

## Acts 15:1-5

“The Conflict ”

(Next week we'll see the Council, or the Correction)

Though every ch of the bible is emphatically essential if we're to take in the totality of the whole counsel of the Word of God, there are various places/portions of the Word of God that are especially crucial to you and me *personally* and the body of Christ *collectively* if we're to get a grip *on* the heart of God *towards* us and learn to lead our lives in a manner that accords *with* the heart of God *for* us. and What I mean by that is though a portion of scripture that deals say with certain lineages, or the # of people in a certain tribe in the nation of Israel is every bit as much of the Word of God as any other portion, and washes over us in that respect. That particular passage probably isn't going to have quite the personal and eternal impact on us as say John Ch 3, whereby we learn that by believing on Jesus Christ we can have everlasting life, or John 14 that tells us that Jesus is the only exclusive way to the Father. So though man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the Mouth of God, certainly there are various portions in God's Word that behoove us to take in and tuck away in the understanding of our heart and mind as perhaps priority (for lack of a better way to say it) over another. and I hope I'm getting my point across here because my point isn't to try and *belittle* any portion of the Word of God, but rather to *amplify* the fact that there are certain places in the scripture that you do well to get a grip *on*, and have an understanding *of* because they'll impact and directly affect your entire walk and relationship with God. and Ch 15 of the book of Acts is one of those portions.

Am I saying that you need to memorize ch 15? No, though if you want to I think that's great, but what I am saying is that you need to have a death grip (or maybe I should say “life grip”) on the principle, or the premise that's found *in it*. Because in ch 15 the very heart of the gospel comes into question, what does it *mean* to be saved, what do I have to *do* to be saved, what is the core of the gospel? If I were to ask you to place the gospel in writing, what needs to happen that I might be saved, what would you place on that piece of paper? It's essential that you know, because that's the making or breaking of eternal life. So the crisis of Ch 15 is the gospel coming under attack, but praise the Lord the confusion gets corrected and the bottom line is brought forth in this ch as it pertains to your/my salvation.

The flow of Ch 15 is as follows; it begins with a *dilemma*, moves into a *dispute*, from there the *disagreement* gets taken to the church in Jerusalem where the core of the gospel is *defended/debated*, there's *deliberation*, the issue is *dissolved*, and then the bottom line is *delivered* back to the church in Antioch. This week we'll see the conflict, next week we'll hear the council.

Vs1

Enter contention; the dilemma- that men from Judea (which is to say the church capital so to speak) are purporting that salvation doesn't happen by grace through faith *alone*. That the message that Paul and Barnabas have been sharing throughout the region for the last couple of years as they've risked their lives taking it here and there has been incomplete, and that the salvation that they thought they were enjoying was a façade, they weren't saved, because they weren't circumcised. Notice it there, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." So this isn't a gray area that they're purporting that can simply be a matter of personal conviction by which they can agree to disagree on, this is a challenge to the message of the cross itself and the sufficiency of Jesus to save you. They're saying that you can't be saved by Christ alone, but that you also need to be circumcised, basically that the work of the cross is incomplete. So this is a major/hard line that's being drawn in the dirt here.

At the crux of it is, "What is it exactly that needs to take place in my life in order for me to be saved?" and If they're right, than all of the hard labor/countless hours that Paul and Barnabas have invested in spreading the message has been a waste and hundreds and thousands of people are walking around with a false sense of security thinking they're ok with God when they're not even saved! But there will always be those who seek to defile the grace of God that you enjoy through legalism. and Their basic message (though not packaged in these words) is that you simply loving *on* God, being in love *with* God, and receiving the sacrifice of Christ on your behalf *from* God isn't enough, you must also be bound in legalism *before* God if you're to be saved *by* God. But truth be known #1 The very fact that you would be in love with God, would testify to the fact that you're saved by God. Because it's not natural to love God, the bible teaches that, "There is none who seeks after God." Rom 3:11 So the love of God, and a love for God in my heart is the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. But then 2<sup>ndly</sup> Having begun in the Spirit, how are you going to be made perfect by the flesh? Which is to say that if the only way I can receive Christ is by faith, (in the Spirit) how can I perfect that, or add to that by a work of my flesh? So you see the question that needs to be answered is, "What exactly is the gospel?" and Once that's been established, then to add even one thing to it, defiles it, once you add something to the gospel, you don't have the gospel anymore, you've got something else.

So is it liberty, or is it law, is it Christ, or is it Moses? Because the 2 don't compliment one another, they conflict with one another. So what is the gospel, Paul put it like this, "*I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you -- unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures,*" 1 Cor 15:1-5 That's the gospel, that Jesus died, was buried and rose again the third day for your sin, you place your faith in Christ, the fact of that message, and you'll be saved.

A little further down in the passage he expounds just a bit, *“For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive.”* 1 Cor 15:21-23

But that just seems too simple for some people, they feel like they somehow need a hand in their own salvation, that they’ve somehow earned it, rather than humbly receiving it. You see this wasn’t just a problem of the past that really has no relevance for today; you need to understand that this same mentality takes place in people all the time still today. and It may not deal with circumcision, but the idea that Jesus alone isn’t enough comes packaged in all kinds of ways. Sometimes people hit you with the fact that Jesus isn’t enough, “You need to be a member of this church to be saved, and if you believe in Jesus that’s neat, but if you’re not a member of this church you’re not saved.” Others will say, “That’s absurd, but *you do* need to be baptized, and if you’re not baptized, it doesn’t matter what you believe about Jesus, you’re not saved.” (Notice that baptism doesn’t come up in this discussion, neither does church membership, regarding the essentials for salvation). Still others might say, “Well we agree that baptism does need to take place, but not baptism just anywhere, only in our church. If you were baptized in another denomination, it didn’t count.” and I’ve yet to figure out why baptism has become this monumental aspect of Christianity as opposed to anything else. “Jesus commanded it.” True, but He commanded a lot of other things to that you don’t do, so why are you isolating this one? Listen, I believe in baptism, I see it as an essential aspect of your witness, the outward public demonstration of the inward transformation of your heart.

But obedience to Jesus is essential period, and to elevate one thing over the other regarding the things He said to do is difficult for me to justify. He commanded that we forgive one another from the heart, so if you’re struggling with bitterness towards a brother are you going to hell? Depends on your theology, if it’s about what you do, you just might, if it’s about what He’s done, than you can abide in His grace. (I’m being a bit facetious but you get the idea)

You see, what’s the message of the gospel, how am I saved? What did we just read? “The death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ” Once you add to that anything, circumcision, church membership, baptism, keeping of the Sabbath, or whatever, you don’t have the gospel anymore; you have grace defiled by legalism. and That’s dangerous, because once I’ve attached my salvation to anything other than the cross of Jesus Christ alone, I’ve made a transition from salvation by grace, to works righteousness which is to insult the cross of Christ. It’s saying to Jesus, “I appreciate what you did and all, but I’ll go ahead and finish up what you were unable to complete, I’ll go ahead and finish where you left off.” It’s saying that when Jesus cried out on the cross, *“It is finished!”* John 19:30 That, that statement was in essence a lie, that it’s really not finished until I do my part. You see it turns critical real fast. That’s why Paul said, *“Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.”* Gal 5:1-4

Which to you and me means that when we try to be justified before God by what we do rather than what He's done, we've stepped outside the realm of receiving the covering of grace, into trying to be covered by our own works, rather than His work on the cross. Be it by holding our baptism up as the banner of salvation, trusting in church membership, seeking to uphold the Sabbath, or a certain dietary code, and on and on the list could go, various ascetic lifestyles and all, if you are baptized for your salvation, than Christ profits you nothing. It's either about your work of baptism, or His work on the cross, it's either about your keeping the Sabbath, or His work on the cross, it can't be both, is Christ sufficient, or is He not? The bible teaches an emphatic resounding "Yes" Christ alone is able to save you from your sin and anything you do to try and bolster that along or help that out, only takes away from it and in the end defiles *it*, and entangles you. But Jesus came to set you free from worrying about trying to justify yourself before God that you might be justified in Him, that's why He said, "...if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed." John 8:36 and Paul amplified that there in Gal 5 which we just read regarding standing fast in the *liberty* by which Christ has made us free. (But this is the conflict at hand, is faith in Christ enough? Paul says "yes," they say "no.")

Vs2

So the dilemma moves to a dispute, Luke uses a diminutive approach to his writing here, kind of down plays it, this is the nice way of saying, "These guys had it out." Why? Because the gospel is under attack, we can't let this begin to take root.

I love the shepherd's hearts these guys have, when false doctrine comes blowing in to the church, they confront it head on, disagree *with* it, dispute heavily *over* it, determine to get to the bottom *of* it and expose the lie *in* it. Now with all due respect to these Judaizers, they didn't have the NT, Romans, Galatians, Paul hadn't penned these letters yet. and What they knew of the OT stated that in order for a Gentile (paraphrase) to come into the covenant of Israel they had to 1<sup>st</sup> become Jew, that is take the sign of the covenant which was circumcision. What they didn't understand is that at it's heart the law was spiritual not physical and that the circumcision that God was after was of the heart, not of the flesh. That God was after a cutting away of the flesh of the heart, not of the body.

That's why later Paul wrote, "*For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.*" Rom 2:28-29 So the focus of God has always been on the inward, never on the outward, why? Because once God has your heart, your inner man, He has your outer man as well, but if you just try to reform your outer man, your inner man can be in the most ungodly of places. and God has never made a secret about His concern *for* and His looking *to* the human heart.

Remember back when Israel was wanting a king, and they got who they wanted, good looking, a head taller than everyone else, a real man's man, Saul. The outward appearance seemed perfect, but we all know how that wound up. So when God chose the man whom *He* wanted, Samuel went to the house of Jesse, looked at all the boys, from the best looking, buffest fella, all the way down. God didn't choose any of them, so he looks at Jesse and says, "Do you have any other boys, I mean God told me to come to this address." Jesse says, "Well, I got one little punk kid out tending the sheep, but I mean he's the youngest, the runt, last in line." Samuel says, "Go get him." and You know the deal, in walks David. But when Jesse had set his oldest boy before him, Samuel was all, "This must be the guy!" He just *looked* Kingly, but that's when God said to him, "*Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature, because I have refused him. For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart*" 1 Sam 16:7 and On it went from there until David came into the picture, but the point is that God has never made it a secret that He's after the heart, the inner man.

Because once you have the *inner* man, you have the *entire* man. Jesus spoke on that same subject when He was rebuking the Pharisees in Matt 23 for being so concerned about their outward appearance but inwardly they were a million miles away from the heart of God. It's the same point He was stressing in Matt 15 when He said, "*Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: 'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honor Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me.'*" Matt 15:7-8 So it's never been about outward reformation with God, but rather inward transformation of the heart.

That's sort of what these guys were wrestling with here, all they knew was the law according to outward reformation, so they were trying to conform to righteousness according to the outer man, they didn't have a grip on God's grace. Now we'll see next week how that as the issue resolved, to their credit these men in particular were teachable, but at this point they weren't ready to just take Paul's word for it. and It's easy to see how they could be confused, but this could end in tragedy if not handled right. and This seems to be that situation that Paul refers to in the book of Galatians when he speaks of how Peter, and even Barnabas began to waiver. Turn to Gal ch 2:11-16

So Paul had to rebuke even Peter because it needed to be made clear, and he's saying "Is it about the law, or do we enjoy liberty in Christ? Is it about what you do Peter, or what Christ has done, if it's about what you do, than why do we believe in Christ, but we who *have* the law have come to believe in Christ because we know that no flesh is going to be justified *by* the law, or by legal works, but rather by faith in Christ." and The point was that if you're justified by Christ, than why are you trying to keep all these little rules and regulations to be made right, it's either Christ, or it's not, it can't be Jesus "plus" anything, either Jesus saves, or He doesn't. and This is the question/conflict that's going to be settled in Acts 15

Now, why take this to the church, the elders in Jerusalem, certainly Paul knew the scripture well enough to mow these guys over? Because #1 Paul didn't want to be perceived as the Lone Ranger in his theology, have these people believe that he and Barnabas were kind of renegade type guys who didn't really have the support of home base in Jerusalem.

#2 He wasn't too prideful to verify his message before other brothers, there's safety in the multitude of counsel. and The bible says that by wise counsel we're to wage war. #3 It was just a wise move to make, not only for his sake, or the church's sake, but also to silence the opposition once and for all so that it would be brought into the light that they were the ones who were out of line. It was just a move of accountability and responsibility. What's this mean to you? Don't be afraid to be brought under the scrutiny of the scriptures, be accountable, be responsible, if you're out of line somewhere, you should *want* to know it, that you might repent and be made right *in* it. But if you're doing things that accord with the scripture, it's always encouraging and refreshing to be affirmed in that as well. So Paul takes off with a few other guys, and heads off for Jerusalem, now who all those guys were I don't know, I do know that Titus was one of them, we find that out in Galatians 2. He probably came along as Exhibit A in Paul's case in that he was a Greek, he was uncircumcised, and "See for yourself his love *for* the Lord, how mightily he's used by the Spirit *of* the Lord, now how can you deny that God has saved him and done a work *in* him, regardless of circumcision?"

Vs3

This is in obvious contrast to the "Certain men" that came down from Judea.

Vs4-5

So declare what's happened, then these Pharisees who'd come to believe begin to debate their position. and This brings the matter a little more into focus, because the Pharisees were a sect of people who held the highest regard *for* the law, and were very scrupulous and meticulous regarding the attention they gave *to* the law. and If a Pharisee believed anything, it was that they could be justified before God by their *keeping of* the law.

But Paul's position was emphatically the opposite, remember what he told the Jews in Antioch of Pisidia? He said, "...*by Him (that is Jesus) everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses.*" Acts 13:39 Which is to say that Moses can't justify you in *anything* but Jesus justifies you before God in *everything*. When these Pharisees came to believe in Christ, they had a real difficulty in letting go of the law for righteousness, "It's great to come to Christ, but you need to get to him through the law." Was sort of their position, and their complaint was that Paul and Barnabas was teaching people that they could come to Christ outside of the law. They thought that Jesus was just an amendment to the law to help them justify themselves in their keeping of the law.

Paul was saying, “You can’t just ‘add’ Jesus to your gig as added insurance.” Like when Elvis was seen with a necklace of the cross, the star of David and a Catholic crucifix and when asked why he had on all these different religious emblems he said, “I’m just coverin’ all the bases.” But you can’t just “add” Jesus into the mix to “cover the bases.” You either trust in Christ or you don’t! So in a sense these Pharisees are in the same predicament as were the heathens in ch 14 whom Paul said that they should “turn away” from their useless practices, “to the living God.” Because you either have to look to the law for righteousness, or to Christ.

Paul Himself was a Pharisee before Christ came into his life, so he’s not speaking from a perspective of which he knows nothing about. Look quickly at Philippians Ch 3:2-11

Vs 8

Which is to say, “I’ve turned *from* the useless things of the flesh, *to* Christ for my righteousness.” (notice)

Vs9-11

You see Paul makes the very clear cut case for the fact that it’s not about anything I do, it’s about everything He’s done, that’s the key, it’s not you, it’s Christ in you that makes for your righteousness.

You see here in vs 5 we get a little more insight as to what they were wanting of these Gentile converts, it wasn’t *just* circumcision, they also said that they should command them, to keep the law of Moses. But that’s the way legalism is, it starts out in one thing, then it grows to 2, but with in that 2<sup>nd</sup> thing there may be a myriad of fine print. “Be circumcised, and keep the law of Moses, just those 2 things,” “Well what’s the law of Moses?” “This 32 volume set along with all it’s commentary by the all various rabbis down through the centuries.” and It permeates through you like yeast through a lump of dough until it completely defiles you. and We can’t be content with being in bondage ourselves, we have to begin to impose our standards on those around us who just enjoy the grace of God. That’s what’s happening here, they’re imposing their legal standards on those who were simply enjoying a love relationship with Jesus Christ “The Conflict”, next time we’ll hear from the council. Be careful to guard against legalism, because as soon as you add something to Jesus that pertains to your righteousness or your salvation, you don’t have a relationship anymore, you have a religion, you have bondage, you’re entangled again with a yoke of bondage, when Jesus came to set you free! What does the bible say? “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is *law*.”? “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is *legalism*.”? “...where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.” 2 Cor 3:17

Perhaps you're caught up, bound by the yoke, entangled in the bondage of sin. Jesus wants to set you free, but He doesn't want to *reform* you outwardly by a set of standards, or religious regulations. He wants to *transform* you inwardly by giving you a new heart, setting you free, and forgiving you of your sin. But you have to come to that place where you're willing to humble yourself *before* Him, cast off every attempt to be made right before God that you've placed *in front* of Him, and cast yourself solely *upon* Him, and trust in Him to give you new life. If in your heart God is dealing with you now, than why not let Jesus make you whole, fill the void in your heart, and forgive you of your sin? All you have to do is ask...

Prayer Points:

Lord, help us to stand fast in the liberty with which you have made us free, that we might discern the fingerprints of legalism when they begin to press in upon us. Thank You Jesus that You alone are sufficient to save us, to sanctify us and to present us faultless on that day before the Father.