the Law was ever given! In fact, Abraham believed before circumcision was given...and certainly before Moses was ever born. **If circumcision saved a person, why did Christ die?**

Knowing all that, why in the world would the Judaizers even **think** about wanting to impose the Law on someone else that even they had never been able to keep?

Verse 11...

Finally, Peter got to the bottom line...

"we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus..."

That was it! Salvation was of grace...not of Law. Grace is the unmerited favor of God. Grace is our getting something from God that we don't deserve.

Look at what else Peter said...

"we are saved...as they also are..."

What a great thing for Peter to say! Peter is talking to Jews. Peter himself is a Jew. Peter normally would have said it the other way around. He would have said, "We believe that they can be saved by grace through faith, just like us." But that's just the point Peter is making...Peter is saying "they don't **have** to become like us to be saved" and to drive that point home, he said,

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“we believe by grace even we Jews are saved, just like the Gentiles.”

Verse 12...

Barnabas and Paul affirmed and reinforced what Peter has just said, and they did it by simply reporting what God had done through them among the Gentiles.

They didn't argue theology with these Judaizers,
They simply said, “Folks, God is working. Who
are we to stand against God?”

Peter has spoken before the Council. Paul and Barnabas have spoken before the Council...now, let's see what James has to say...

James is the half brother of the Lord Jesus. James is also the leader of the church of Jerusalem. As such, James' words would carry a lot of weight with the Jewish believers there. Most theologians agree that James tended to be somewhat legalistic and that he would tend to agree on the side of the Judaizers...so everyone must have held their breath when he got up to speak!

Verses 13-21...

First of all I want us to see that James used the name “Simeon”...instead of “Simon” for Peter. “Peter” was Peter's Greek name. “Simon” was Peter's Jewish name and “Simeon” was **the most Jewish form** of Peter's Jewish name.

Then, James did what neither Peter nor Paul nor Barnabas had done so far in this debate. James went back to the Old Testament and reminded these folks that God had promised way back then that the Gentiles would bear His name.

Did you know Jesus visited James after His resurrection? I wonder if Jesus gave James a special ability to recall and quote the Old Testament.

And **verse 17** doesn't say anything about the fact that they would need to be circumcised first, does it?

In effect, James was saying...

“God has spoken on this matter. God said He would save the Gentiles. And indeed He is doing just that. We must not impose on the Gentiles any demands that God has not imposed on them. Therefore, in my judgment we must not oppose God or His holy Word by making it difficult for the Gentiles to turn to God.”

(Aren't you glad this matter didn't have to go before the Florida Supreme Court?)

The next part of this chapter is a letter James wrote to the church at Antioch. James told the Gentiles that the folks who had disturbed them...the **Judaizers**...had not been instructed to do so by the church at Jerusalem. James tells them that he is sending Barnabas and Paul and Judas and Silas to give them a report of their meeting.

Then James gave them some instructions. James is saying,
“You're not instructed to be circumcised to be saved, but
you **are** instructed to do a few things because you are saved.”

Verse 29...

Why did James give them this three-point instruction?

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Well, we need to remember that the Jews and Gentiles had never been friends. The Jews look down on the Geniles and the Gentiles knew it.

James is trying to bring together the Jewish believers and the Gentile believers, isn't he? To smooth the way to social acceptance and spiritual fellowship between the Jewish and Gentile believers, the Gentiles should be prepared to take some measures...

There are three ways a person can live...

1) A person can live with his life governed by license.

This person says,

"Hey, I'm free to do anything I want to do. I'm saved. I can't be unsaved, so I'm going to do whatever I want And I don't care what anyone else thinks..."

That person probably isn't saved at all...he cares nothing for the things of God and he believes he has license to do anything he pleases.

2) A person can live with his life governed by legalism.

This person says,

"Oh, I don't do this and this and this. I do that and that and that. If you don't do my 'do's' and if you don't don't my 'don'ts' then there's something bad wrong with your spiritual life. You're just not as deeply spiritual as I am if you don't follow all **my** rules and regulations."

3) A person can live with his life governed by love.

This person says,

"If it bothers you if I eat meat sacrificed to idols, I won't do it, because I **love** you. If God has commanded me to keep my body pure, I will do that because I **love** Him. If your tradition says the life of the flesh is in the blood, I won't violate your tradition because I **love** you and I don't want to offend you."

God has called us not to walk in **licentiousness**...doing anything that feels good!

God has called us not to walk in **legalism**...in bondage to all sorts of rules and regulations!

God has called us to walk in **love!** We're not to go out of our way to offend our brothers or sisters in Christ and may I say to you, by the same token, we're not to go out of our way to be offended, either.

Paul wrote a whole chapter on this subject...**Romans 14**. Paul told us we should practice self-denial for the sake of the weaker brother. (If you have time this afternoon read this chapter.) See, we need to understand that many times our brother who is weak is also our brother who considers himself very "religious". He's so religious that he's judgmental in all that he does. But Paul tells us that we're to deny ourselves in order not to offend that brother.

Verses 30-35 simply tells us that this letter was delivered, read and joyfully received.

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Let's just summarize what we've seen in this lesson and then we'll be through. There are two principles laid out very clearly for us here...

1) as those under grace we are not to make non-Biblical demands of others.

In that day, this meant not demanding a Jewish lifestyle of Gentiles. Today this means we're not to make areas of **our** lifestyle that aren't spelled out in Scripture the norm for everyone else if they're to be "good" Christians. When I think of this I think of the way **we** dress, the books **we** read, the music **we** listen to...imposing what we believe is right for **us** on others.

God made us all different! And if we thrust on others the things **we** believe necessary to a life of godliness, we repeat the sin of the Judaizers!! Listen, if folks need to be changed...**God** will see to it!! He doesn't need us to be someone else's Holy Spirit.

Extra-Biblical restrictions take their toll. I know women **our** age, even in our own class, who are **still** struggling with a childhood spent in legalistic homes!!

Before we go on...may I also say that we don't work to keep ourselves saved? Our being kept in the hands of God is His doing...not ours. Nothing we do gets us saved and nothing we do keeps us saved!

The other principle we see in today's lesson:

2) because we are under grace, we gladly restrict our freedom for the sake of others.

There was nothing wrong in and of itself with eating meat sacrificed to idols. Idols don't exist. Nor was there anything wrong with eating a rare steak...a steak with a little blood...but James implied they must boil it or eat it well done for the sake of fellowship with the Jews.

Paul put it this way in **1 Corinthians 9:19-21...**

Was it Shakespeare who said, "To thine own self be true"?

Well, Paul didn't say that...Paul said, "I look around at the folks I'm trying to win to Christ and I make adjustments in my own behavior that I might win them to Jesus Christ!"

Paul's not saying he's compromising his convictions...Paul is simply walking in love!!

Well, I pray we'll realized anew and afresh that our salvation is Jesus plus nothing! I pray we'll not impose our requirements for salvation and sanctification on other people. I pray we'll allow the Holy Spirit to do the work that only He can do!

I pray God will show us the difference between **license** and **legalism** and **love** and I pray that when He does we will choose to walk in love as Paul did.