

EXPOSITION OF ACTS

Message #32

Acts 15:1-11

We are living in a day and age in which many Christians want devotional things, not deep doctrinal things. As a result there are devotional commentaries and devotional stories and even devotional Bibles. But when you carefully study the development of the church in the book of Acts and the writings of the Apostle Paul it becomes evident that the early church was really intent upon defending its doctrine. The early church wanted to know doctrine because it is proper doctrine that produces a proper faith and a proper lifestyle.

The doctrine of the grace of God hit the religious world hard. Most religious people love their religious works and their O.T. Laws. Most religious people love their denominational traditions and man-made rules. They always have and always will. God's grace was blasting that religious world totally apart. The man God was using to unfold this grace system was the Apostle Paul. It was Paul's preaching and teaching of grace that was causing big trouble. He preached a message totally opposite of anything these religious people had ever heard.

God's grace teaches that any who will believe on Jesus Christ will be completely justified from all things and saved from all sin and given eternal life. God's grace teaches that faith alone in Christ alone would make a sinner right with the Holy God. Faith plus nothing. Faith plus no works, no law, no religious ceremonies, no rituals, no tithing, no traditions.

That message was affecting the whole world. Sinners from all walks of life believed in Jesus Christ and were saved. You can imagine how that message went over with the religious world that is teaching that people need to behave a certain way in order to be saved. The religious world taught people that to be right with God they had to follow them and their religious rules and the grace Gospel was putting a real dent in their religious systems.

One of the critical matters we must resolve in our minds and hearts is the “faith plus nothing” grace Gospel, because most religious people will proclaim a “faith plus something” works Gospel. The church council meeting that takes place in Jerusalem in Acts 15 clearly is designed to show that God's grace is a “faith plus nothing” proposition.

If you believe in Jesus Christ you are saved. It is not faith plus baptism. It is not faith plus circumcision. It is not faith plus tithing. It is not faith plus promising to make Jesus Lord of your life. It is not faith plus raising your hand or walking forward in a church. It is faith alone in Christ alone. That is clearly the grace Gospel that was defended and developed by the first church council meeting in Jerusalem. What we see is this:

THE FIRST MAJOR COUNCIL MEETING IN JERUSALEM AFFIRMED THE DOCTRINAL REALITY THAT GOD'S GRACE SALVATION IS THROUGH FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST AND NOT THROUGH ANY RELIGIOUS RITUAL OR WORKS.

Just recently I saw a religious televangelist tell people that if they sent him seed money, he would unleash God's blessings on them. Just imagine someone going on that very program and telling people "you can have all of God's blessings without sending one dime to this TV "network." You may be certain this would not go over too well.

HISTORICAL FACT #1 - Some men came to Antioch from Judea. 15:1

Now certain men from Judea "came down" to Antioch which means they came down in elevation, not direction. Actually, Antioch is about 300 miles north of Jerusalem, but it sits about 2500 feet lower in elevation.

It is very likely that when John Mark got back to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13), he reported the message that Paul and Barnabas were preaching-one is justified from all things by believing in Jesus Christ apart from Mosaic law and works (Acts 13:38-39). He also reported that powerful things were happening in Antioch.

So certain key men from Jerusalem went to Antioch to try to turn people away from believing God's grace. They went into Antioch and started teaching "the brethren" that unless they were circumcised according to the custom of Moses, they could not be saved. Just the moment that people were rejoicing in the doctrine of the grace of God, here came religious people trying to sway people away from it.

Some of you have experienced this. You start embracing the grace of God and the Word of God, and someone comes along who will try to put you back under some religious code or system.

One commentator said we can tell you what these guys looked like because we have seen their relatives and they look exactly the same today. These are religious people who strut around with their gloomy faces and self-righteous pious looks and they rarely smile because their rigid legalism won't let them smile. They are, as one writer said, "Long faced killjoys."

Now these men are subtle and satanic. They did not come right out and say you shouldn't believe in Jesus Christ and His death, burial and resurrection. They did not say you shouldn't believe that Jesus is God. **What they said was you must add something to believing on Jesus Christ if you are going to be saved.** If you are going to be saved you must add something and you must do something; specifically you must be circumcised.

The idea of making additions to pure grace still happens today. You must believe and be baptized. You must believe and tithe. You must believe and never do certain things. It is the same old legalistic message-you must add something to grace.

HISTORICAL FACT #2 - Paul and Barnabas refute them. 15:2

Now some churches promote the idea that we should just love everybody and let people believe what they want. Let all people have their say. Don't take a stand over doctrine and let's just all get along so everyone is happy.

Paul and Barnabas did not believe that and they took these religious men head on and straight up. They stood their ground and they would not back down when it came to true doctrine. When you have true men of God leading the church they will go to war for God's grace and God's Word. Things were intense in this church of Antioch. The words used in **verse 2** prove that.

The word "dissension" (στασεως) is the word from which we get our English word "static." This word means that Paul and Barnabas stood their doctrinal ground in a very strife filled and dissension filled atmosphere (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 415). The word "debate" (ζητησεως) means that Paul and Barnabas questioned them and sought out them and their theology and verbally debated them (Ibid., p. 196). They would not let them off the hook; they were relentless. Some people are doctrinal cowards. Either they don't know the doctrine or they are too afraid to defend it. But Paul and Barnabas would not back down. They held their ground.

Years ago we had someone come into this church who believed in Lordship salvation, which says you must believe on Jesus Christ and make Him Lord of your life, and you must follow Him and His teachings as a disciple to really be saved. It is a dangerous doctrine because it makes works a part of salvation. Nowhere does the Bible teach that about grace salvation. You cannot find that in this book of Acts. Now this man had gone to different churches and in most churches people are so doctrinally illiterate that he can get away with propagating what he believes. But when he came to this church, he came to a church that understood true doctrine and could defend it, and things got so intense he left and took his faulty doctrine to another church. In fact, as I understand it he has gone to two or three more churches. Paul was not a man to back down and cater to anyone presenting faulty doctrine and neither will we.

Well, apparently some of the brothers of the church of Antioch thought it would be a good idea if Paul and Barnabas and some of the key elders of the church went up to Jerusalem (elevation) to see the other apostles and elders in the church of Jerusalem, and to get their take on this.

HISTORICAL FACT #3 - Paul and Barnabas travel to Jerusalem. 15:3

Notice the text says they were sent on their way "by the church." The church of Antioch sponsored this and paid for the trip. It is approximately 300 miles from Antioch to Jerusalem, and the route that Paul and Barnabas followed took them through the states of Phoenicia and Samaria, which means they were pretty much following the Mediterranean coast.

As they were traveling they met with believers and told them what God had done in the Gentile world. Notice they "described things in detail." This is the way you give a report. Give a detailed analysis of what God had done. When the Jews learned that many Gentiles were responding to God's grace, they rejoiced. It brought great joy to all those truly saved.

Now why would Paul be willing to make this 300 mile trip to Jerusalem? Protecting the doctrine of the grace of God was well worth the hardship and the expense of travel. That church of Antioch saw the importance of accurately teaching God's doctrine of God's grace.

HISTORICAL FACT #4 - Paul and Barnabas arrive in Jerusalem. **15:4**

It had been a while since Paul and Barnabas had been in Jerusalem and when they got there the church welcomed them. When they got into Jerusalem three events occurred:

(Event #1) - They were received by the church. 15:4a

The verb “receive” (παραδεχομαι) means that there was no rejection at all from the church. It received them and admitted them into its fellowship.

(Event #2) - They were received by the apostles and elders. 15:4b

The same verb is used and it means that the other apostles and elders of the church of Jerusalem received them and admitted them into its fellowship.

(Event #3) - They gave a report of all that God had done. 15:4c

It is interesting words that Dr. Luke uses. The words mean they gave a “detailed report” of the many things that God had done. This is the way it should be. It is the testimony of what God had done.

Most of us have probably heard presentations of missionaries that are designed to show what the missionary has done. Many years ago in one such presentation, my thought was it appears to me that God hasn’t done much of anything. They had been on a particular mission field for years and by what was being presented God hadn’t really done too much at all.

It was not that way with Paul and Barnabas. They could tell you exactly what God had done and they could tell you the people and places where He had done it.

HISTORICAL FACT #5 - Certain Pharisaical believers contradict their grace message. **15:5**

Now it appears that some of these Pharisees were true believers in Jesus Christ, but they were very confused about their doctrine. They apparently believed that you needed to believe on Jesus Christ, but then you needed to be circumcised and keep the O.T. Law of Moses. Now it is one thing if you have your own goofy theological convictions. But the problem is, they stood up and opened their mouths. They said if one is going to be truly saved, one must be circumcised and one must keep the O.T. Law of Moses. What happens next is something every N.T. believer needs to see and understand.

HISTORICAL FACT #6 - The apostles and elders defend God's grace. 15:6-11

The apostles and elders listened carefully to what these Pharisees were saying in response to Paul and Barnabas. In fact, **verse 6** says they came together to "look into this matter." The Greek means they specifically gathered together to look into the Word. They got together to carefully see what it was that God's Word theologically taught about grace.

After there had been a great debate, Peter stood and gave the doctrinal consensus of the apostles and elders, which becomes the first church doctrinal statement on record. **If this moment hadn't happened, the grace of God's Gospel could have been lost right here.**

There are five key theological acknowledgements made by the Apostle Peter:

- 1) Peter acknowledged that in the early days of the church he was directed by God to present a faith Gospel to the Gentiles. **15:7**
- 2) Peter acknowledged that when they believed in Jesus Christ they received the Holy Spirit. **15:8**
- 3) Peter acknowledged that the Gentiles had their hearts cleansed by faith. **15:9**

Do not gloss over this point. There is only one way to have your heart cleansed in the sight of God and that is by believing on Jesus Christ.

- 4) Peter acknowledged that no yoke of law should ever be put on grace. **15:10**

Peter says "why do you put God to the test?" His point is, to insist that God demand something extra than believing on Jesus Christ is to test and tempt the pure grace of God. The O.T. Law is a yoke that "we have not been able to bear." Do you get this point? You and I cannot possibly keep the O.T. Law. Let's put this to a little test and see.

When Jesus Christ was here on earth one of these Pharisees asked Jesus which was the greatest commandment in the Law of Moses. Jesus answered the question with these words: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and foremost commandment and the second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets" (Matt. 22:34-40).

So we can legitimately break the Mosaic Law down into two simple legal mandates. Let's put this to the test and see. Would you be willing to stand up and say you have done this your entire life? You have never missed the mark in either of these two requirements. You have never had a moment in your life when anything except God was first and you have always loved your neighbor just like you love yourself.

If you dare stand up and say you have met these requirements, we will prove you a liar, because none of us ever have. We cannot bear these two simple commandments let alone all the other requirements of the Law.

5) Peter acknowledged the pure grace salvation gospel. **15:11**

This is why salvation must be by God's grace and may only come through faith. We cannot keep the law. We cannot be good enough for God.

Now most people believe if they try real hard and are real good they will go to heaven. So let's say you are 80% good and only 20% not so good. Do you think that your 80% good will earn you heaven? Here is the big problem. God will not let anyone into His presence who is 20% dirty. To get into His presence and into His heaven, one must be 100% righteous. None of us are. Fact is none of us are even 80% close to it.

This is why salvation must be by pure grace by faith in Jesus Christ. It is faith alone in Christ alone.

We believe just exactly what that church in Jerusalem believed. You may ask us today a series of questions and we will tell you exactly what we believe.

Do we believe you may be saved by being circumcised? No

Do we believe you may be saved by being baptized? No

Do we believe you may be saved by religious rites or rituals? No

Do we believe you may be saved if you purpose to follow the teachings of Jesus? No

Do we believe you may be saved if you promise to try harder to be better? No

Do we believe you may be saved by walking away from some addiction? No

Do we believe you may be saved by church membership? No

Do we believe you may be saved by taking communion? No

Do we believe you may be saved by tithing your money? No

We believe exactly what the apostles believe: "We believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus in the same way as they are also." Salvation is through grace and through faith. Faith plus nothing; no religious works, and no religious rituals.