



Summary

In Acts 15, we find ourselves at the center of one of the most consequential debates in the history of the early church. A group of Jewish believers had been telling Gentile Christians that faith in Christ was not enough, that circumcision and adherence to the law of Moses were also required for salvation. The Jerusalem Council's response to this controversy cuts straight to the heart of the gospel itself. The council's letter, one of the earliest epistles sent to the churches, is a masterclass in grace. It is remarkably brief, devoid of religious pride, and saturated with love. Rather than overwhelming new believers with an exhaustive list of requirements, the letter trusts the Holy Spirit to guide believers into all truth. This is the same confidence Jesus expressed in John 16 when he promised that the Holy Spirit would lead us into all truth. The central spiritual lesson here is both simple and profound: salvation has always been by faith alone. Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him as righteousness, and this was 400 years before the law was even given. Jesus declared from the cross that the work of salvation was finished. Nothing can be added to what Christ has already accomplished. As we reflect on this passage, we are invited to ask ourselves whether we are truly resting in that finished work, or whether we are still striving to earn what has already been freely given.





Points

Title: Grace Alone: The Jerusalem Council and the Unchanging Gospel of Salvation

Sermon Summary: Drawing from Acts 15, this sermon examines the Jerusalem Council's landmark decision regarding how both Jews and Gentiles are saved. The central theological argument is that salvation has always been, and remains, by grace through faith alone, not by adherence to the law or any human works. The pastor traces this truth from Abraham's faith in Genesis through the New Testament declarations of Jesus and Paul, demonstrating that the law functions as a mirror revealing human sinfulness but cannot provide salvation. The Jerusalem Council's letter to the church at Antioch serves as a model of grace-filled communication, guided by the Holy Spirit, that protects believers from the damage of legalistic false doctrine. The sermon also warns against the ever-present temptation to drift toward legalism and emphasizes the importance of knowing with certainty that one is saved.

Key Points:

- - The Pharisaical Jewish believers who came to Antioch falsely taught that circumcision and keeping the law of Moses were necessary for salvation, which Paul, Barnabas, and the Jerusalem Council firmly rejected
- - Salvation has always been by faith alone, as demonstrated by Abraham, who believed God and was credited with righteousness four hundred years before the law was given
- - Jesus declared the work of salvation finished on the cross, meaning nothing can be added to what he accomplished for mankind's redemption
- - The law functions as a mirror that reveals sin and the need for a savior, but it has no supernatural power to bring about the new birth
- - Peter's testimony at the council was striking in that he declared Jewish believers are saved in the same manner as Gentiles, not the other way around
- - The Jerusalem Council's letter to the Gentile churches was a model of humility and grace, summarized by the phrase "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us," leaving further instruction to the Holy Spirit rather than imposing heavy burdens
- - The Gentile believers were asked to show sensitivity toward Jewish believers in matters of food preparation and sexual morality, not as conditions of salvation but as expressions of love and fellowship
- - Legalism remains a persistent danger in the church, as illustrated by Paul's later rebuke of the Galatian churches and even of Peter and Barnabas for their hypocritical withdrawal from Gentile fellowship
- - Believers can and should know with certainty that they are saved, as the Holy Spirit's presence in the heart provides an inward witness to salvation
- - The spiritually dead are capable of hearing God's voice and responding in faith, as Jesus himself declared, meaning faith always precedes regeneration rather than the reverse



Scripture Reference:

- - Acts 15 (primary text, the Jerusalem Council and its letter to the Gentile churches)
- - Genesis 15:6 (Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness)
- - John 3:3 (the necessity of being born again)
- - John 3:16-17 (God's love for the world and his purpose in sending his Son)
- - John 5:24-25 (the spiritually dead hearing the voice of the Son of God)
- - John 11:25-26 (Jesus as the resurrection and the life)
- - John 14:6 (Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life)
- - John 16 (the Holy Spirit guiding believers into all truth)
- - 1 Timothy 2:3-7 (God desires all men to be saved)
- - 2 Peter 3:9 (God is not willing that any should perish)
- - Galatians 2:11-21 (Paul's rebuke of Peter at Antioch)
- - Galatians 3:1-14 (salvation by faith, not by works of the law)
- - 1 Corinthians 12:26 (all members of the body suffer or rejoice together)
- - 1 John 5:1-13 (the witness of the Spirit and assurance of eternal life)

Stories:

- - The account of the Pharisaical Jewish believers troubling the Gentile church at Antioch by insisting on circumcision as a requirement for salvation, which prompted the Jerusalem Council
- - Peter's vision of the great sheet lowered from heaven filled with animals, and Jesus commanding him to rise, kill, and eat, illustrating the difficulty Jewish believers had in setting aside deep-rooted food customs
- - The illustration of a child's pull-ring doll programmed to say "I love you," used to demonstrate that compelled love is meaningless and that true love cannot exist under compulsion
- - The illustration of a mirror, used to explain that the law reveals sin but cannot provide salvation, just as a mirror reveals flaws but cannot fix them
- - The illustration of a certificate of occupancy given to a homebuilder when all inspections are complete, used to explain the meaning of Jesus' declaration "it is finished" on the cross
- - Paul's rebuke of Peter and Barnabas at Antioch for withdrawing from table fellowship with Gentiles out of fear of those of the circumcision, demonstrating how even mature believers can fall into legalistic behavior
- - The pastor's personal account of his salvation experience on December 29, 1993, shared to illustrate the inward witness of the Holy Spirit and the assurance of salvation
- - The account of the grandmother showing a granddaughter photographs from her infancy, used as an illustration of the value of reflecting on one's own salvation experience with fresh wonder



Scripture

Acts

- Acts 2:42
- Acts 10 (the great sheet let down to Peter)
- Acts 14:19-20
- Acts 15:1
- Acts 15:2
- Acts 15:6
- Acts 15:19-20
- Acts 15:21
- Acts 15:22
- Acts 15:24
- Acts 15:28
- Acts 15:29
- Acts 15:30-34

Genesis

- Genesis 15:6

Leviticus

- Leviticus 11

Psalms

- Psalms (general reference regarding no one being righteous)

John

- John 3:3
- John 3:16
- John 3:17
- John 5:24-25
- John 11:25-26
- John 14:6
- John 16 (Holy Spirit guiding into all truth)

Romans

- Romans 3 (no one righteous, not one)

1 Corinthians

- 1 Corinthians 12:26



Galatians

- Galatians 2:11-16
- Galatians 3:1-9
- Galatians 3:21-22

1 Timothy

- 1 Timothy 2:3-7

2 Peter

- 2 Peter 3:9

1 John

- 1 John 5:1-13



Quotes

The love of Christ never compels because love cannot exist in an environment of compulsion.

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. What seems good to the Holy Spirit? What they have agreed upon is what seems good to the Holy Spirit. And so it needs no further argument, does it? If it seems good to the Holy Spirit, that's case closed.

The law tells you what's wrong with you. but it cannot provide salvation any more than a mirror that you hold up to your face can provide salvation.

We cannot bear to see anyone harmed by false doctrine. Why? Because of love, not for conformity. We're not into this because we want you to do exactly what we do. That's not it. It's because we love you. and we don't wanna see you harmed by false doctrine.

It is so easy, it is so easy to fall prey to Satan's desire to sow seeds of legalistic tendencies into his church. It's so easy because we live in this body of flesh that wants to perform, that wants to do good things for God, to connect that doing good things for God to receiving the grace of God that if I can only work hard enough that I will receive God's favor by the hard work that I'm doing.

It was Jesus's work that accomplished salvation for man, not man's work that accomplished salvation for God.

I didn't even say the right prayer. That's why I want to say, when I'm given an invitation, it's not the words that save you, it's the attitude of your heart.

I trust the Holy Spirit to guide people into all truth and exactly whenever I get between someone and the Holy Spirit, I'm gonna mess up that channel, aren't I?

When you've received, when that Holy Spirit has been made alive in your heart, you know that you're saved. It's such a dramatic thing by receiving the grace of God for salvation through choosing to place your faith in the saving work of Christ on the cross for salvation.

I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain.





Discussion Questions

The Jerusalem Council's letter declared that salvation comes through grace alone, not by keeping the law -- in what ways do you find yourself, even subtly, trying to earn God's favor through personal performance rather than resting in what Christ has already accomplished?

Peter, one of the most prominent apostles, was publicly corrected by Paul for reverting to legalistic behavior out of fear of what others thought -- what does this reveal about the ongoing struggle between living by grace and living for the approval of others, and how does that struggle show up in your own life?

The letter from the Jerusalem Council was remarkably brief and humble, saying only that 'it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us' -- what does this kind of restrained, Spirit-led communication look like in contrast to the way conflicts are typically handled in churches today?

The sermon draws a sharp distinction between the graceless message of those who said 'you cannot be saved unless' and the gracious message of the Jerusalem Council -- where have you encountered graceless religion in your own experience, and how did it affect your understanding of salvation?

The pastor emphasizes that the love of Christ never compels, because love cannot exist in an environment of compulsion -- how does this principle reshape the way you think about evangelism, discipleship, and your relationships within the church?

James and the council trusted the Holy Spirit to guide believers into all truth beyond the few necessary instructions in the letter -- in what areas of your spiritual life do you find it hardest to trust the Holy Spirit's ongoing work rather than relying on external rules or human authority?

The sermon points out that Abraham was justified by faith roughly 400 years before the law was given, establishing that salvation has always been by faith and not by works -- how does this historical reality challenge any assumptions you may hold about what it means to be right with God?

The pastor reflects on his own salvation experience on December 29, 1993, and encourages believers to revisit the moment they first came to faith -- how does regularly returning to that foundational experience of grace strengthen or reorient your walk with Christ?

The sermon warns that Satan actively sows seeds of legalism into the church, and that even mature believers like Peter and Barnabas can be swept into hypocrisy -- what spiritual disciplines or community practices help you guard against drifting from grace back into performance-based faith?

Jesus declared in John chapter 5 that the spiritually dead can hear his voice and live, directly challenging the idea that the dead cannot respond to God -- how does this truth about the nature of salvation by faith shape the way you pray for and share the gospel with people who seem far from God?



Small Group Guide

Acts 15: The Jerusalem Council and the Gospel of Grace

Before You Meet

Encourage group members to read Acts 15:1-31 and Galatians 2:11-21 before gathering. Ask them to come prepared to share one thing that stood out to them from the passage.

Opening Question

Think back to a time when someone told you that you were wrong about something you knew to be true. How did that feel, and how did you respond?

Background and Context

The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 addressed one of the earliest and most significant controversies in the church: whether Gentile believers had to follow the law of Moses in order to be saved. Jewish believers from Jerusalem had traveled to the largely Gentile church at Antioch and declared that circumcision and keeping the law were requirements for salvation. This created serious conflict, ultimately leading to a formal council in Jerusalem where apostles, elders, and church leaders gathered to settle the matter. The result was a gracious letter sent back to Antioch, accompanied by trusted witnesses, affirming that salvation comes through faith in Jesus Christ alone and not through adherence to the law.

Key Takeaways

1. Salvation is by grace through faith alone. Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness, as recorded in Genesis 15:6. This was 400 years before the law was given, demonstrating that faith has always been the basis of a right standing before God, not law-keeping. The law reveals our need for a savior but cannot provide salvation.

2. The law reveals sin but cannot remedy it. As the sermon illustrated, the law functions like a mirror. It shows you what is wrong, but looking into a mirror cannot fix the problem. Only faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross can do that.

3. Grace is communicated with humility. The Jerusalem Council's letter used the phrase "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us," a remarkably humble declaration. The letter avoided lofty arguments and religious pride, trusting the Holy Spirit to do the convincing work in the hearts of those who received it.



4. Love, not compulsion, is the foundation of the gospel. The council's concern for the believers in Antioch was rooted in love, not a desire for conformity. The sermon made clear that love cannot exist in an environment of compulsion. The gospel is an invitation, not a demand.

5. The Holy Spirit guides believers into all truth. The minimalist nature of the council's letter reflected a deep trust that the Holy Spirit would continue to lead believers into greater understanding. Believers are not left to figure everything out on their own.

6. Legalism is a persistent danger. Even after the Jerusalem Council's decision, Paul had to confront Peter and Barnabas in Antioch for reverting to legalistic behavior, as recorded in Galatians 2. The pull toward earning God's favor through performance is something every believer must remain watchful against.

Discussion Questions

Exploring the Text

1. In Acts 15:10, Peter asks why the Jewish believers would put a yoke on the Gentiles that "neither our fathers nor we were able to bear." What does this reveal about the purpose and limitations of the law? How does this challenge the idea that stricter rules lead to a closer walk with God?
2. Peter made a striking statement in Acts 15:11, saying that Jewish believers would be saved in the same way as the Gentiles, not the other way around. Why would this have been surprising to a Jewish audience? What does it tell us about the nature of grace?
3. The council's letter in Acts 15:23-29 is notably brief and humble. What do you observe about the tone and content of that letter? How does it differ from the message the Judaizers brought to Antioch in verse 1?
4. James quoted from the prophet Amos in his address to the council, grounding the decision in scripture. Why is it important that theological decisions be anchored in the word of God rather than in tradition or personal opinion?
5. In Galatians 2:11-13, Paul describes how Peter, and even Barnabas, fell into hypocrisy by withdrawing from Gentile believers when Jewish visitors arrived. What does this episode reveal about the subtle ways legalism can creep back into a believer's life?
6. Paul writes in Galatians 3:3, "Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?" How would you describe the difference between beginning in grace and then drifting into performance-based faith? Have you experienced this in your own walk?

Going Deeper

7. The sermon described the law as a mirror that shows you your flaws but cannot fix them. How has the law functioned in your own life to point you toward your need for Christ? Where do you find yourself still trying to use the mirror as a remedy rather than a diagnostic tool?



8. *The letter from the Jerusalem Council said it "seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us." What would it look like for your church community, or even your small group, to make decisions with that same kind of humble dependence on the Holy Spirit? What would need to change in the way decisions are typically made?*
 9. *The sermon pointed out that the love expressed by the Jerusalem church toward Antioch was unwarranted, meaning it was not earned or obligated. How does understanding God's unwarranted love for you change the way you relate to other believers, especially those who are different from you?*
 10. *The congregation in Antioch rejoiced when they heard the letter read aloud. When was the last time the truth of the gospel produced genuine joy in your heart? What tends to crowd out that joy in your daily life?*
 11. *The sermon drew a parallel between the Judaizers telling Gentile believers they could not be saved and the modern tendency to add conditions to salvation that are not found in scripture. What are some examples of extra-biblical conditions that churches or individuals sometimes attach to salvation today? How can a community guard against this?*
 12. *In 1 John 5:13, John writes that he wants believers to know they have eternal life. The sermon emphasized that assurance of salvation is not arrogance but a gift God desires every believer to have. How confident are you in your own salvation? What, if anything, creates doubt, and how does scripture address that doubt?*
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Practical Applications

This Week, Consider the Following:

- **Reflect on your salvation story.** *The sermon encouraged believers to return to the memory of when they first came to faith, the way a child marvels at baby photos. Set aside time this week to journal or pray through what your salvation experience was like. What did you sense? What changed? Let that remembrance renew your gratitude and confidence.*
- **Examine where performance has crept in.** *Ask yourself honestly whether there are areas of your spiritual life where you are trying to earn God's favor rather than simply receiving it. Bring those areas before God in prayer and ask the Holy Spirit to replace the spirit of performance with the spirit of adoption.*
- **Practice grace in a difficult relationship.** *The Jerusalem Council's letter was a model of communicating truth with love and without compulsion. Identify one relationship in your life where you have been more inclined to demand conformity than to demonstrate grace. Take one concrete step this week to lead with love in that relationship.*
- **Memorize a verse on grace.** *Consider committing Galatians 2:20-21 to memory this week. Let Paul's words about living by faith in the Son of God, rather than by the works of the law, become a daily anchor for your thinking.*
- **Pray for someone who is burdened by legalism.** *Whether it is someone in your family, your church, or your community, lift up in prayer anyone you know who is striving to earn what God freely gives. Ask the*



Holy Spirit to bring the freedom of the gospel to their heart.

Closing Reflection

The Jerusalem Council did not send back a long list of rules. They sent back a short letter full of grace, carried by people who loved the believers in Antioch enough to make a 300-mile journey on their behalf. That is a picture of what the church is meant to be: a community that bears one another's burdens, guards one another from false doctrine, and trusts the Holy Spirit to do the deep work in every heart.

Close your time together by reading aloud Galatians 2:20-21 as a group, and then spend a few minutes in prayer, thanking God for the grace that makes salvation possible and asking the Holy Spirit to make that grace the defining characteristic of your community.

For Further Study

- *Genesis 15:6 on Abraham's faith being credited as righteousness*
- *Romans 3:9-26 on the universal need for grace*
- *Galatians 3:1-14 on the relationship between the law and faith*
- *1 John 5:1-13 on assurance of salvation*
- *John 3:1-21 on the new birth and God's desire to save the world*



Daily Devotional

5-Day Bible Reading Plan and Devotional Guide

Based on Acts 15 and the Doctrine of Grace

Day 1: Salvation by Grace Alone

Reading: Galatians 3:1-14

Devotional: The Jerusalem Council settled one of the most consequential questions in church history: can man earn salvation through religious performance? The answer was a resounding no. Abraham believed God, and that faith was credited to him as righteousness — four centuries before the law existed. This truth dismantles every human attempt to earn what God freely gives. Examine your own heart today. Are you resting in the finished work of Christ, or are you quietly keeping a personal scorecard of religious performance? Grace is not a starting point you eventually graduate from. It is the entire foundation.

Reflection Question: In what areas of your life are you still attempting to earn God's favor rather than receive it?

Practical Application: Write down one area where you have been striving to earn God's approval. Surrender it in prayer today, consciously choosing to receive grace rather than manufacture it.

Day 2: The Holy Spirit as Guide and Witness

Reading: John 16:7-15; 1 John 5:1-13

Devotional: The letter from the Jerusalem Council carried a phrase of extraordinary humility and confidence at the same time: it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. The leaders of the early church did not claim to speak with their own authority alone. They leaned into the guidance of the Spirit and trusted him to carry the message deeper into the hearts of those who would receive it. John wrote his first epistle so that believers could know with certainty that they have eternal life. The Holy Spirit himself bears witness to that truth within every born-again heart.

Reflection Question: When did you last pause to listen for the witness of the Holy Spirit in your heart rather than relying solely on the opinions of others?

Practical Application: Set aside fifteen minutes today in silence. Ask the Holy Spirit to confirm his presence in your life and to bring to mind any area where he is calling you to deeper trust.



Day 3: The Unity of the Body in Love

Reading: 1 Corinthians 12:20-27; Acts 15:22-31

Devotional: The church at Jerusalem did not have to concern itself with the turmoil in Antioch. They could have dismissed the controversy as someone else's problem. Instead, they convened a council, wrote a letter, and sent trusted men to personally deliver it — a 300-mile journey. Why? Because when one member suffers, the whole body suffers. The love of Christ does not recognize the boundaries of geography or background. It overflows. The graciousness of that letter stands in sharp contrast to the graceless compulsion of those who had troubled the Gentile believers. True love never compels. It demonstrates.

Reflection Question: Is there a fellow believer you have dismissed as outside your concern? How might the love of Christ compel you toward them?

Practical Application: Reach out today to someone in your church community who may be struggling, discouraged, or isolated. Offer encouragement without agenda or expectation.

Day 4: Faith That Precedes and Transforms

Reading: John 5:24-29; Ephesians 2:1-10

Devotional: Jesus declared that the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. Faith is not the product of regeneration — it is the doorway to it. The spiritually dead are not beyond the reach of God's voice. His call goes out to every person, and his desire, as Paul wrote to Timothy, is that all men would be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. Salvation is not a reward for the spiritually prepared. It is a gift to the spiritually desperate. The moment you heard and believed, everything changed.

Reflection Question: Do you remember the moment the Holy Spirit became alive in your heart? What was the condition of your life when God's voice reached you?

Practical Application: Take time today to write out your salvation testimony in your own words. Share it with one person this week, not as a religious exercise, but as a living witness to the grace of God.

Day 5: Resting in the Finished Work of Christ

Reading: John 19:28-30; Galatians 2:11-21

Devotional: From the cross, Jesus declared that the work of salvation was finished. Every requirement met. Every debt paid. Nothing left to add. And yet, as Paul witnessed even in Peter and Barnabas, the pull toward religious performance never fully disappears this side of eternity. The flesh wants to contribute. It wants to earn. It is uncomfortable simply receiving. But to build again what grace has torn down is to suggest that Christ's sacrifice was insufficient. You are not a project you must complete for God. You are a child he has already claimed. Rest today in the arms of a Savior who said it is finished and meant it.



Reflection Question: Where in your daily life does the voice of legalism still speak loudest? What would it look like to answer that voice with the finished work of Christ?

Practical Application: Memorize Galatians 2:20 this week. Let it serve as your daily declaration that the life you now live is lived by faith in the Son of God who loved you and gave himself for you.

