

THE GREATEST DEBATE

Acts 15:1-35

Do any you remember when we were in Acts 10 and I said, “*It’s hard to teach an old dog new tricks?*” Well, apparently it’s harder than we thought because we’re back on this subject of some Jews in the early church struggling to accept the idea that God would save the Gentiles by grace through faith apart from any sort of induction into Judaism with the Law of Moses and rites like circumcision. Hey, Jesus did say it’s hard to pour new wine into old wine skins and that’s playing out again as we come to Acts 15, watching them wrestle with the transition from Law to Grace. There’s been a lot of great debates throughout history but none so crucial as the theological debate between Law vs. Grace, which becomes the reason for the first church council in history.

You should want to know the outcome of this debate because it’s the most important question you will answer in your life. How you answer it determines your destiny in heaven or hell. It’s the most important question when you go to witness to others. It’s a question that led to a much-needed Reformation 500 years ago. It’s the question: How is a man justified (declared righteous) before God? How is he saved? By grace or by Law? by faith or works? That’s what we’re going to look at as we go through this and look at various principles concerning grace. Remember, Paul and Barnabas have just returned from their 1st missionary journey and are at their sending church in Antioch, filling everyone in on how God has opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.

12 And after Paul and Barnabas had a heated argument and debate with them, the brothers determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue. 3 Therefore, after being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and they were bringing great joy to all the brothers and sisters. 4 When they arrived in Jerusalem, they were received by the church, the apostles, and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. 5 But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to keep the Law of Moses.”

I. **THE DEBATE. (VV. 1-5)**

First thing we see is a heated debate at Antioch. Some men come down (in elevation) from Judea to Syrian Antioch and they were teaching that unless a person was circumcised according to the Law of Moses, they can’t be saved. Well, how does that line up with the gospel message the apostles have been preaching in Acts? How does that line up with the work of God that we’ve seen in Acts? The apostles were not preaching that, “God so loved the world that He gave His only Son so that whosoever believes *and is circumcised* will be saved.” No, it’s just whoever believes. They’ve been preaching **justification (being declared righteous/having a right standing before God)** by **grace** through **faith** in what **Christ has done** (not what men do). God confirmed grace.

After the “Gentile Pentecost” – if we can call it that – in Acts 10 with Peter and Cornelius, they already discussed this with the party of the circumcision and were all amazed that the Gentiles received the Holy Spirit. But here we are... again.

Grace is continually on trial and not to be compromised.

The fact that it is up for debate again shows us that grace is something that is always on trial but never to be compromised. Because we are proud, sinful beings, it’s hard for us to humble ourselves and receive a gift. We want to try and be good enough for good through what we do (filthy rags, **Isaiah 64:6**) rather than accept Christ’s work for us. Or even as believers, maybe we make a little progress in the Christian life and start to look good and forget we are purely products of grace. We forget the quarry of grace from which we were dug (**Isaiah 51:1**). Even the apostle **Peter** himself, after preaching free grace and being used of God to take the gospel to the Gentiles, started to become a **hypocrite** at Antioch. Galatians says he started to withdraw from the Gentiles and became standoffish when these Judaizers came. Paul says, “*He feared the party of the circumcision.*” So he preached grace but wasn’t living it and **the rest of the Jewish believers** joined in and even **Barnabas** was carried away by their hypocrisy (**Gal. 2:11-13**).

Folks, grace is always on trial in every generation. There are always going to be men who try to add to the perfect work of Christ on the cross. And my job as a pastor is not to teach us new things all the time but mainly to keep reminding us of these same old foundational truths like this over and over again. I used to think I could never be a pastor because I’d always have to be coming up with new stuff. Well, **2 Peter 1:12-13** comforted me, but you’ll have to turn there to see why. Justification by grace is one of those truths that we need reminded of. If we get justification wrong, nothing else we do really matters. It is a hill to die on.

II. THE DISCUSSION. (VV. 6-12)

6 “The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. 7 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 would hear the word of the gospel and believe. 8 And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; 9 and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. 10 Since this is the case, why are you putting God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our forefathers nor we have been able to bear? 11, in the same way as they also are.” 12 All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles.

So thankfully, Luke here summarizes this meeting for us. The last thing we need is to go through the details of board meeting! The only details are really in regard to **Peter** and **James** input and the **letter** that is written at the end to inform the churches of their decision. It says after some time of much debate, **Peter** stands up and reminds them all of when the God called him to pioneer the

salvation of the Gentiles at **Cornelius'** household in Acts 10. His point is that **it wasn't his idea. It was God's!** "*God made a choice in the early days*".

God directed the grace-venture to the Gentiles.

The church just discovered it when God gave Peter that vision of the sheet full of unclean animals saying they were now clean and he could eat! Peter refused. He didn't want to. He said, "*By no means Lord!*" (v. 14). But God said, "*What God has cleansed, no longer consider unclean.*" **3 times** God did that to make it sink into Peter's thick skull. But that vision went beyond eating unkosher food (food acceptable in Jewish Law). It taught that God was accepting Jew and Gentile equally and restoring them to table fellowship. And so Peter ends up walking right into that awful, dirty, Roman capital city in Israel called **Caesarea** where a Jew wouldn't be caught dead. That city represented everything wrong with the current nation of Israel! But there is where he preached to a Roman official named **Cornelius** and some of his friends. And where **God gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit in the same way He did with the Jewish believers in Acts 2.** Note that:

God gave the Spirit apart from and before works.

He didn't make a distinction by saying, "*If these Gentiles want to receive the Holy Spirit they need to be circumcised and baptized and take holy communion and tithe and walk an aisle.*" It was none of that. There was no induction into Jewish religious rituals. They didn't have to become Jewish converts in order to become Christians. It was while Peter was preaching and they simply believed (God is the *cardia gnostas* who knew that in their hearts they **believed**), He granted to them the Holy Spirit who fell upon them, **cleansing their hearts by faith**, evidenced by the **gift of tongues**. The Spirit of God was evidence that they were **truly born again** and **truly saved**. The Spirit of God doesn't baptize someone who isn't saved. Romans 8:9 says, "*If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.*" The possession of the Holy Spirit is the indication that we have been cleansed and justified and have become God's children (Gal. 4:6). The Holy Spirit comes to **indwell** us the moment we believe, and **He seals us eternally as God's possession**, like a down payment on eternity (Ephesians 1:13-14). The fact that we can grieve the Spirit and quench the Spirit through sin is proof that we are sealed by Him. He doesn't leave us.

God testified to the gospel of grace.

How do we know who has the right gospel – Paul or the Judaizers? We could say to follow the supernatural work of God through the apostles. The miracles, signs and wonders are God testifying to the word of His grace (14:3). Mark 16:20 says, "*God confirmed the word [gospel] by the signs that followed [the apostles].*" Hebrews 2:1-4 says, "*God was testifying with them, both by signs and wonder and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.*" These signs and miracles were important in this foundational era of the Church to establish the apostles as the divinely commissioned leaders. It's part of how we know whose teaching to trust. Nowadays, someone can do all the miracles they want, but if what they say doesn't line up with the Word of God that they wrote, I ain't following (2 Thess. 2:9).

Now in verse 10 Peter makes the point: **if God makes no such distinction or demand this yoke upon them, why should they?** It reflects his own words from earlier **Acts 11:17**, *“If God gave to them [Gentiles] the same gift as He gave to us [Jews] also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?”* That would be to **tempt God**. To add works is to **stand in God’s way and nullify** – make void – **the grace of God in Christ** (Gal. 2:21). To do so would be placing the commands of man upon men that God Himself didn’t place on them – something Jesus severely chastised the Pharisees for (Mark 7:1-13). Remember the religious **Pharisees** had come up with all sorts of commands in the **Mishnah** (like a catechism) that they placed upon men that God had not made any such demand. For every command in the Law, they came up with more laws to keep from breaking the original commands and it had reached the point where these **man-made traditions of men had virtually replaced the entire Law**. They weren’t even following the Law anymore and it became a **yoke of slavery** to the people. A yoke is a burdensome frame placed around an animal’s neck for plowing that weighed it down. When Jesus said, *“Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy laden,”* and *“take my yoke upon you... and find rest for your souls.”* it was in reference to man-made religious rules.

If the early church doesn’t step in and rebuke the false gospel, it will be a slippery slope to another yoke. These Judaizers wanted people to be circumcised *“according to the custom of Moses,”* indicating that circumcision was merely their initial requirement, and they were planning to use it to bring them into bondage of the whole Law (Gal. 2:4-5). But Peter clears things up:

Salvation is by freely by grace because of Christ’s work for us.

Peter says, in one of the clearest NT statements on salvation: *“But we believe we are saved by **grace through the grace of the Lord Jesus.**”* Grace is not worked for. **Grace is free (Rom. 11:6)**. Salvation is a free gift received by faith (by trusting) in what Christ has done for us. Our faith is not in our works but in the work Christ has done for us. He paid for our sins in full. After Peter, **James**, the Lord’s half-brother, and a leader in the Jerusalem church, speaks.

13 After they stopped speaking, James responded, saying, “Brothers, listen to me. 14 Simeon has described how God first concerned Himself about taking a people for His name from among the Gentiles. 15 The words of the Prophets agree with this, just as it is written: 16 ‘After these things I will return, And I will rebuild the fallen tabernacle of David, And I will rebuild its ruins, And I will restore it, 17 So that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, And all the Gentiles who are called by My name,’ 18 Says the Lord, who makes these things known from long ago.”

The grace-venture to the Gentiles agrees with OT prophecy.

James **reinforces Gentile acceptance** from an Old Testament prophecy, making the point from Scripture, that **Scripture is in agreement** with them. God always intended to use Israel to reach the Gentiles. God’s covenant with Abraham would be a blessing to the nations (Gen. 12:1-3). The Jews were expecting and still are expecting Jesus to come and restore Israel and to bless the nations in the millennial kingdom (Acts 1:6; 3:20-21). So I see James is using this prophecy about the

coming kingdom in a similar way to how Peter quoted Joel in Acts 2 concerning “the day of the Lord”. The day of the Lord is still future (1 Thess. 5:2) but Peter found application in it now. The complete fulfillment of James’ prophecy from Amos is still future, but there is application now. From this prophecy the Jews, being overrun with Gentiles, will see God is not done with Israelⁱ and will be reminded that God was always planning to accept Gentiles without Gentiles losing their identity as Gentiles.ⁱⁱ It comforts Jew and Gentile.

III. **THE DECISION. (VV. 19-29)**

19 Therefore, it is my judgment that we do not cause trouble for those from the Gentiles who are turning to God, 20 but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols, from acts of sexual immorality, from what has been strangled, and from blood. 21 For from ancient generations Moses has those who preach him in every city, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.” 22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas: Judas who was called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, 23 and they sent this letter with them:

“The apostles and the brothers who are elders, to the brothers and sisters in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles: Greetings. 24 Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have confused you by their teaching, upsetting your souls, 25 it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 Therefore, we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth. 28 For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: 29 that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from acts of sexual immorality; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell.”

I will very briefly summarize this. The **letter** is **in support of grace** but it also includes some suggestions related to the Gentiles’ former way of life in **pagan idol worship**. The immorality and the meat from strangled animals instead of properly bled animals had to do with idol worship and it would severely offend their new Jewish brothers and sisters. They would do well to abstain from such things since they are called out of idolatry anyway and because doing so would magnify the unity, the **fellowship**, in the cross-cultural church between Jew and Gentile. But at the same time, those Jews keeping kosher diets according to the Law need to realize keeping the Law won’t make them more spiritual or any better than the rest. So we see another principle:

We operate in grace towards others in the non-essentials (gray areas).

Paul talks more about this in Romans 14. We pursue things which makes for peace and for building up one another (Rom. 14:19). Notice it *doesn’t* say, “*If you keep yourselves free from idols, blood and immorality, you’ll be saved.*” It just says, “*You will do well.*”

IV. THE DELIVERY. (VV. 30-35)

30 So when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and 32 Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brothers and sisters with a lengthy message. 33 After they had spent time there, they were sent away from the brothers and sisters in peace to those who had sent them out. 35 But Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.”

Alright so they arrive and deliver the letter together. Look at the response: **they rejoice!** You would too, men, if you found out that you didn’t have to be circumcised as an adult, right?! But that’s not the ultimate reason they’re rejoicing. They are rejoicing because it was confirmed to them that God saved by grace and not by works. Hallelujah! **Judas** (not Iscariot) and **Silas** deliver a **lengthy message** to them. **Paul** and **Barnabas** stick around for a while too and teach and preach this old congregation of theirs. No doubt they taught on grace!

In closing, I want you to look at one passage with me. **Galatians 2:15-21.** *15 “We are Jews by nature and not sinners from the Gentiles; 16 nevertheless, knowing that a person is not justified by works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the Law; since by works of the Law no flesh will be justified. 17 But if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have also been found sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Far from it! 18 For if I rebuild what I have once destroyed, I prove myself to be a wrongdoer. 19 For through the Law I died to the Law, so that I might live for God. 20 I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. 21 I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly.”* That passage teaches 2 things:

We are saved (justified) by grace through faith in Christ.

We live by grace through faith in Christ.

We cannot earn salvation. It is freely received by faith. But then from there on out, we live the Christian life by looking to Jesus: what He has done for us, who we are in Him, and depending on Him. We are saved by grace and we live by grace. We never serve for grace, but from grace. If I die today or tomorrow – if I go on vacation this week and never make it back because I catch a fish as big as Jonah’s and it eats me and doesn’t spit me out like Jonah – out of all the things I’ve taught you in my years here, I want you to remember this: we are saved by grace through faith in Christ, and we live that way too. If that’s all I leave you with, I’ll be happy. I’ll be happy because it is grace that heals your relationship with God and that grace will spill over into your relationships with others – your marriage, your family, your friends, your coworkers.

ⁱ John MacArthur, <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/1751/is-salvation-by-law-or-grace-part-2>

ⁱⁱ Michael Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?* 99-103.