



Acts: The Church Unleashed- Session 9

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Reference *The Gospel Project*, Winter 2017-2018

Introduction

In the movie, *Saving Private Ryan*, Miller (Hanks) has taken a mortal wound saving Ryan (Damon). As life slips away from the captain, he weakly says something to Ryan who leans in to hear him say it again: “James, earn this...earn it.” The thing that Ryan was called to earn was his life.

That image of an older man looking back at his life wondering, needing to know, that he earned the life given to him is sobering. Can you imagine someone laying down his life for you so that your life might be spared and then living each day trying to earn that gift that had been given to you? For those of us in Christ, that is not a hypothetical situation. That is what we have experienced in Christ Jesus. The problem, though, is that just like Ryan, many of us struggle with feeling as if we need to earn the gift of life that was given to us. We fail to embrace wholly the gift given to us and therefore believe we need to live in such a way as to earn our salvation.

Why do some Christians struggle to accept that salvation is by grace alone and we don't need to do anything to earn it, whether before or after?

Transition: In this session we see how the church handled a heated disagreement about the nature of salvation for Gentiles. Were Gentiles saved by faith alone or must they enter into salvation through the path of obedience to the law first? The Jerusalem Council that was convened to answer this critical question offers us a good example of how to handle disputes in the church but also was vital in preserving the gospel message of “Christ alone.”

1. The Dispute: “Jesus Alone” vs “Jesus Plus” Acts 15:1-5

Have a volunteer to read Acts 15:1-5

1 Some men came down from Judea and began to teach the brothers: “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom prescribed by Moses, you cannot be saved.” 2 After Paul and Barnabas had engaged them in serious argument and debate, Paul and Barnabas and some others were appointed to go up to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about this issue. 3 When they had been sent on their way by the church, they passed

through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and they brought great joy to all the brothers and sisters.

⁴ When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church, the apostles, and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. ⁵ But some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to command them to keep the law of Moses.”

Context: Just before this in Acts 13–14, we saw how the early church had sent the first missionaries, Paul and Barnabas, to push the gospel farther out from Jerusalem as Jesus had instructed (Acts 1:8). The trip had been difficult for the two missionaries, but many had come to faith in Christ, including a number of Gentiles. News of what God had done spread, but not everyone in the church who heard it was pleased.

What was the dispute? What were the two views of the gospel?

1. Some viewed that it was Jesus plus the Jewish law. The dispute began when some men who evidently had heard the reports of Gentiles coming to faith in Christ came down from Judea to Antioch. A significant part of the identity of these men had been based on their allegiance to the Law of Moses—the way that they were set apart as God’s people from the nations around them—and that was difficult for them to give up. These men were stuck in their thinking and failed to see God doing the unexpected all around them. To understand the influence of those that stood for Jesus and Jewish law go to Galatians 1:6-10; 2:14, and 3:15.

2. Some viewed that it was Jesus alone. The crux of the debate can be boiled down to the question of whether Jesus alone is sufficient for salvation or if something else—anything else, such as circumcision in this case—was needed in addition. Paul and Barnabas objected to the teachings of these men for two probable reasons.

Why did it matter what was being disputed?

The primary reason centered on the core of the gospel—salvation by grace alone through faith alone (Eph. 2:8-9). The men from Judea were teaching that faith alone was not sufficient for salvation; instead, a person first had to belong to God’s covenant community, the people of Israel, and becoming part of that community required the mark of circumcision. Consider Martin Luther’s motivation for the Reformation: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/theologians/martin-luther.html>

Requiring a Gentile to be circumcised first would mean that they had to do something first to earn the right to be saved, but no one is worthy to be saved. No one deserves an invitation into a relationship with the living God. Salvation is by grace. Grace initiated it. Grace sustains it. Grace fulfills it. Gentiles should not have to do something to earn salvation when no one else had done anything to merit it.

What is the difference in a work and fruit? (Works: things done to achieve salvation, fruits- evidence of salvation in an individual.) Why can people lean towards works based salvation instead of grace-alone salvation?

What are some traditions we can hold on to that may impede the gospel for others?
What role can traditions play in our lives? (Merely for remembrance)

What traditions have you had to set aside for the gospel? How were you able to do so?

Transition: The church leaders gathered to consider the issue in what has been called the Jerusalem Council. As we will read, settling the issue at stake was critically important, but so was how the church would resolve it. To what would the church appeal to answer this question? Tradition or God's Word and what they had seen God do around them?

2. The Discussion: Tradition vs Scripture and experience. Acts 15:6-21

Have a volunteer to read Acts 15:6-21.

⁶ The apostles and the elders gathered to consider this matter. ⁷ After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them: "Brothers and sisters, you are aware that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the gospel message and believe. ⁸ And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he also did to us. ⁹ He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now then, why are you testing God by putting a yoke on the disciples' necks that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ On the contrary, we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus in the same way they are."

¹² The whole assembly became silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul describe all the signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. ¹³ After they stopped speaking, James responded: "Brothers and sisters, listen to me. ¹⁴ Simeon has reported how God first intervened to take from the Gentiles a people for his name. ¹⁵ And the words of the prophets agree with this, as it is written:

*¹⁶ After these things I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent.
I will rebuild its ruins and set it up again,*

¹⁷ so the rest of humanity

may seek the Lord—

*even all the Gentiles who are called by my name—
declares the Lord*

who makes these things ¹⁸ known from long ago.

¹⁹ Therefore, in my judgment, we should not cause difficulties for those among the Gentiles who turn to God, ²⁰ but instead we should write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from eating anything that has been strangled, and from blood. ²¹ For since ancient times, Moses has had those who proclaim him in every city, and every Sabbath day he is read aloud in the synagogues."

What had happened earlier to Peter that helped him to side with Paul and Barnabas in this dispute?

Peter reminded the gathering of his experience with Cornelius and how God had revealed Peter's need to cast aside a mind-set fixed on tradition and replace it with one fixed on the gospel (Acts 10–11). Circumcision had been a mark of purity and separateness from the world for God's people, but now in Christ, that mark comes by faith. In Christ, purity and separateness do not lead to salvation but instead flow out of it. Requiring circumcision before salvation undermined this essential aspect of the gospel. Therefore, adding anything to faith alone for salvation was adding a heavy, unbearable yoke on their shoulders.

How did James affirm what Peter said?

James concluded that based on what they had experienced and what God had revealed to them in Scripture (Amos 9:11-12), the church should not make it difficult for Gentiles to come to faith in Christ, which requiring circumcision would do. However, James also understood that there were ways that Gentile believers could threaten unity with the Jewish believers and also become a barrier to other Jews coming to faith in Christ. James suggested that the church write the Gentile believers and share what they could do to preserve the unity of the church.

The early church was proactive in dealing with a potential threat to the church's unity and mission. What lessons can we draw from their example?

What are some of the dangers of relying only on our experiences to validate what God is doing?

How important is it that we remain faithful to the purity of the Gospel? What are ways that you see the gospel get distorted today?

How did dealing with these disputes affect the missional attitude of the church? (Being sent means we go to anyone, anywhere, at any moment to share the gospel and declare that the cross and resurrection power is for anyone!)

Transition: The council of elders and apostles followed James' leadership and wrote a letter to be delivered to the Gentile believers in Antioch. Two men were selected to accompany Paul and Barnabas so there would be no questioning of the council's decision.

3. The Decision: Freedom and Love. Acts 15:22-35

Have a volunteer to read Acts 15:22-35.

²² Then the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, decided to select men who were among them and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas: Judas, called Barsabbas, and Silas, both leading men among the brothers. ²³ They wrote:

"From the apostles and the elders, your brothers,

To the brothers and sisters among the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings.

²⁴ Since we have heard that some without our authorization went out from us and troubled you with their words and unsettled your hearts, ²⁵ we have unanimously decided to select men and send them to you along with our dearly loved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶ who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who will personally report the same things by word of mouth. ²⁸ For it was the Holy Spirit's decision—and ours—not to place further burdens on you beyond these requirements: ²⁹ that you abstain from food offered to idols, from blood, from eating anything that has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. You will do well if you keep yourselves from these things.

Farewell.

³⁰ So they were sent off and went down to Antioch, and after gathering the assembly, they delivered the letter. ³¹ When they read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. ³² Both Judas and Silas, who were also prophets themselves, encouraged the brothers and sisters and strengthened them with a long message. ³³ After spending some time there, they were sent back in peace by the brothers and sisters to those who had sent them. ³⁵ But Paul and Barnabas, along with many others, remained in Antioch, teaching and proclaiming the word of the Lord.

It was clear from the greeting that the church's ruling was in favor of the Gentile believers and that they were considered brothers and sisters in Christ. All of the leaders in Jerusalem were concerned about the trouble the situation had caused the Gentile believers and they wanted to set the record straight.

What were the four things they asked the believers not to participate in?

1. The Gentile believers were not to eat food offered to idols. It was a common practice among the Roman Empire that once food was offered as a sacrifice to their gods, it would then be prepared and shared in the pagan temple and even sold in the public market.

2. The Gentile believers were not to eat food with blood still in it or used as an ingredient. Some Roman and Greek foods used blood as an ingredient, but Levitical law prohibited consuming blood. These foods might be offered at a wedding or a funeral feast, at a city festival, or even in common meals, but Gentile believers should now abstain from them.

3. The Gentile believers were not to eat anything that had been strangled. Animals that were strangled instead of slaughtered retained the blood in them and could lead to it being consumed.

4. The Gentile believers were to abstain from sexual immorality. The Greek word used here is the word from which we get the English word "pornography." The Gentiles were known for engaging in loose and open sexual practices, both in daily relationships as well as in pagan worship. The church leaders probably assumed the Gentile believers would know to abstain from sexual fornication as part of worship practices. However, they might not have a clear understanding on the broader idea of

sexual purity. Sexual encounters were of utmost intimacy and should be practiced only within committed marriage relationships.

What were the leaders teaching the church by focusing on these areas?

- **Protection of the weaker followers of Christ.** James and the other leaders were concerned that the Gentile believers might take their personal freedom in Christ too far and live in such a way as to be a stumbling block to the convictions of their Jewish brothers and sisters.
- **Pathway to pursuing holiness.** These four practices were addressed in Leviticus 17–18, where they were forbidden for both Jews and Gentiles living among the people of God. That is most likely why James mentioned that the law of Moses was read every week in every synagogue in verse 21. These four prohibitions should not have surprised the Gentiles and they were of deep significance to the Jewish believers.
- **A way to live in unity and purity.** If the Gentile believers abstained from these four practices, they would safeguard themselves from being a burden to the Jewish believers, ensure healthy fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christ-followers, and not put a burden on other Jews coming to faith in Christ.

There is freedom in the gospel of Jesus Christ, but that freedom does not grant us the ability to do whatever we like. Freedom in Christ drives us back to God's love and kindness to us and compels us to extend love and kindness to others. Freedom and love go hand in hand.

The understanding of how personal liberties affect the whole body is especially true as our groups meet at New Vision. There are times where one personal liberty may not be a stumbling block for one person and yet it is for someone else within our groups. To bring personal liberties to the group that could harm another violates the purposes of why we meet as groups at New Vision. An example can be the consumption of substances (alcohol) at our group meetings or at a group function. Your personal liberty may allow you to consume them, but there may be someone that is a new believer, someone with a different view regarding its consumption, or someone dealing with a past of alcohol that does not need to be around it all within the same group. Therefore, it is better to set your personal liberty aside for the spiritual growth of another than to allow your personal liberty to become a stumbling block.

What are some other cultural practices today that are opposed to the gospel that we may need to clarify with new believers?

What freedoms have you given up, or should you give up, out of love for others?

What do you think it means for us to be united towards pursuing holiness in our groups? What would it look like? What would need to change in your group?

Conclusion:

A relationship with Jesus alone is all we need for salvation. The early church protected the core message of the gospel. Today, God continues to call us to proclaim the message

that salvation is available through faith in Christ alone, and not through additional obligations and works.

Spend time this week in reflection about how salvation comes through Jesus alone. If you have based your salvation in your personal goodness, please come discuss with a Cornerstone room counselor or staff member about the true essence of salvation.

If you struggle with stumbling blocks or the understanding of personal liberties, spend time praying for the growth of your group and what you need to set aside for the growth of others.

Quotes/Commentary

Acts 15:1-5

“Questions and problems arise in the fellowship of believers. When difficulties become evident, Christians have an opportunity to demonstrate the power of Christ in their lives. Our response to conflict and to those who disagree with us shows the depth of our Christian character. Conditions and circumstances continually change, causing new questions to arise. Some people in the early church questioned whether salvation rested on legalism—outward acts which others could see—or totally on the grace of God. Many early believers insisted the Gentiles must be circumcised. The early church met this problem swiftly and openly, affirming the work of grace. The council at Jerusalem sent a letter of encouragement to Gentile believers to build their faith. During conflict, churches must exercise compassion, restraint, and concern that God’s will be done and that the fellowship of believers be strengthened. Personal experience, the Holy Spirit’s witness, the theology of salvation by grace alone, and Bible study provide answers to the church’s problems. Churches must deal with problems quickly and effectively, seeking to preserve the truth of the gospel and the unity of the churches.”³

–*Disciple’s Study Bible*

“Satan greatly approves of our railing at each other, but God does not!”⁵

–Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892)

Acts 15:6-21

“The rabbis often used the metaphor of a ‘yoke’ with reference to the law, and Peter’s reference to ‘yoke’ here refers not just to circumcision but to the whole of the Mosaic law. By speaking of the law as an unbearable yoke, Peter was not denying that the law was God’s gift to Israel. Rather, he was arguing that Israel was unable to fulfill it perfectly and that salvation could not be obtained through the law (cf. Rom. 2:17-24). Only one means of salvation exists for both Jew and Gentile: God’s ‘grace’ (Acts 15:11) in Jesus Christ. Paul also refers to any requirement to keep the OT laws as ‘a yoke of slavery’ (Gal. 5:1). By contrast, Jesus calls people to take his new ‘yoke’ upon them, a yoke that is easy (see Matt. 11:29).”⁶

–John B. Polhill

“The hallmark of an authentic evangelical is not the uncritical repetition of old traditions, but the willingness to submit every tradition, however ancient, to fresh biblical scrutiny, and if necessary, reform.”^z

–John Stott (1921-2011)

“There was no arrogance in the church. After Peter, Paul speaks, and no one silences him. James waits patiently and does not jump up. Great is the orderliness [of the proceedings]. No word from John here, and nothing from the other apostles. They hold their peace. For James was invested with the chief rule, and they did not begrudge him, so free was their soul from love of glory.”⁸

–John Chrysostom (circa 347-407)

Acts 15:22-35

“The letter was written in the name of the Jerusalem leaders, ‘the apostles and elders.’ The recipients were denoted ‘the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia.’ Actually, this could be considered almost as a single address. Syria-Cilicia was administratively a single Roman province, and Antioch was a city within it. It was at Antioch that the debate had arisen (15:1), and so it was to Antioch that the Jerusalem leaders sent their response.”⁹

–John B. Polhill

“It’s bad enough for me to make choices that hurt my own relationship with God. How much more serious is it to be the cause of someone else deciding to sin? Not only must I choose the pathway of holiness for God’s sake and for my own sake; I must also do it for the sake of others.”¹⁰

–Nancy DeMoss Wolgemuth

“They indicated clearly by what they wrote that though the decree had been written by men who were apostles, it was from the Holy Spirit and universal. Barnabas and Paul took this decree and confirmed it to the whole world.”¹¹

–Cyril of Jerusalem (circa 310-386)