

Introduction

Please turn to Acts 15. Last week I told you Acts 15 is *one of the most* significant chapters in the entire NT for understanding the *rest* of NT theology. This theologically rigorous chapter forces us to reckon with how we should understand Law and Grace in our Christian life.

I mentioned last week that good works *do* have a role to play in the Christian life; however, I tried to emphasize that we need to get the *order* correct. Our good works earn us nothing, for we are saved by the radical simplicity of grace. I mentioned last week that we need to belong before we can behave; but that means once we *do* belong; once we *have* been adopted into God’s covenant-family there *is* the expectation of obedience. Following theologian Geerhardus Vos, we must remember that “God is a God who saves by grace, expects his people to obey him, and moves his people to obey him. This obedience can be ‘necessary’ without compromising in the least an affirmation of the radical grace of God.”¹ Obedience is *never* to get anything in return. If we do anything to *get* then we are not resting in the radical simplicity of God’s grace. But if we do anything to *thank* God for his undeserved gift of salvation, then our good works *will be* rightly motivated. Theologian Richard Gaffin says it like this: “A faith that rests in God the Savior is a faith that is restless to do his will.”²

We must remember that God’s work of salvation *always precedes* our obedience. Our big idea of the second half of Acts 15 is that God expects his people to joyfully respond to receiving salvation by prioritizing their holiness. Last week we answered the question: “What must I do *to be saved*?” Tonight we are answering the question: What must I do *after* I am saved?

Acts 15:22-35 (DHT)

²²Then it seemed good to the apostles and elders with all the church to choose men from them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas: Judas called Barsabbas and Silas, esteemed men among the brothers. ²³By their hand they wrote:

“The apostles, elders, and brothers; to the brothers among the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Rejoice! ²⁴Since we have heard some from us who were not given orders went and troubled you by words; upsetting your souls saying, ‘Be circumcised and keep the law,’ ²⁵it seemed good to us, after coming to one mind to choose men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶men who have handed over their souls for the name of our Lord Jesus the Messiah. ²⁷Thus, we have sent Judas and Silas. By their word, they will tell you the same. ²⁸For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay no burden upon you beyond these requirements: ²⁹to abstain from things sacrificed to idols, from blood of that which has been

¹ Bradley Green, *Covenant and Commandment: Works, Obedience, and Faithfulness in the Christian life* (Downers Grove: IV Press, 2014) page 68.

² Richard Gaffin, *By Faith, Not By Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation* (Bletchley: Paternoster, 2006) page 78.

strangled, and from sexual-immorality. You will do well to keep yourselves from these. Farewell.”

³⁰Therefore, after indeed being sent off, they went to Antioch, and having gathered the multitude, they gave the letter. ³¹After reading it, they rejoiced at its comfort. ³²Both Judas and Silas, who were also prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. ³³But after doing so for some time, they were sent away in peace from the brothers to those who sent them. ³⁴*But it seemed good to Silas to remain there.* ³⁵And Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching the word of the Lord, and preaching the Gospel to many others.³

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

The Priority of Holiness

By a show of hands, how many of you want to know God’s will for your life? Without a shadow of a doubt, I know God’s will for your life, and I am so bold as to prophesy in the name of Jesus of Nazareth that God’s will for your life is... that your life would be marked by holiness. Let’s turn real quick to Eph. 1:3-7.

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as **he chose us** in him before the foundation of the world, **that we should be holy** and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace.”

Certain things stick out to us: 1) God made a choice before the foundation of the world; 2) In eternity past God chose to save you and determined individual holiness to be your destiny; and 3) God’s predetermined destiny for your life flows *from* his gracious redemption of you. God’s will for you to be holy comes *after* his will to save you. John Calvin says it like this: “His [Christ’s] beneficence is...joined with such a mercy that through his Holy Spirit he dwells in us and by his [the Holy Spirit’s] power the lusts of our flesh are each day more and more mortified [put to death]; we are indeed sanctified...with our hearts formed to obedience.”⁴

People like to say we choose God, but I know of no verse in the Bible that says we choose God first, but I do know of those that say the opposite (John 6:44; 15:16; Tit. 1:1-2; 1 John 4:19). We are not saved by choosing God, as if we even could, otherwise it would not be

³ Verse 34 is rightly absent from most English translations following the 20th century Dead Sea Scrolls discovery.

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.14.9.

grace. We are not saved by choosing God; we are saved by responding with faith and submission to the grace God has already lavished upon us. If you are a believer in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ then God chose you to display his glory through you, and determined your destiny to be rooted in holiness.

In Acts 15:20, after decisively ruling that circumcision is not a prerequisite to salvation, James rules there were three things Gentile believers *need* to do, *after* coming to faith. James labels these things with this word, “pollution,” which means these three things fall under the category of holiness. These three things *pollute* believers in ways other sins do not. James also ruled that they should write a letter to Gentiles to share their decisions.

The Letter

The letter begins by describing the impact the legalists had. “We heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave no instructions.” The early Church devoted themselves to the teachings of the apostles, and these legalists were speaking *as if* they had apostolic authority. In Galatians 2, Paul refers to these individuals with the Greek word *Pseudo-Adelphos*. Paul refers to these legalists as *pseudo*-brothers, as false- or fake-brothers who were contradicting the teaching of the apostles. Rather than building them up, the theologically destructive teaching of the *pseudo*-brothers was tearing new believers apart.

The letter tells us the decision of the Jerusalem Council was unanimous. There was not one member of the apostles or elders who took the side of the legalists—not one! The Jerusalem Council authorized four individuals to speak authoritatively on their behalf, at risk of others who sought to do what the legalistic, *pseudo*-brothers did by claiming authority that wasn’t theirs. And then, the letter reveals whose authority the call to individual holiness actually came from. Whereas in verse 25 “it has seemed good to us” to authorize some preachers, in verse 28, “it has seemed good to *the Holy Spirit...*” to call you to the burden of holiness.

The words circumcision and grace are noticeably absent from the letter. However, there are two key reasons why the dispute from earlier in the chapter is still front-and-center. The first reason in the opening line, they address their letter “to the brothers” (vs. 23). Whereas the *pseudo*-brothers troubled these Gentile believers by questioning the authenticity of their

salvation, the Jerusalem Council makes very clear up front that if they have received the Holy Spirit by grace through faith in Jesus Christ then they are *already saved and part of the family*.

The second reason is toward the end of the letter, when the Jerusalem Council *does* place burdens on Gentile converts, they introduce the burdens like this: “...to lay no burden upon you beyond these requirements.” Gentiles *are* to be burdened with the lifestyle of holiness, but these burdens were the *only* things the Jerusalem Council wanted to stress to new believers. These are the *only behaviors* new believers need to prioritize.

The first two—blood sacrifice and idolatry—deal with how we ought to worship; the third one—sexual-immorality—deals with how we ought to use our bodies. The Jerusalem Council burdens Gentile believers with a limited scope to *only* these things, and the letter uses a strange word to describe these things; the Jerusalem Council calls these things *requirements*. This is the only time in the NT this word is used, which should demonstrate to us the severity of this command.

When you are saved by the radical simplicity of God’s grace, you don’t just stop sinning all of a sudden. But you do become aware and concerned about your sin in ways you didn’t before. Trying to cope with the vastness of our own sinfulness is a recipe for disaster. We simply cannot bear the weight of our own sin—that’s the whole reason Jesus died on the cross! Just because we are saved doesn’t mean we’re all of a sudden *able* to bear the weight of our sin. The Jerusalem Council is not saying that all the things we do wrong are not sinful; they’re simply limiting the focus so as to not overwhelm us. It’s not that cussing or gossiping or getting drunk or high aren’t sinful; the Holy Spirit says, just focus on how to properly worship and focus on how to glorify God with your body. Don’t overwhelm yourself. Just focus on these things. We wish to lay no burden *beyond* these requirements.

The Holy Spirit instructs us in this way because if we focus on how to properly worship God and how to glorify God with our body, many other sins will be dealt with along the way without stressing about it. Rather than beat around the bush by dealing with little sins and avoiding the big ones, the Holy Spirit tells us to focus on these big ones and let the little ones get resolved over time. Persistent and unrepentant engagement in improper worship and/or sexual-immorality *will* negatively impact your day-to-day walk with the Lord. You will not progress in your faith if idolatry and sexual-immorality still have mastery over you.

Grace and Sanctification: Same-Sex-Attraction Case Study

This doesn't happen overnight, though. Sanctification is the process of being made holy. You are progressively made holy over the course of your life; I slowly but surely learn, practice, and exhibit holiness more and more in my life. After coming to faith, we become aware of sins we didn't know we had before. Sanctification is the process by which these sins are revealed, confessed, and removed from our lives. In this life we don't become sinless, but overtime we do progressively sin less. There ought to be a noticeable trajectory over the course of time, a trajectory of increasingly hating the sin we once loved and a trajectory of increasingly loving the holiness and righteousness we once hated. This isn't something you see in two-weeks. Although we may wish it were immediate, it is for our benefit that this is a gradual process, for in those moments when we mess up, it is grace that sustains us on the slow sanctification journey.

But we often forget that this is a process in others as well; we expect holiness to happen more quickly in others. For example, let's take the Christian who experiences same-sex-attraction. We wish they would take their holiness more seriously and just stop. But this mindset is not the grace of the slow-sanctification-journey; instead, this is hypocritical-legalism popping its head in again expecting from others what we don't expect of ourselves and what we know we can't do it ourselves. There are multiple same-sex-attracted individuals part of our larger group. I just wonder what impact this church community could have on them if we gave their sanctification journeys the same grace and opportunities to serve that we give those of you who struggle with pornography. Showing grace in the sanctification journey of others does not require us to deny the sinfulness of homosexuality. Engaging in homosexual-sex is sinful, *and* sanctification is a process that requires grace along the way.

I have not yet connected with all of you who experience same-sex attraction, but I have been encouraged by the conversations I have had thus far. Last week, I talked about the need to subject our experiences, desires, and attractions to the Word of God. While you may not understand *why*, you recognize God's Word says *that* these behaviors are sinful. Every voice around you, with one exception, says that your same-sex-attraction is good and that you should enjoy it, and yet you break through the noise and intense pressure to cling to the one voice who knows best. You don't stop submitting to the *that* even while you wrestle with God over the *why*,

and I must commend you for glorifying God with your body by pursuing sexual-holiness with a humble spirit of repentance and submission. While it is a lonely road, even in the church, keep up the fight. Cling to Rom. 8:18, *that the present sufferings of this life are not worth comparing to the glory that awaits us in the age to come.*

I just wonder what kind of impact the Church could have if we treated the sanctification journeys of all saved-people with the grace we all so desperately need every day. Perhaps if we did, our fellow-believers who experience same-sex-attraction would be less vulnerable to the temptation that accompanies loneliness. Perhaps if we did, these fellow believers would find satisfaction in the Holy Spirit that is felt *in community*. Paul writes that God provides a way of escape in times of temptation. What if hanging out with them, eating with them, getting to know them, talking about anything *other* than that specific temptation, and showering them with physical affection out of a genuine love for them is a way of escape for them; what if you are their escape God has sent but you don't want to associate with someone like that? Is this all about you or about *being the Church*? Perhaps if we did, they would feel like they are part of the church, discover their spiritual gifts, and develop a desire to use them to benefit the church—perhaps even one of the communication gifts. Perhaps some of them may feel called to ministry and go to seminary to learn the Bible and theology. Perhaps after some years of demonstrating a matured faith some may even serve in leadership at their local church. I just wonder how many opportunities have been missed because early-on we expected “the other” to turn from sin overnight, or we gave them the space to do work through their “issues,” but *over there* and on their own, rather than *with one another* in community.

I wonder what would happen if we gave them grace when they mess-up; not permission to mess-up, but grace. What does it mean to confess sin to God in prayer? What does it mean to rest in God's promises for his people? What does it mean to repent, both internally and externally? What does it mean to walk by the Spirit rather than the flesh? We all have to learn these things, and these are especially learned, not by ourselves in solitude, but in the rawness of when we mess up *and* confide in trusted siblings in Christ who can take care of our souls. Showing grace does not mean denying the sinfulness of certain behaviors; grace is sticking by, keeping that arm around them, assuring them of your love for them as a brother or sister, assuring them that since—not if—since they are a Child of God their sins have already been taken care of, and committing to walk this road *with them together*. Because, after all, since

holiness is God’s destiny for *all* of you who put your faith in Jesus Christ, that means *all Christians* are headed down the *same* road. Some may be further along in maturity, but we’re all headed to the same finish-line. We all are tempted with lust. We all need to practice self-control. We all need to submit to the same Scripture. We have to walk together, hand-in-hand together as fellow-believers, and together with the Holy Spirit.

Sexual Holiness is Central to Sanctification – 1 Thess. 4:1-8

1 Thess. 4 says this: “Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you through our Lord Jesus. *For this is the will of God, your sanctification.*” And then he goes right into sexuality. “*This is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality, that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust...* For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore, whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God who gives his Holy Spirit to you.”

God’s will for your life is clearly revealed in the Scriptures. Sexual holiness is not a suggestion or something we try when it’s convenient. Sexual-holiness is a requirement for all who claim to be Christian, and it’s a commitment you need to make today. If you are a Christian, I hope you feel compelled to glorify God with your body; this is a commitment you need to make tonight; your past does not dictate your ability to live sexually-holy today. God designed sex to be powerful; a powerful bonding agent that transforms two into one. Misusing God’s good gift does not glorify God. Setting sexual-boundaries *does* glorify God. Even in marriage there are sexual-boundaries; such as who you can have sex with, how often you abstain from it, etc. Only the world shames sexual-boundaries.

You may be sitting next to someone with whom you’re sexually involved. If you are compelled to pursue sexual-holiness, and your boyfriend or girlfriend is not 100% on board, that’s a great sign to end your relationship, like on the drive home tonight. I don’t care if you’ve been together for years. Before the universe was created, God knew you and gave you a destiny, and you’re telling me you want to continue spending time with someone who thinks so little about God’s destiny for your life? If the person you’re dating doesn’t care about your holiness or their holiness *now*, what makes you think they will when they put a ring on it? Marriage does not

end the requirement for you to be sexually-holy; divorce or the death of a spouse do not absolve the Christian from the command of sexual-holiness. It is true that when you get married, *how you express* sexual-holiness changes, but you are still expected by God to be sexually-holy.

If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, then in eternity past God predestined you to holiness, with your *sexual*-holiness squarely in view. Any pastor, preacher, teacher, theologian, Bible-college professor, small group leader, or parent who tells you your sexual-holiness is irrelevant to your Christian life is worthy of the title “false-teacher.” There is no wiggle room out of the lifelong requirement of sexual-holiness for all Christians.

This is where the “purity” movement of the 90s and early-2000s got off-track. Although well-intentioned, purity culture equated sexual-holiness with virginity, but these are not the same thing. As a teenager, “purity culture” told me to “stay pure until I’m married,” as if once I got married holiness no longer mattered. The unintended consequence of that poor messaging was a generation of millennials who grew up in church, experimented or had fun in college, and then because of their shame they could not see themselves as anything other than tainted. That was the mindset brought about by the “purity culture” that equated holiness with virginity.

I have two friends, Christian-A and Christian-B. Christian-A had almost a triple-digit body-count, but after becoming a Christian tried to put an end to his promiscuity; he eventually stopped engaging in causal hookups and stopped watching pornography after feeling convicted of these things as sins—as part of this process I can attest that this took a few years—and he has since gotten married to a lovely Christian woman. Christian-B hasn’t gone all the way yet but he’s done pretty much everything else; he also watches pornography two or three times a week, not as often as his friends, so it’s not really that big of a deal to him. If sexual-holiness is defined by virginity, then Christian-B thinks he glorifying God meanwhile Christian-A is stuck in an endless cycle of guilt over sins for which the blood of Jesus already paid.

In reality, Christian-B shows *no* signs of repentance. By equating sexual-holiness with virginity, Christian-B must change the definition of “virgin” to make him feel good-enough. Sexual-holiness is not the same thing as virginity. Sexual-holiness is about what you’re doing today. Christian-A is the one who has taken the pursuit of sexual-holiness seriously. His pursuit of sexual-holiness did not end at marriage either. Before he was married, pursuing sexual-holiness meant abstaining from sexual behavior with his then-girlfriend, even though he really wanted to. After he got married, pursuing sexual-holiness means regularly having sex with his

wife and enjoying her body, which now belongs to him and giving her his body, which now belongs to her to enjoy. Sexual-holiness is a command for all Christians that never ends. Despite your past, sexual-holiness is something you can decide today. Your past is a place of reference, but not a place of residence. We’ve all made mistakes in our past both before and after we became Christians; your holiness is not defined by then; it’s defined by now. The goal of the Christian life is not virginity; it is *holiness*. Start afresh today without delay.

Returning to the Big Idea and Conclusion

We began this evening with our big idea, that God expects his people to joyfully respond to receiving salvation by prioritizing their holiness. The letter from the Jerusalem Council illustrates clearly to us why theology is so important. Simply put, wrong theology corrupts God’s People, whereas correct theology—even if it is difficult to stomach—correct theology encourages the hearts of God’s people. We saw this in Acts 14:22 that telling the Church they must enter the Kingdom of God through many tribulations *encouraged* God’s People. And despite telling these Christians they had to behave a certain way, Acts 15:31 tells us that when the letter was read the Gentile believers *rejoiced* because of its *encouragement*. Just because it is difficult doesn’t mean it’s not encouraging. Good theology encourages the faith of God’s people.

While difficult, the Holy Spirit views sexual-holiness as one of the first and most basic acts of obedience in the Christian life. For those of you who are newer Christians or still at an early stage in your faith journey, while it is a difficult task, I hope you are encouraged by the limited scope of this instruction from the Holy Spirit. For those who are more mature in your faith, I hope you are encouraged in remembering the grace has supported you along your own journey, and I hope you feel empowered to show your siblings in Christ the grace you know they need along their journey.

To live sexually-holy requires self-control. Self-control is difficult. One of my childhood heroes Mr. Rogers says this: “Human beings are not born with self-control. We have to learn what to do with the mad that we feel. Learning to control ourselves is a long, hard process. It happens little by little. In fact, it is something we work on all through our lives.” If self-control were easy it wouldn’t be a spiritual discipline; God wouldn’t need to command us to do it. That God commands it is evidence God knows it is difficult. Jonathan Edwards says it like this: “A true and faithful Christian does not make holy living an accidental thing. It is his great concern.

As the business of the soldier is to fight, so the business of the Christian is to be like-Christ.” Friends, we practice self-control by being honest about our desires rather than suppressing them or hiding them. We practice self-control by confessing those desires to God and to trusted Christians who can affirm the sinfulness of those desires, remind us of the finished work of Jesus Christ for us, pray for us and with us, and hold us accountable. Knowing what sorts of things set us off, we practice self-control by placing boundaries on ourselves to protect our holiness.

In 1 Thess. 4, just like in the letter from the Jerusalem Council, we are reminded that this command to sexual-holiness does not come from a panel of men, but from the Holy Spirit. It is not Paul, or James, or Adam, or me who call you to sexual-holiness; it is God who also gives us the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit, obeying the command of sexual-holiness is a nonstarter. We *need* the Spirit to convict us of sin. We *need* the Spirit to point us in the correct direction when we wander to the right or to the left (Isa. 30:20-21). We *need* the Spirit to give us endurance to battle through the pains of temptation, reminding us that our momentary suffering will be worth it in the end. We *need* the Holy Spirit, and all who put their faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ and submit to his Lordship are *given* the Holy Spirit. We receive the Holy Spirit as a gracious gift, and we joyfully respond by using that gift to say “yes” to that which God has blessed, and “no” to that which God has said “no,” because the God who redeemed us from sin gets to define what sin we need protecting from.

The *only* way we can say “yes” or “no” is by the Holy Spirit who dwells in every single one of us who have been saved by the radical simplicity of grace in Christ. It is *only because* we have this Holy Spirit as our Helper that the requirement of sexual-holiness can be done; it is *only by* clinging to the Holy Spirit that we can flee from temptation; it is *only when* we humbly walk with the Holy Spirit that the Holy Spirit’s requirement of sexual-holiness can be lived out.

Let’s pray