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Acts 15:1-35

Twenty-third Message

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GRACE ON TRIAL

SERIES: THE SPREADING FLAME

In the book of Acts Luke traces the fulfillment of Jesus' promise that the Spirit would give power to his witnesses to spread his gospel to the ends of the earth. We have been observing the apostle Paul's first missionary journey in recent studies. In Pisidian Antioch, he said that because the Jews rejected the gospel he would turn to the Gentiles. Reporting back to the home church, the apostle particularly stressed that God himself had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. These developments had far-reaching consequences. They demonstrated that the gospel of Christ was not a reform movement within Judaism, but good news for the whole world. The church of Christ was not a Jewish sect, but an international family.

Not everyone agreed that this was the case, however. The rift between Jews and Gentiles had a long and very deep history. It could not be bridged without painful heart searching among Jewish Christians, many of whom could not fathom the thought that Gentiles could be accepted by God on the very same terms as they were, without distinction.

The Gentile mission was gaining momentum as the trickle of converts was fast becoming a river. The Jewish leaders were fine with the concept of Gentiles coming into the church, but the question forming in the minds of many Jewish believers was what that inclusion should look like. They assumed that these Gentiles would be circumcised and observe the Torah. But something quite different was happening. Gentile converts were being welcomed into the church without being circumcised. They were becoming Christians without becoming Jews, retaining their own national identities.

This was too much for some orthodox Jewish Christians. They couldn't accept that Gentiles did not need to be circumcised or obey the law. So they formed a pressure group, often referred to as Judaizers, to oppose this Gentile mission. Paul used some less kind adjectives to describe them in his letter to the Galatians. They wanted to bring this mission under the umbrella of the Jewish church, in order to control it. They insisted that the Gentile converts must become Jews as well as Christians.

This tension grew until it led at last to the first ecumenical council. This assembly gave the church an identity apart from Judaism and liberated the gospel to being good news for the whole world. Chapter 15 of Acts is in a very real sense the turning point in the book. The decision of the council justifies all that has happened so far, and gives impetus for all that is yet to come.

This struggle for faith alone is as real for us today as it was for those early Jewish believers. We are tempted to ask if there is something else we can do or be to be assured of God's approval. The struggle for faith alone never ends. It's part of our inability to accept a gift. And deeper than that, we want to be loved for what we can do for God. It's hard for us to receive unconditional love, and as a consequence, difficult to extend that love to others. So this chapter has great relevance for us.

Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue. (Acts 15:1-2 NASB)

Some men came from Jerusalem, claiming to have been sent from James, a claim which James denies later in the chapter. They wanted to put a stop to the freedom that these new Galatian believers were enjoying, and add things to the simple gospel of grace. Their message was that it was all right to believe in Christ, but to be saved, people had to be circumcised.

It appears they went even further. Galatians says they were teaching that it was improper for circumcised Jewish believers to eat with uncircumcised Gentile believers. Paul says in Galatians that when they came to Antioch, Peter was visiting the city at the time and he was swept away by their rebuke. These Judaizers were bothered that Peter was hanging around and eating forbidden foods with Gentiles.

But all Peter's old Jewish scruples had already been overcome. Only a short time before this he had a direct revelation from God on this very subject, recorded in Acts 10-11. On his rooftop one day he fell into a trance and saw in a vision a sheet coming down from the sky containing a smorgasbord of unclean animals. A voice said to him, "Arise, Peter, kill and eat!" When he objected, the voice, told him, "What God has cleansed, you must not call unclean." The vision was repeated three times for emphasis. Peter concluded, as Luke reports in Acts, that "God shows no partiality." Gentiles are welcomed on an equal basis. So Peter knew better.

But when these Judaizers saw him enjoying this new freedom, they rebuked him. Peter began to withdraw, Paul says in Galatians 2, not out of conviction, but fear. On this particular occasion he was a people pleaser. This affected even steady, mature Barnabas, Paul's right hand man, his troubleshooter

for difficult situations. Because of this, others in the church were being swept away by hypocrisy.

This was a serious issue. If it was not confronted, Paul saw that there would be a permanent schism in the church, with one table for Jews and another for Gentiles.

As the debate went on they could not reconcile their differences, so the church dispatched Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem, with some of the other brothers. They were appealing to a higher court, in essence. These Judaizers went to all the cities in Galatia that Paul had evangelized and began to subvert the gospel of grace that he had preached. That is why Paul wrote the letter to the Galatians, which was possibly written while he was on his way to Jerusalem to reconcile these differences. The apostle was very upset. To see his state of mind during this period, read the letter to the Galatians. He even wrote, “If anyone preaches a gospel to you contrary to the one you received, let him be damned” (1:8). He was outraged that anyone would take away the freedom and joy of these new converts.

Therefore, 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 were bringing great joy to all the brethren. When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. 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 observe the Law of Moses.” The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. (15:3-6)

It might seem strange to read that there were Pharisees in the church. These were Christians, and yet they were of the party of the Pharisees. Earlier, Luke says that a number of the priests, probably Pharisees, believed. Remember that Nicodemus was a Pharisee. After these people became Christians they probably continued on as Pharisees.

We have to remember that Christianity was Jewish in its original setting. These people didn’t abandon the synagogue when they became Christians. They continued to worship as Jews. They retained Judaism as a form. That is clear from the NT. James records that the believers worshipped in synagogues. They still circumcised their children. They observed the feasts and the fasts of Israel. The form of their worship was Jewish, but they were worshipping Jesus as their Messiah. They simply saw that the Lord was the culmination of all the OT worship and religion. Jesus was the reality to which all their sacrifices pointed. And they also believed that they should continue to observe their customs, and even to impose them on Gentile believers.

Luke doesn’t state what was involved in the “much debate” he mentions in verse 7. But he summarizes the three speeches made by the three apostles, Peter in verses 7-11, Paul, supported by Barnabas, in verse 12, and James in verses 13-21.

First, Peter’s speech.

After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brethren, 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. And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.” (15:7-11)

The event that Peter refers to “in the early days” is his encounter with Cornelius, a God-fearer who became a Christian, about ten years earlier. Peter reminds his listeners that God sovereignly arranged what happened. He preached the gospel to Cornelius and his friends in Cornelius’ house, uttering the words, “whoever believes in Jesus will be forgiven of his sins.” And apparently in the quietness of their own hearts they believed. The Holy Spirit descended on them and they began to speak in other tongues—a sign that God endorsed their faith and they belonged to that same community. This happened before they were baptized and without their being circumcised. They believed, and the Holy Spirit descended on them. Notice how Peter describes this. God saw that their hearts had opened up to receive the gospel, so he gave the gift of tongues as a sign of the reality of their faith.

So Peter asks, why would you tell them to do something else to be saved when they were already saved? Why put God to the test by asking him to act contrary to his will? “Why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?” (15:10).

Let’s look again at the relationship between the law and faith. Many believers think that there are two methods of salvation taught in the Bible. They think that in the OT, people were saved by keeping the law, but in the NT, people are saved by faith. But no. From the very beginning, God has acted out of grace. Faith is always what is required of us. Numerous NT passages say that the Israelites were saved by faith. In both Galatians and Romans, the apostle points to Abraham as an exhibit of faith. How did he become a “friend of God?” Was it through a lifetime of good works? No! Abraham believed God, Moses writes in Genesis, and it was “reckoned unto him as righteousness.” Faith has always been the way. No one was saved in the OT by keeping the law.

The purpose of the law was never to make you the friend of God, that in the sense that if you kept it, God would accept you. The purpose of the law is twofold. First, it reveals the character of God. The law is a pure expression of the holiness of God. And secondly, the law draws you to it and you want to obey it. But as you see your inability to keep it, it draws you back to God for mercy and grace. It tells you what is good and

where to go to find that goodness. The law was never intended to make us good! It never made anyone good. Every person, educated or uneducated, religious or pagan, comes into the family the same way, solely by the undeserved kindness of a forgiving God.

That is why Peter says that if they imposed the law upon the Gentiles now, they were placing a burden that neither they nor their fathers could bear. If we are thinking of the law as a method of salvation, it won't work. Jews are saved the same way as Gentiles, by grace, through faith.

When Peter had finished speaking, there was silence. It was a turning point in the meeting.

Paul and Barnabas are next to speak.

All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. (15:12)

Barnabas is mentioned first here, probably because Paul was suspect in Jerusalem. He wasn't one of the original twelve. Barnabas wisely takes the lead, recounting the signs and wonders that had accompanied their proclamation of the gospel in Cyprus and Asia Minor. The point is that by these miracles, God had endorsed the method of salvation which they had preached to the Gentiles. The council was awestruck at this point.

James is the final speaker. If it was quiet before he spoke, I am sure there was absolute silence at this point. This is James, the Lord's brother, who wrote the NT letter in his name. Nicknamed "James the Just," he was highly respected in Jerusalem, and was evidently the moderator of this assembly. He waited until both leading missionary apostles had spoken. The hopes of the Pharisaic sect rested with him, and there was great anticipation as he began.

After they had stopped speaking, James answered saying, "Brethren, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written, 'After these things I will return, and I will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen, and I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, so that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by My name,' says the Lord, who makes these things known from long ago. Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath." (15:13-21)

James' first words are powerful, and more significant than they might appear at first. That phrase, "a people for His name," is an idiom for the people of God, the community of

God, those who are called by his name. It is used throughout the OT for Israel. James is saying that it is clear that God is calling out a new community from among the Gentiles. A new Israel was being formed.

To substantiate this claim, James quotes from Amos 9:11-12. During his ministry, the eighth century B.C. prophet predicted the downfall of both the Northern and Southern kingdoms of Israel and Judah because of their apostasy. He prophesied that their king would be taken away, and Israel would be without a monarch for a long, long time. But he said that the dynasty of David would be built back up; the ruling family would be restored. Christian eyes see Jesus as the fulfillment of that prophecy. Jesus in his resurrection was appointed as the King of Israel, and he would reign forever. The result would be that the rest of mankind, the Gentiles, would seek the Lord.

James is saying, in effect, "God has spoken in this matter. He said he would save the Gentiles. Now he has done it. Therefore let's not make it difficult for them to turn to God. Let's not put any roadblocks in their way. Let's not burden them by asking them to add anything to their faith in Christ Jesus. Let's embrace these Gentile believers as brothers and sisters in Christ."

At the same time, having established the principle that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone, without works, James appeals to these new Gentile believers to respect the consciences of Jewish believers and refrain from a few practices. He asks them to be sensitive to the fact that all over the Roman Empire there were Jews whose culture and lifestyles were different, and they should not violate those.

There were four things that Gentiles should be sensitive to. These are not requirements or demands. This is a word of exhortation to Gentiles who might inadvertently step on toes and keep some Jews from becoming Christians.

I believe that all four of these requested abstentions relate to ceremonial laws laid down in Leviticus 17-18. I have summarized them under three headings:

1. Don't eat anything contaminated by idols.

In the Roman world it was common practice for the parts of the animals that were not consumed in the sacrifices to be sold in the local markets. Gentiles would buy meat, knowing full well that the rest of the animal had been offered to Jupiter or Hermes. Even the Christians would eat that meat because they knew that an idol was nothing more than a piece of wood or metal. What difference did it make? It was a perfectly good piece of meat. But that would be abhorrent to Jews. They would have nothing to do with such meat. And it would be particularly upsetting to invite a Jew over and offer it to him.

2. Be sensitive to Jewish dietary laws.

There are actually two items mentioned under this: abstaining from that which is strangled, and from the blood. The OT had certain dietary restrictions which the Jews followed. Now these Jewish leaders knew that these laws had been rescinded.

Peter had just learned that in his vision. But it was still difficult for Jews to eat meat that wasn't properly slaughtered, that wasn't kosher. So the exhortation is to be sensitive to that, and not to eat things that had been strangled and still contained the blood, because that would be very distasteful to a Jew.

3. Avoid fornication.

This seems odd, because it's not a cultural thing. Both Jews and Gentiles would agree that fornication was a sin. In the New Testament this word usually refers to any sexual activity outside marriage. Why would that be listed here in this list of cultural items? James is using the word here in a limited sense, in the same way in which rabbis sometimes used it to refer to marriage between close relatives. The Jews were very restrictive of marriage between certain close relatives, unlike the Gentiles. This arose from some laws concerning irregular marriages, listed in Leviticus 18. Again, this was another cultural matter. James wasn't talking about sexual matters in general, but a particular matter that would be distasteful to Jews.

Now all four of these things are cultural in nature. James is saying that Peter and Barnabas were right in holding that they shouldn't impose anything on the Gentiles beyond simple faith. All they needed to do to be saved was believe. So they should keep telling them to trust in Christ, to believe in him and nothing more. On the other hand, just as they would not want to impose Jewish cultural norms on Gentile believers, they asked that Gentiles not impose their cultural norms on Jews throughout the Roman Empire.

The council agreed with James' summary, and the letter they drafted is almost word for word from his exhortation. The principle that was established is critical for us to understand. Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone. The OT declares that. The apostles proclaimed that. Paul fought this battle over and over again with the Judiazers, those who would add something to simple faith. The good news is that salvation is by grace through faith alone. That is true not only for our initial salvation, the way we enter the family of God, but also of our ongoing relationship with God. It is by faith. It all depends on God, not on us.

At the beginning of the message I said that this struggle for faith alone is as real for us today as it was for those early Jewish believers. It's part of our inability to accept a gift. We want to be loved for what we can do for God. Legalism has a hold on so many in the church because it appeals to our self-righteousness. We admit that the Lord is responsible for almost all of our salvation, but we want to be able to work for at least some of it. But God says we can't contribute one thing to it. And God is responsible for our sanctification as well. That is why Paul would write to the Galatians, "Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (3:3). In other words, having begun by faith, do you now think that you're going to please God by trying harder? No, trying harder doesn't work! Everything is accomplished by faith.

I would like to close with these words of David Seamands:

Many years ago I was driven to the conclusion that the two major causes of most emotional problems among evangelical Christians are these: the failure to understand, receive, and live out God's unconditional grace and forgiveness; and the failure to give out that unconditional love, forgiveness, and grace to other people... We read, we hear, we believe a good theology of grace. But that's not the way we live. The good news of the gospel of grace has not penetrated the level of our emotions.¹

May we rest in our Heavenly Father's love, confident that he will complete the good work he began in us.

1. Quoted by Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 15.

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