

## ACTS 15

Good evening and thank you for joining us. Would you please turn in your Bibles to Acts 15?

The story is told that, on a snowy January day at the turn of the century, a crowded passenger train steamed its way from Chicago to St. Louis. At one of many stops along the way, one of the travelers observed a young mother board the train with two small children in tow. "Please, sir, I need to get off at the city of Beaumont," he heard her say to the conductor.

The passenger, taking note of the overworked conductor, approached the young woman and said, "The conductor is busy. No doubt he'll forget you want to get off at Beaumont. I've been on this train a hundred times. I'll make sure you get off at the right place." Several hours later, as the train decelerated, the man made his way to the young mother and said, "This is the spot. Here's where you want to get off." Thanking him, she gathered her children and went out into the blizzard.

Half an hour passed before the conductor called out, "Where is the woman who wants to get off at Beaumont? It's coming up in five minutes."

Horrified at what he heard, the man said, "What do you mean? Beaumont was the last stop we made."

"No, sir," replied the conductor. "The last stop we made was to pick up water at a tank in the middle of nowhere." And both men instantly realized that the woman and children had been sent off the train to their deaths.

Thus the very real danger about improper instructions. Yet the Bible even has a sterner warning for those who teach the Word of God.

James 3:1 My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.

Tonight we see what happens when erroneous teaching creeps into the church, and the storm of controversy that it leads to.

The title of tonight's message is GRACE ON TRIAL

Lets pray

1 And certain *men* came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." Whenever a chapter starts with the word And or Therefore, we must step back and look at how the prior chapter ended to get a clear understanding of the circumstances surrounding these words. So lets peek back a few verses and look at Acts 14:23-27 23 So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. 24 And after they had passed through Pisidia, they came to Pamphylia. 25 Now when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. 26 From there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had completed.

27 Now when they had come and gathered the church together, they reported all that god had done with them, and that he had opened the door of faith to the gentiles. 28 So they stayed there a long time with the disciples

So chapter 14 ends with the thunderous joy of the body of Christ working in unison and rejoicing over those coming to faith in Jesus. So with that as the backdrop let's read chapter 15 verse 1 again

1 And certain *men* came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." These men who taught that circumcision was a requirement for salvation would later be known as Judaizers. You see they wanted the Christian faith to really become part of the Jewish faith. They wanted these Gentile proselytes, which is another term for a convert, to really become Jewish proselytes.

This attack seems to suddenly "pop up" right after the apostles and other believers celebrate the mighty work of God. Whenever we are committed to spread the gospel, the enemy will try to rise up and oppose.

Now we know what the Bible has to say about works and salvation. **Ephesians 2:8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast.** We are saved because of the grace of God, when trusted upon in faith. But that's not what these Christian Jews were teaching...

2 Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question. The text here describes some heated discussions between Paul, Barnabas, and the Judaizers, these fellow Christians.

Think about Paul for a minute, what his personality was like. He was incredibly focused and determined to accomplish whatever he put his mind to, wouldn't you say? Whether it was to

persecute the Christians prior to his meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus, or his total commitment to the churches in Ephesus, Galatia, and Thessalonica to name a few. Paul wasn't a man whom you'd ever accuse of being lukewarm, or indifferent, was he?

But the point is, PAUL WAS DETERMINED to make sure the truth of Christ was known. That salvation was by grace through faith alone.

This disagreement was not a "majoring in the minors" type of dispute where there was a big dust up over something inconsequential. We've all seen those within the church from time to time, haven't we?

No, this situation was different-there couldn't be any "agreeing to disagree on this issue", because at the core of what the Judaizers were teaching was that Jesus was not enough. And we simply cannot compromise on that. We cannot agree to disagree on that.

All we need is Jesus. Not Jesus and circumcision, not Jesus and good works, it is always simply Jesus. And as you know Jesus + anything is false doctrine because it minimizes the work of the cross.

And so, being the good soldier of Christ that he was, Paul was not willing that anything should get in the way of the gospel of Christ. And he wouldn't back down from the truth.

So when the Judaizers saw that neither Paul nor Barnabas were going to allow this false teaching from these Judaizers, they recommended Paul and 'Ol Barney go up to Jerusalem and speak to the leaders of the Christian church in Jerusalem about this disagreement.

3 So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren

You can imagine the outpouring of joy as the conversations were consumed with talk about the miraculous things that God had done.

Notice the end of verse 3- at the news of the conversion of gentiles-there was an outbreak of joy!

4 And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them. So think about the stories Paul and Barnabas would tell, some of the things we've studied in Acts so far. Preaching at Cyprus, and Antioch of Pisidia, the stoning at Lystra, all of these remarkable accounts how God used them as they spread the truth about the grace of God.

5 But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command *them* to keep the law of Moses" Look at verse 5 closely again-it's necessary to circumcise them, AND to keep the law of Moses in order to be saved according to these Pharisees who believed.

Basically, their teaching was: "Gentiles are free to come to Jesus. We welcome them and want them to come to Jesus. But they have to come through the Law of Moses in order to come to Jesus.

And notice who said this THE Pharisees who believed in Jesus. This wasn't some attack by a wicked ruler, this was from fellow Christians!

We can imagine how the Judaizers probably made a case from the Old Testament for this erroneous teaching. Remember they had

been reared in the law of Moses for fifteen hundred years, to break tradition would've been incredibly difficult. So, they perhaps said something like "Israel has *always* been God's chosen people, so the Gentiles must become part of Israel if they want to be part of God's people."

**6 Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter.** Now we're going to read in a few moments some of the names at this meeting.

Peter, Paul, Barnabas, James, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas. And you get the impression as you read this chapter that these men were following the wisdom of **Prov 18:13** **He who answers a matter before he hears it, It is folly and shame to him.**

This meeting is a wonderful example of Christians getting together and being yielded to the truth of HS's instruction.

**6 Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. 7 And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: "Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.** Peter is reminding them that his outreach to the gentiles was by the direct guidance of the HS, and that God confirmed this calling by giving the HS to those gentile believers in Acts 10

**8 So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us,** You remember that while Peter was at the home of Cornelius that the HS came and fell upon the gentiles when they believed the gospel. Later on, Paul asked the church in **Galtians 3 2 This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?** The obvious answer is they had

received the HS by hearing of faith. They didn't reach a certain level of holiness or because they did certain works. It was by faith.

9 and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. Peter acknowledged that there is no difference between the way a Jew or gentile comes to salvation. Both must come through faith in Jesus Christ.

Now we know that the Jews were God's chosen people. Paul said in **Romans 3: 1 What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision? 2 Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God.**

This was the chief advantage of the Jew-this was the nation to whom God revealed His plan of redemption, the nation that would bring forth the Messiah. But whether Jew or gentile, all need Jesus by grace through faith

And Peter also clearly explains the fact that the HS was given to the Gentiles as they trusted Jesus as savior. God is the only one that can see hearts, and had these Gentiles not been sincere in their faith, hadn't truly accepted Jesus as savior, they wouldn't have received the Holy Spirit. The gentiles were truly saved!

10 Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?

What is the yoke that the Jewish Christians could not bear? Well it's not just the circumcision because the Jews Christian converts were all in fact circumcised right? The yoke was the attempt to keep the OT law.

This is a vast different yoke than the one Jesus promises to His followers in **Matthew 11 28 Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take My yoke upon**

you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

11 But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ[fn] we shall be saved in the same manner as they.”

Other than Christ, no one has been able to follow the law perfectly. And the law could never purify a sinners heart, impart the HS, or give eternal life. What the law could not do, God did through His own Son Jesus.

Look how Peter phrases this! It's not the gentile will be saved as us, no it's us as Jews saved in the same manner as they!

12 Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles. So picture this scene. In verse 7 there was a big dispute. Now after Peter speaks the multitude, who were the church leaders, the room is silent. Peter is done speaking and sits down, and as he does Barnabas and Paul stand up and begin speaking-continuing right where Peter left off.

They explained that God worked miracles, and Paul's appeal is incredibly convicting. Why would God work miracles among the Gentiles? So they would come to saving faith in Christ, and they would do this without having to obey the law.

13 And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, “Men *and* brethren, listen to me: Now this isn't the apostle James, and we know that because the apostle James's death as a martyr is recorded in Acts 12:2 And he killed James the brother of John with the sword. But rather this James is the half-brother of Jesus, brother of Jude and author of the book of James.



James begins his speech:

14 Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. 15 And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written: This is from Amos chapter 9

*16 'After this I will return  
And will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down;  
I will rebuild its ruins,  
And I will set it up;*

*17 So that the rest of mankind may seek the LORD,  
Even all the Gentiles who are called by My name,  
Says the LORD who does all these things.*

When God says there are Gentiles who are called by His name, He is saying they stay Gentiles. They are not Gentiles who have been made Jews. Therefore, Gentiles do not need to become Jews or be under the law to be saved!

Remember, Israel was to be a light to draw their wicked neighbors to the love of God

Isaiah 42:6 "I, the LORD, have called You in righteousness,  
And will hold Your hand;  
I will keep You and give You as a covenant to the people,  
As a light to the Gentiles,  
And

Malach 1:11 For from the rising of the sun, even to its going down,  
My name shall be great among the Gentiles;  
In every place incense shall be offered to My name,  
And a pure offering;  
For My name shall be great among the nations,"  
Says the LORD of hosts. But tragically the nation of Israel became a stumbling block to the nations.

James continues...

18 "Known to God from eternity are all His works.[fn] 19 Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, The words 'Therefore I judge' implies that James had a position of high authority in the church. Some believe he was the highest authority of the church at Jerusalem.

So James says with authority "Leave them alone. They are turning to God, and we should not get in their way"

James decided that Peter, Barnabas, and Paul were correct, and that those of the sect of the Pharisees who believed were wrong.

But James tempers his verdict with some wise counsel.

20 but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, *from* sexual immorality,[fn] *from* things strangled, and *from* blood. 21 For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath." James' decision that Gentile believers should not be under the Mosaic Law is also tempered by practical instruction.

James seamlessly moves from the essentials of faith- to the non-essentials. He's telling the leaders gentiles can be saved without circumcision and the law, but let's make sure they are not taking advantage of the grace of God by causing their Jewish brethren to stumble in these areas.

He's instructing the Gentile believers that yes, they are saved by grace, but they shouldn't antagonize their Jewish brethren by participating in these practices

22 Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with

Paul and Barnabas, *namely*, Judas who was also named Barsabas,[fn] and Silas, leading men among the brethren. We see the wisdom of the leadership here. If they only sent back Paul and Barnabas to say-‘ok here’s what was decided’, they would’ve been met head on with suspicion.

But in their wisdom, the Jerusalem council sends Silas and Judas, two members of the Jerusalem Jewish community with Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch, the place where the whole dispute arose to testify of the decision.

And just in case there was further suspicion, they send a letter

23 They wrote this *letter* by them:

The apostles, the elders, and the brethren,

To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia:

**Greetings.** Notice the 2 uses of the word brethren. The Jerusalem Jewish Christians identify with the gentile Christians as brothers. This was a monumental moment!

24 Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, “*You must be circumcised and keep the law*”[fn]—to whom we gave no *such commandment*—they wanted the gentile believers to know that the Judaizes who kept troubling them came on their own authority-they weren’t sent from the Jerusalem church.

The letter continues:

25 it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,  
26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth. Saying that Judas and Silas will confirm all that Paul and Barney have to say

28 For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: 29 that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality.[fn] If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well.

**Farewell.** Notice they recognized the place of the HS in guiding their decision regarding these directives. Again these directives weren't a matter of salvation, but instead the gentiles are charged with refraining from these so they don't stumble their fellow soldiers in Christ.

30 So when they were sent off, they came to Antioch; and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter. Can you imagine how eager the gentiles were to hear what the verdict was? They likely saw Paul and Barnabas, Judas and Silas enter town. Waiting on baited breath as they begin to read the contents of the letter

31 When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement. When I read this verse I ask myself the question-when was the last time someone rejoiced over my encouragement to them?

32 Now Judas and Silas, themselves being prophets also, exhorted and strengthened the brethren with many words. 33 And after they had stayed *there* for a time, they were sent back with greetings from the brethren to the apostles.[fn]

34 However, it seemed good to Silas to remain there.[fn] 35 Paul and Barnabas also remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also. So Judas goes back to Jerusalem, but Silas stays at Antioch. The fellowship grows as the teaching of the word goes out. And you can picture the scene-it's a blossoming church, dripping with love and fellowship for one another. It's really a beautiful scene.

Now some time passes between verses 35 and 36, and we don't know how long.

**36 Then after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing."** Paul wanted to loop back around to all the cities they had traveled and evangelized to, to make sure the new believers were growing. Now we know that Paul wrote many letters, but it could take weeks or even months for a letter to be delivered. Plus with a letter there's not really any conversation. So Paul says to Barnabas—let's hit the road again.

**37 Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark.** John Mark was the nephew of Barnabas, and had accompanied these guys on their first missionary journey. When they left the island of Cyprus, Acts 13 told us that John Mark left the journey. **Acts 13:13 Now when Paul and his party set sail from Paphos, they came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John, departing from them, returned to Jerusalem**

The Greek word translated "determined" means "to keep on insisting." Barnabas was adamant. Mark's presence on their second trip was a non-negotiable for him.

**38 But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work.** On their first trip, when they left Cyprus, and sailed to the Turkish coast Mark bailed. He proved chicken to go to Turkey. Uncle Barnabas wants to give his nephew a second chance. But in Paul's mind, John Mark, had proven he wasn't up to the challenge. When you're in a battle you've got to be able to trust the men in your platoon. Paul had lost confidence in Barnabas' nephew. And many of us know the pain and

disappointment of when a fellow soldier in Christ lays down their weapon and simply walks off the battle field.

39 Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus; 40 but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God. 41 And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. Here are men of incredible spiritual stature. They've just made a brave stand, and wisely resolved a major schism. They averted a bust-up between Jew and Gentile, but now just days later, they endure their own bust-up.

Commentator Warren Wiersbe states the obvious, "If God had to depend on perfect people to accomplish His work, He would never ever get anything done."

God actually used their stubbornness for His glory. Instead of one team on mission among the Gentiles, there're now two! The division doubled their efforts. And it's amazing that years later, Paul writes **2 Timothy 4:11 Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry.**

Apparently, Paul's attitude toward John Mark changed. Though Acts charts only Paul and Silas, it seems Mark grows, Paul softens, and God blesses both men