

Acts 15:1-21 (DHT)

¹After coming down from Judea, some were teaching the brothers that if you are not circumcised by the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved. ²Then Paul and Barnabas brought no small dissension and debate with them. After that they appointed Paul, Barnabas, and some others from them to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders about this disagreement. ³Therefore, having indeed been sent by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria on the way, relating in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, bringing great joy to all the brothers.

⁴Then, after arriving in Jerusalem, the church, apostles, and elders received them, and they disclosed all God had done with them. ⁵But, some of the believers of the Pharisee sect rose up saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them and instruct them to keep the Law of Moses.” ⁶Then the apostles and elders were gathered together to examine this word.

⁷After much debate took place, Peter rose up saying to the men, brothers, you know that from ancient days God chose from among you my mouth by which the Gentiles would hear the word of the Gospel and believe. ⁸The heart-knowing God witnesses to them, giving them the Holy Spirit just the same as to us; ⁹he made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. ¹⁰Therefore, why are you now tempting God, laying a yoke upon the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we are able to bear? ¹¹But we believe we are saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus the same way they are.

¹²Then all the multitude stopped talking and were listening to Barnabas and Paul explain what God had done with signs and wonders by them among the Gentiles. ¹³But after the men stopped talking, James answered, saying, “Brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴Simon has explained how God first visited the Gentiles, to accept from them a people for his name. ¹⁵The words of the prophets agree with this, as it is written:

¹⁶After these things I will return and rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins; I will erect it ¹⁷that the remnant of humanity may seek the Lord; all the Gentiles upon whom are called by my name. Thus says the Lord who does these things. ¹⁸From eternity, God has known all his works.

¹⁹Therefore, my ruling is not to trouble Gentiles who are turning to God, ²⁰but to write to them to abstain from the pollution of idols, sexual-immorality, and from that which is strangled—from blood. ²¹For from ancient generations every city proclaims Moses on every Sabbath when he is read in the synagogues.” *This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.*

The Problem

How many of you have ever encountered a legalist? Someone who talks to you as if you’re not really saved unless you...say the sinners prayer; unless you tithe enough; unless you agree with John MacArthur. You’re not really saved if you have tattoos; if you drink or smoke, or cuss; or if you experience same-sex attraction. You’re not really saved unless you’ve shared your testimony enough times; unless you serve in children’s ministry; unless you give up your meal or empty your wallet every time you see a homeless person. You’re not really a Christian unless you... How many of you have ever encountered a legalist?

The Gospel is not just for unbelievers. The Gospel is for believers. Believers need to be regularly reminded of the Gospel; reminded of *the radical simplicity of grace* so that we can refute those who talk to us as if we aren't a good enough Christian, or even worse, to avoid becoming legalists ourselves. God supernaturally rescued Israel from Egypt, and yet there are no fewer than 97 times when the Sons of Israel had to be reminded of God's redemption of them. I mean, how embarrassing; how could you forget such an incredible move of God in your life? But we're just like them. Believers need the Gospel because believers are prone to the pride of man that says I can do this on my own; and believers need the Gospel because believers are prone to the despair of not being where we'd like to be; doing things we wish we did not and not do things we wish we would.

This was almost exclusively a Jewish movement. Jesus was a Jewish man, the Jewish messiah of his fellow Jews, and the first Christians were all Jewish. The Holy Spirit poured out and thousands upon thousands converted. There was radical unity among the early Christians. If anyone had a need, it was met because they all had one mind to love God, to love one another, and to devote themselves to the teachings of the apostles. The early church was growing exclusively by Jews coming to know Jesus as their long-awaited Messiah.

But with the Eunuch of Ethiopia and Cornelius the Centurion, the Holy Spirit was also poured out on the Gentiles. Peter had an apocalyptic vision in which it was revealed to him that Gentiles must be included in the People of God through faith in Jesus the Messiah. Luke told us there *were* some circumcised believers who glorified God because the gift of the Holy Spirit was given to the Gentiles in the same way it was to them (11:18). But this also caused great distress for other Jewish Christians; not all were on board quite so fast.

The Church was being filled with Gentiles, and some legalists began to teach that those Gentiles were not really saved. You're not really saved unless you get circumcised. You're not really saved unless you first *become* Jewish, because God is *ours*, not *yours*. According to these legalists, if the Gentiles wanted to join the movement, they needed to convert through their outward works of obeying Moses *before* they could believe in Jesus Messiah. These legalists lost sight of the *radical simplicity of grace* at the heart of the Gospel. These legalists mixed up the Law-Grace formula by insisting on obedience *to earn* God's grace.

There is a common error still held today that people before Jesus were saved by obedience and people after Jesus are saved by grace through faith. But this is not how God

works. In the Garden, God tells Adam ‘I have *given* you *all* these trees to eat, but you must not eat of this specific one because it will kill you’ (Gen. 2:16-17). The gift comes before the command to obey. The Ten Commandments begin: I am YHWH your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the place of slavery, therefore do not have any other gods besides me” (Ex. 20:2-3). The gift of salvation is not the result of obedience, but rather Israel was to obey *because* they were saved. In Lev. 26:13, God says, “I am YHWH your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, so that you would no longer be slaves. I broke the bars of your yoke and *enabled* you to live in freedom.” The gift of salvation is what gives us the *ability* to obey. In Deut. 24, there are some laws about protecting the poor, and the final verse provides the justification. Deut. 24:22 says, “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt. Therefore, I am commanding you to do this.” God’s salvation-work comes *before* obedience. You must belong before you can behave. We can’t obey without God *first* making the way; we can’t love God without God *first* loving us. God’s work of salvation *always precedes* obedience, which means God’s salvation is *always* a firm act of grace. These legalists forgot how critical the order is, and this led them to destructive theological error.

Why Circumcision?

What does circumcision have to do with salvation? In Genesis 12, God promised a man later renamed Abraham that God would bless Abraham and the Gentile nations specifically through one descendant of Abraham. Abraham had a hard time believing God because he and his wife were quite old. Abraham sought to procure a son through alternative means (15:2), but this was a faithless act, for God promised the seed of blessing would come from the sexual union of Abraham and his wife Sarah, a promise Abraham believed in Gen. 15:6, and was declared *righteous because of his faith*. Notice the order. God made a promise in Genesis 12. Abraham believed the promise in Genesis 15. And *then* God made a covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17, instituting circumcision as the sign of the promise. All males in Abraham’s family on their eighth day of life were to be circumcised as a reminder of God’s promise to Abraham that his one, royal seed would be through whom God would bless the ends of the earth.

Why was the sign only given to males? God’s promise to Abraham was connected to his sexuality. One seed would come from Abraham’s own body and be the catalyst of God’s blessing to the Gentiles. Abraham’s sexual organ was the instrument through which God’s

promise would be realized, so the covenant-sign for this *previously* given and *previously*-believed promise are connected; both the *believed*-promise and the *sign-to-remember* that promise involved the male sexual organ of Abraham and all his descendants *until* the promised seed came. This did not mean women were excluded from the covenant-community; it simply means the sign corresponds to the promise.

We must also remember that circumcision was the *sign* of the promise, not the promise itself. The promise was fulfilled when the one seed of Abraham finally arrived, the man Jesus of Nazareth. That Jesus is *the* promised seed of Abraham is clear from Matthew and Luke’s genealogies. Circumcision pointed ahead to the Messiah, and a sign pointing ahead to the Messiah was no longer necessary, for the Messiah had arrived. These legalists lost sight of the glorious significance of the Gospel, that the Messiah they were waiting for arrived; the one to whom the *sign* of circumcision pointed had come; and if the one who fulfilled the promise had come, then it was time for the covenant blessings to extend to the ends of the earth.

The First “Ecumenical” Council in Church History in c. AD 50

“You’re not really saved unless you get circumcised.” This is what these legalists were teaching. But Paul and Barnabas had a series of encounters contrary to what these legalists were saying. How could it be true that you must be circumcised to be saved if the Holy Spirit was already being poured out on Gentiles who turned by faith from their idols to the one true and living God? This sharp disagreement led Paul and Barnabas to have “no small dissension and debate with them” (vs. 2).

So, the Antioch church commissioned Paul, Barnabas, and some others to go to Jerusalem to seek resolution to the significant question before them about how *anyone* is actually saved. When they arrived in Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas disclosed to the whole church what God had done with the Gentiles (vs. 4). This is when some believing Pharisees argued it is necessary to circumcise Gentiles and instruct them to keep the Law of Moses. This prompted the first ecumenical council in Church history, comprised of the leaders of the Church, to hear both sides. Peter summarized to the Jerusalem Council his personal experience with the Gentiles. In verses 8-11, we get Peter’s thought-process. He had this crazy experience he couldn’t explain and yet he just had to make sense of it. Peter tried making sense of his experience in light of who God is; his thought-process can be shown in six points.

First, the heart-knowing God witnesses to the Gentiles—meaning that since God knows the deepest depths of our souls, if God declares someone as clean then they *really are* clean, for no uncleanness can be hidden from God. Second, the heart-knowing God witnesses to the Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit just the same as to the Jews—Peter is relating to his experience that if God gives someone the Holy Spirit, then why do they need to do anything more to “get” the Holy Spirit they were already given? Third, the heart-knowing God gave the Gentiles the Holy Spirit just like the Jews, thus making no distinction between us and the “other.” It is clear from Scripture that God hates favoritism, for favoritism destroys justice. Peter pieces together that if God hates favoritism, then the fact that God has opened the door of faith even to Gentiles seems consistent with his unchanging character. Fourth, God made the hearts of Gentiles right with him *through faith*. Since there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile then it must also be true that Gentiles are saved by faith, just like the Jews were always called to live by faith. Fifth, Peter rebukes the Pharisees for placing expectations on Gentiles that were never on Jews, and as it turns out, expectations Jews were never able to obey in the first place. What they placed as a contingent to salvation could not be done by Gentiles, nor by Jews; it can only be done by the heart-knowing God who will be gracious and merciful to whom *he chooses* to be gracious and merciful (Ex. 33:19; Rom. 9:15-18). And this is what leads to Peter’s grand conclusion that we are all saved in the exact same way: by the *grace* of the Lord Jesus.

After Peter walked through his reasoning based on his *personal experience*, next were Barnabas and Paul. We don’t get their argument; we simply read that Barnabas and Paul explained what God did through them among the Gentiles. Like Peter, Barnabas and Paul give their evidence for Gentile inclusion by appealing to their personal experience. I don’t say this to criticize Peter, Paul, or Barnabas; it just simply must be pointed out. A personal experience, even from an apostle, does not determine truth. An experience is subjective; truth is objective. One of the mantras of our postmodern milieu is the philosophically untenable claim, “that’s just your truth, this is my truth.” If someone makes a claim against my own narrative, it’s just fake news. To our culture personal experience equals truth, and if personal experience equals truth, then *all truth is relative*, which is just another way of saying there is *no* truth.

These apostles had personal experiences with Gentiles they could not explain because it caught them off guard, but they also couldn’t deny it, and so they tried to piece it together with

what they knew to be true about God. The question before the Jerusalem Council was whether the experiences of Peter, Paul and Barnabas were consistent or in conflict with God’s Word.

The Resolution to the Problem

This is when James, the brother of Jesus, and the president of the Jerusalem Council gave his ruling. James began by summarizing Peter’s argument: God visited the Gentiles to accept a people for his name. And then James declared that the words of the prophets agreed with this. James fuses together Amos 9:11-12 with Isaiah 45:21, in a way that also alludes to God’s promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3—all of which clearly declare God’s plan for *Gentiles* to be covenantally-blessed *alongside* Israel.

God was about to do something that would enable the remnant of *humanity* to seek the Lord; the work God was about to do would *cause* Gentiles to call on God’s name for salvation. After God sent Israel into exile as judgment for their idolatry, their worthless sacrifices, and their flagrant sexual-immorality, God was going to provide them *and the Gentiles* the way to salvation by raising up the Messiah, Jesus from Nazareth, the Son of God, who after dying in our place was raised up by God the Father that we may be made whole by putting our faith in him. James ruled that the personal experiences of Peter, Paul, and Barnabas were not coincidences, but part of God’s plan all along. These experiences were not just things that happened, but were experiences *confirmed* by God’s Word.

Seventy years ago, James Stewart prophetically warned against “a theologically-vague and harmlessly accommodating Christianity, which is less than useless.”¹ In our everything-goes culture, we must subject our experiences and our desires to the truth of God’s Word. Scripture tells us God is unchangeable in three ways: God’s Word is unchangeable; God’s character as revealed in his Word is unchangeable; and God’s promises as revealed in his Word are unchangeable (Isa. 40:8; Heb. 6:7-18). Scripture is the steady beam by which we must judge our experiences lest we deceive ourselves into disregarding God’s Word in favor of what’s convenient or “good” for me. Augustine said it like this: If you believe what you like in God’s Word and disregard what you don’t like, then it’s not God’s Word you believe in, but yourself. If we have any experience or desire that contradicts God’s Word, then no matter how “Christian” it sounds, it is not from the Holy Spirit or God-honoring. At the Jerusalem Council the personal

¹ James S. Stewart, *A Faith to Proclaim* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1953), page 16.

experiences were given a hearing, but the Word of God was the deciding factor. Peter’s experience was backed up by God’s Word. Therefore, we can boldly join Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and the Jerusalem Council that *we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, just the same as every other saved person around the world and throughout history.*

Gentiles who turn to the Lord should not be burdened with circumcision. But James doesn’t say they shouldn’t be burdened at all. Does obedience have a role in the lives of Gentiles who turn to God? The answer from James is a resounding “Yes.” To James, salvation-by-grace-alone does not mean works have *no* place in the life of a believer. Notice the order. Instead of works of obedience being the *root* of salvation, James says that works of obedience are the *fruit* of salvation. Later in his own epistle he writes that faith without works is dead (Jas. 2:17). Just as he ruled at the Jerusalem Council, faith comes first. Martin Luther famously said it this way, “We are saved by faith alone; but saving-faith is never alone.”

Is it necessary for someone to be circumcised to join the covenant-community? The answer of the Jerusalem Council is a decisive “No.” James says Gentiles are saved just like the Jews: by grace through faith in the resurrection of Jesus. *And* they must be burdened with fleeing from various types of *pollution*. Gentiles who believe the Gospel *need* to live holy lives. What it means to be holy is an important subject for another day, but this morning I just want you to notice the order. How is anyone saved? You are saved by putting your faith in the grace of what Christ did for you, *and after that* James says those of you who are saved ought *then* to obey. How easy it would be for us to join the legalists by saying you’re not really saved unless you clean yourself up first. No, we are saved by the *radical simplicity of grace*; meaning it is at absolutely *no* doing of our own; a grace that enables us to obey the Lord because the Lord has transformed our hearts to do so. If we do *anything*, even just one thing, to prompt our salvation, then it is not grace. The ruling of the Jerusalem Council is that Gentile converts *should* be burdened with lifestyle expectations, but these holiness-burdens are *post-conversion*, not *prerequisites* to conversion. Our obedience does not compel God’s love, but rather the love of Christ compels *us* (2 Cor. 5:14); we are only able to love God and love one another *because* God *first* loved us (1 John 4:19).

Gospel Presentation // Conclusion

When faced with theological division, the Church found resolution by appealing to the heart of the Gospel and by elevating Scripture over experience. The heart of the Gospel is the *radical simplicity of grace*. The only thing we contribute to our salvation is the sin that damned us in the first place. Since I can do nothing to compel God to save me, God’s saving of me is *exclusively* by grace; it is *entirely* undeserved. The content of what God graciously did to save me can be best understood as the person and work of Jesus Christ; who Jesus is, and what Jesus did *is* the Gospel. God made a promise to Abraham and Abraham put his faith in that promise. Jesus is the realization of that promise. Jesus is *the* promised seed of Abraham, whose virtuous life, vicarious death, and victorious resurrection brought God’s unyielding blessing to all the earth, to all who put their faith in him and submit to him exclusively as their Lord.

The virtuous life of Jesus Christ is of great importance, for it means his death could actually be vicarious, meaning in our place. To be sacrificed as an unblemished lamb, he had to live unblemished by sin. Jesus lived a perfect life, being tempted in every sort of way you are, yet he never gave in, not even once (Heb. 4:15). If Jesus did not live the perfect life; if Jesus did not resist *every* temptation, then his sacrifice on the cross was worthless. Thus, Paul writes that Jesus who knew no sin became our sin so that we who know no righteousness would become his righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21). The vicarious death of Jesus in our place is of utmost importance because his death is the *only way* your sins can truly be forgiven. In the words of a great modern hymn, “Upon a life I have not lived, upon a death I did not die; [but on] Another’s life, [on] Another’s death I stake my whole eternity. Not on the tears that I have shed, not on the sorrows I have known; [but on] Another’s tears, [on] Another’s griefs...I rest on these alone. Jesus, Son of God, I build on what your cross has done *for me*; there bore my death, I read, my guilt and pardon there I see.”²

Jesus lived the life we fail to live; he died in our place the death our sins deserve; and he was raised as our victorious king so all people who put their faith in him would be made right with God, unshackled from enslavement to sin, and indwelt by the Holy Spirit who enables you to live in freedom; that we may join Paul’s later words, declaring “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. The life I now live in the flesh I live *by faith* in the Son of God, who loved me, gave himself for me,” and was raised from the dead for me (Gal. 2:20; cf. Rom. 4:25).

² “Upon a Life” by Sandra McCracken

If you are not a believer, but you feel compelled by the *radical simplicity of grace* in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, I would simply say that it is not the sound of my voice; but the Holy Spirit who is calling you to come home to your perfect and loving Father who is ready with his warm, open arms to welcome you into his family. Today is the day of salvation; delay no further (2 Cor. 6:2); put your faith in Jesus Christ and if you do, God will forgive you of your sins, he will come into your heart, change your life, and give you a purpose that extends even beyond the grave. I implore you: put your faith in the finished work Jesus Christ today.

We do this—we put our faith in Jesus Christ the Son of God by casting aside our own works to cling to the finished and sufficient work of Jesus, who has redeemed us by *his* good works. And this is hard because our sinful nature tells us we need to earn it. “I am a good person because of what I have done,” many are inclined to say. Christianity, however, is the only religion in the world founded upon grace; in every other religion you have to earn it.

The hardness of heart; the unbelief of the Israelites in the wilderness that led them to grumble and complain against God following their redemption can just as easily manifest in believers. Just like Israel needed to be constantly reminded of God’s redemption of them from Egypt, we also need to be constantly reminded of God’s redemption of us from sin and death through the *radical simplicity of grace* in person and work of Jesus Christ.

Alistair Begg helpfully reminds us that “without the preaching of the cross; without preaching the cross to ourselves all day and every day, we will very quickly revert to faith plus works as the grounds of our salvation. So to go to the old Fort Lauderdale question, ‘If you were to die tonight and gain entry into heaven, what would you say?’ If you answer that, and if I answer it in the first person, we’ve immediately gone wrong: because I; because I believed; because I have faith; because I am this; [because I did this]. Friends, the only proper answer is in the third person; because *he*; because *he!* ...

“That’s the only answer. And if I don’t preach the Gospel to myself all day and every day then I will find myself beginning to trust myself [and] trust my experience, which is part of my fallenness as a man. If I take my eyes off the cross [and the resurrection], I can [only give] lip service to [Christ’s power] while at the same time living as if my salvation depends upon me, and as soon as you go there it will lead you either to abject despair or a horrible kind of arrogance. And it is only the cross of Christ that deals both with the dreadful depths of despair and the pretentious arrogance of the pride of man that says, ‘You know, I can figure this out and

I’m doing wonderfully well.’ No, ‘Because the sinless savior died, my sinful soul is counted free; for God the just is satisfied to look on *him* and pardon me.’ That’s why [Martin] Luther said most of your Christian life is outside of you, in this sense: that we know that we’re not saved by good works... But we’re saved as a result of what *Christ* has achieved [and] it gives to the believer a very important reminder of the story of God’s love we get to take out into a broken world. [The *radical simplicity of grace*] corrects my tendencies to [puff myself up] and [yet] gives me a confidence I couldn’t otherwise have; a confidence in the Gospel.”³

Let’s pray.

³ Alistair Begg, “The Power and Message of the Cross,” Sermon accessed via YouTube.