



Sermon Series: Acts

Sermon Title: The Scandal of Grace

Date: 7/19/2026

Big Idea: Stop trying to earn what God gives freely by grace.

Acts 15 records one of the most theologically critical moments in the early church. A group of teachers from Judea has arrived in Antioch, insisting that faith in Jesus is not enough - that circumcision is required for salvation. The debate that follows is not a secondary disagreement. It goes to the heart of the gospel itself. The question being fought over is the same one that surfaces in every generation: is faith in Jesus enough, or does grace need to be supplemented with religious performance?

1. We try to earn grace through religious performance. (Acts 15:1-3)

The false teachers arriving in Antioch were not fringe voices. They claimed authority and had a clear message: unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved (Acts 15:1). Originally, circumcision was given by God as a covenant sign - a physical marker that Israel belonged to him. But over time it had shifted from a sign of grace into a scorecard of spiritual achievement. What was intended to mark belonging had become a system for earning it.

Paul and Barnabas pushed back hard - the original language suggests the room erupted into serious conflict. The stakes were massive. Antioch was the launching point for global missions, and whatever theology settled here would travel with every missionary and shape churches across the known world. As Paul wrote to the Galatians facing the same false teaching: if anyone preaches another gospel, let him be accursed (Galatians 1:9). Anytime human effort or religious duty must be added to faith in Jesus for someone to be fully accepted by God, the gospel itself is being distorted.

2. We struggle to believe grace could really be that free. (Acts 15:4-5)

When Paul and Barnabas arrive in Jerusalem, they discover the problem runs deeper than a few teachers in Antioch. Pharisaic believers there are not saying

circumcision saves you - but they are insisting it is required to remain in good standing as a Christian. Same root, slightly different branch. For these men, strict obedience to the Mosaic law was not just religious practice - it was identity. When the gospel began spreading among Gentiles who had done none of that work, it threatened the entire system by which they had measured their worth. The closer your identity is tied to religious performance, the harder it will be to celebrate grace freely given to others.

This same struggle plays out today whenever we create unofficial requirements people must meet to be considered truly serious about Jesus. **Colossians 2:14** puts the gospel plainly: the record of our debt was nailed to the cross. Jesus paid for forgiveness. He absorbed the wrath, carried the shame, and settled the debt in full - so that we would not spend our lives trying to earn what he already purchased.

3. We forget that God already settled the issue through Jesus. (Acts 15:6-12)

Peter cuts through the debate with a simple observation: God, who knows the heart, testified to the Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us, making no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith (**Acts 15:8-9**).

The people being debated over already had the Holy Spirit. God had already acted. While religious leaders argued about whether Gentiles qualified, God had already swung the door wide open through Jesus Christ. Peter presses the point in verse 10 - why put on new believers a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? The irony of religious legalism is consistent through history: those most rigid about the rules are often the very ones who fail to live up to their own standards.

The scandal of grace is that the people least qualified to receive it are welcomed freely through Jesus. That is the invitation of **Matthew 11:28** - come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Not rest earned through performance. Rest given by grace.

Discussion Questions:

- 1. The false teachers in Acts 15 were not denying Jesus - they were adding to him. What are some ways people today add requirements to the gospel, either explicitly or quietly in church culture?**
- 2. The sermon says the closer your identity is tied to religious performance, the harder it is to celebrate grace freely given to others. Where do you see that dynamic playing out in your own heart or community?**
- 3. Colossians 2:14 says our record of debt was nailed to the cross. What does it mean practically that Jesus paid in full - and how should that change the way you approach God on your worst days?**
- 4. Peter pointed out that God had already given the Gentiles the Holy Spirit before the debate about them was even settled. Has there been a moment in your life where God clearly moved before you had everything figured out? What did that teach you?**
- 5. Jesus invites the weary and burdened to come to him for rest (Matthew 11:28). Are you carrying any religious burdens he never asked you to carry? What would it look like to set those down?**