

Grace Alone

BOTTOM LINE:

THE GOSPEL REVEALS THAT SALVATION IS BY GRACE ALONE, THROUGH FAITH ALONE, IN CHRIST ALONE!

GOAL OF SERMON:

To help our people understand that the Gospel of grace is a hill that we should be willing to die on when it comes to following Christ.

INTRODUCTION:

Say something about worship – Go ahead and turn in your copy of the word with me to Acts 15 – We are going to be looking at Acts 15:1-35 this morning....

As you are turning there – I want you to think about something with me – I want you to think about the hills that you are willing to die on – the convictions that you will go to battle for – the things that you will risk comfort and security and relationships for! – I want you to think about those things – because the reality is – WE ALL HAVE THEM – We have them as individuals – We have them as families – we have them as organizations – and we have them as followers of Christ.

Sometimes those hills show up in things like worship styles – or bible translations – or political parties or agendas – And Sometimes those hills are in things like parenting styles – schooling – traditions – denominations – dress codes – or rules!

My family has developed a hill that we have established when it comes to a Christmas tradition – and it's actually my fault that we have created this hill in our family – I'm the one to blame – But that hill is that **our Christmas tree has to be a real tree** – 10 years ago – when we moved back to Amarillo – we made the decision as a family that we wanted to create the tradition of going to the boy scout tree lot every year with a cup of hot coffee or hot chocolate and pick out a tree as a family – We have done it every year since.

Going into this past Christmas season I made the suggestion of switching to a fake tree – and I love real trees – they make my house smell good – they look good – and they are fun to pick out – but the cost and the mess are both pretty outrageous things to deal with – So I made that suggestion along with my very solid points to make the change – and you would have thought that war was about to break out in the Laird household – and I would have lost that battle very quick – so I conceded and we went and bought a real tree – That's a hill that my family is willing to die on!

TENSION:

This morning – as we look at Acts 15 – we are going to see that this moment in the history of the church was a really crucial moment – It was the moment where not only a hill worth dying on was established – but **THE MOUNTAIN worth dying on was established** – It was the moment

where the church had to decide what the conditions of salvation were – Was it Jesus + SOMETHING (Circumcision – Mosaic Law – Cultural Conformity – fill in that blank) – OR – was it **Jesus + nothing = Everything! – Was it by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone!**

Before we dive into the scripture – I want to clarify a couple of things – FIRST – the tension being created in this passage isn't that these people were denying Jesus – that's not what they were doing at all, actually – Jesus was still very much a part of the equation – but for these people it was **JESUS + SOMETHING ELSE – They were adding to Jesus!** – That's what we call **legalism**, btw! – **It's adding to what Jesus did for us!** – For them it was Jesus + Circumcision – Jesus + the mosaic law – Today we don't say those, necessarily – but we do hear things like Jesus + church attendance – Jesus + giving – Jesus + cleaning your life up first – Jesus + voting – Or Jesus + tradition – People still add to Jesus.

And here's the thing – I'm not saying that some of those things don't matter – they do in their proper place and their proper time – but when we add them to the Gospel – when we make them a requirement to being saved – we are missing the point – and not only that – we are moving from the Gospel to a burden! – **When we make good things into saving things – that's when it becomes dangerous!**

The second thing that I want to clarify before we dive into the text this morning is that the issue that is being presented in this passage isn't about sanctification – the process of becoming more and more like Christ – that's what we mean when we say sanctification – If we have given our life to Jesus – meaning that we have been saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone – **we are called to grow in Christlikeness** – We are called to holiness – Which means we should be doing everything that we can to take off the old and put on the new – We should be doing everything that we can to be moving in the direction of Jesus! – That doesn't mean that we are perfect – it doesn't mean that we won't fall into temptation and sin – but it does mean that **we should be doing what we can to move in the direction of Jesus** – the author and perfecter of our faith!

So, this passage isn't about sanctification – It's not presenting the idea that we can get saved and then live our life as we please – doing whatever we want to do! – What it is about though is salvation – it's about what a person must do in order to be accepted by God! – and the answer to that is found right here in **Acts 15** – **So, let's pray and turn our attention to His Word this morning – PRAY!**

TRUTH: READ ACTS 15v1-35

What Acts 15 is teaching us is that the Gospel is not Jesus + Something – The Gospel is **THAT SALVATION IS BY GRACE ALONE, THROUGH FAITH ALONE, IN CHRIST ALONE!** – That's the Gospel!

And **Acts 15** gives us three primary witnesses to this truth! – Peter – Paul and Barnabas – And James.

1. PETER – GOD SAVES BY GRACE (Acts 15:1-11)

Look at verse 7 with me again – **READ vs7-11** – Peter spoke up and reminded the council – the apostles and elders – about the encounter that he had with Cornelius – and how that whole thing

was not his own doing – Peter would have never thought about going to Cornelius’ house to tell him about the Gospel – He didn’t even know Cornelius – It was all God’s doing – It was God working – and then Peter tells us that God confirmed all of that by giving Cornelius and everyone that was in his house the gift of the Holy Spirit – just as He gave them the Holy Spirit – Peter was making the point that **there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile – There was no “us” vs “them”** going on here – It was all a part of God’s perfect plan! – and then check this out – He ends his testimony by saying this – *“We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” (15v11)*

I want you to take notice of how this is worded here – Peter doesn’t say they will be saved because they became like us – NO – He says, **We are saved like them – We are saved BY GRACE ALONE – JUST AS THEY ARE SAVED BY GRACE ALONE!** – This turns everything that they have ever believed upside down – The Jewish people were a set apart people – They were established by God to be a holy nation – So they believed that in order for the Gentiles to be saved they needed to become like the Jews – They needed to be circumcised because that was a sign of the covenant – they also needed to adhere to the Mosaic law because the law was what shaped the people of the covenant – So for them – if the gentiles wanted to belong to Israel’s messiah – to Jesus – than **they needed to enter into Israel’s covenant way of life!**

Peter’s standing there saying, *“No. no, no, no – we got it all wrong – if the Gentiles want to be a people of God – then all they have to do is believe in the grace of God through Jesus to save them – That’s it”* – and Peter says, *“that is the only requirement for us as well”* – Peter even went as far as stating that the law was too heavy of a burden for them to even adhere to – so why should they put that on the Gentiles!

Peter’s whole point here was threefold – First, he points out that God chose them to be his people – Second, the gentiles didn’t need to become like them to be saved – that burden wasn’t theirs to carry – Third, the Jewish believers needed to admit to the truth that they were saved just like the gentiles – **BY GRACE ALONE!**

Peter’s whole point was that **our hearts are cleansed by faith in Jesus – Not by carrying around the most religious weight that we can possibly carry!**

Paul makes this same point in **Ephesians 2v8-10** which says, *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*

In other words, God doesn’t save us by how religiously fit or clean we are before we come to Him – **He saves us by His grace alone!**

2. PAUL AND BARNABAS – GOD’S WORKS CONFIRM GOD’S GRACE (Acts 15:12)

The second set of witnesses that we hear from in this passage is from Paul and Barnabas – And we don’t actually hear what they have to say word for word either – Luke sums it up by saying.... **READ ACTS 15v12** – All they do is testify to what God has done among the Gentiles – that’s it – and that matters! – They are revealing the fruit of what the Holy Spirit is doing in the lives of the Gentiles – They are telling the people about all the things that God has done – Proving that God has chosen this! – That this is all God’s handiwork!

Here's what we need to understand here – the signs and wonders that Paul and Barnabas were talking about – they weren't what saved people – Some churches teach and believe that if you are truly saved – you should be able to do xyz – as testimony of your salvation – I want you to hear me say this – **That is not biblical** – and that is not what Paul and Barnabas are saying, either – they are simply using the testimony of the signs and wonders as confirmation that God is working amongst the gentiles believers! – They are proving that **God's work confirms the Gospel of Grace** by proving two things – First, they are proving that He is the one orchestrating everything – Not them! – They are also proving that because He is confirming it with *“signs and wonders”* they don't have to become like them to be saved – **ALL THEY NEED IS JESUS!** – They are simply giving experiential evidence to what Peter just preached!

3. JAMES – GOD'S WORD CONFIRMS GOD'S GRACE (Acts 15:13-35)

Then we get to James – the brother of Jesus – the leader of the Church in Jerusalem – Listen to what he says... **READ ACTS 15:13-21...**

James turns to God's word to bring confirmation to everything that is being discussed – He even quotes Amos 9 to show that God's plan has always been to include the Gentiles – to take them as a people for His name – That statement right there was a BIG DEAL – And it was a big deal because the people of Israel were a people who were called out from the nations – a people who were chosen by God – to be His people – **Deuteronomy 14:2** tells us that – It says, *For you are a people holy to the Lord your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.* – So, for James to point out from the scripture that God has already decided to call the Gentile people for His name was a huge deal! – **God was now calling people from the nations to be His people** – Not just the nation of Israel – and here's the big kicker – this was not just in addition to the nation of Israel – It wasn't like James was saying, “Hey guys, the gentiles can attend” – NO – It was to be inclusive – Meaning **that people from all nations are now being called people for His name** – The prophets already spoke of this because God already planned it!

James goes on to tell the people at the council that if God has already included the gentiles who turn to Him – then who are they to make it more difficult for them to turn to God – **Grace is the point! – It is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone that they shall be saved!**

James does go on to give some conditions though after turning to the Lord – **after salvation** – He says that once they are saved they should refrain from certain things – things polluted by idols – sexual immorality – what has been strangled – and blood – And these conditions were meant to serve three purposes – and none of those purposes involved salvation – They were meant to help the gentiles resist idolatry – to help them live as a holy people – and to help them preserve table fellowship with Jewish believers!

So by giving these conditions to the gentiles – James avoids two things – He avoids legalism – adding to Jesus – Jesus plus circumcision or Jesus plus Mosaic Law = Salvation – He avoids that – He also avoids licensure – the idea that because Jesus' grace is more than enough – I can do whatever I want – I don't have to change anything! – James addresses both of these common misconceptions. – He shows us that **Jesus + Nothing saves us but Jesus + My Everything is the proper response to His grace!**

After Jame's speech – the council agrees – they write a letter to the gentiles apologizing for the confusion – and clarifying the truth – **That the Gospel is BY GRACE ALONE, THROUGH FAITH ALONE, IN CHRIST ALONE!** – And Luke tells us that the people were glad and encouraged by this truth!

APPLICATION:

Acts 15 forces us to ask a couple of really hard questions as the church today – because the reality is **Acts 15** isn't just a church history thing – It's a today thing! – The temptation to add something to Jesus didn't end in Jerusalem that day – It didn't end with the letter that went out to the Gentile followers either – that temptation is just as alive today as it was back then.

We are just as tempted today to say that salvation is Jesus + _____ – but that isn't the Gospel – **The Gospel is Jesus + nothing = everything** – and if we believe that is true than that means that we have to ask ourselves some pretty hard questions – We have to **identify our Jesus plus something**... We do that by asking **Questions like what am I consciously or unconsciously adding to the Gospel? – What do I require from people before I treat them like Christians? – Where Have I confused my preferences with God's requirements? – or what burden am I placing on others that Jesus did not place on me?**

The **second** thing that this passage teaches us is that we need to be able to **defend the Gospel without becoming combative** – Luke tells us that Paul and Barnabas had *“no small dissension and debate with them”* – **They defended the Gospel – But they didn't get ugly about it!** – They recognized that it was a hill worth dying on – but they also recognized that unity was at stake – So they sought out the councils advice on this – Listen, we can and we should be flexible on things like preferences – we should be patient with the growth and immaturity of our brothers and sisters in the faith – we can even learn how to be charitable on secondary issues – learning how to not make mountains out of molehills – **BUT WHAT WE CANNOT DO IS NEGOTIATE THE GOSPEL – WE ARE SAVED BY GRACE ALONE THROUGH FAITH ALONE IN CHRIST ALONE – THAT IS IT!**

What this means is that not every hill is worth dying on – But the God's grace most certainly is! – Some of us are more than willing to die on hills that we shouldn't be dying on – and those hills are costing us our witness – they are costing us the ability to display and talk about God's amazing grace to those around us – We have to learn to defend the Gospel without becoming combative!

The final thing that this passage teaches us is that we can **practice a freedom that limits itself in love!** – Here's what I mean by that – when we look at the conditions that James gave to the gentile believers we can see they were free from the law as a means of salvation – but what they couldn't do was ignore how their lives affected others – that is what the conditions were for – The same is true for you and me – In Christ we are free – There is no doubt about that – **John 8:36** says *“If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”* – We have freedom in Christ – but that doesn't mean that we should always act in that freedom! – Here's what I mean by this – in **1 Corinthians 6:12** Paul wrote, *“All things are lawful (permissible) for me,” but not all things are helpful (beneficial). “All things are lawful for me,” but I will not be dominated by anything.”* – When I was doing student ministry I always wanted to do a sermon on this passage where I came up on stage wearing skinny jeans – And I'm not talking the slim fit kind – I'm talking those gotta grease your legs up to get 'em on kind – proving that it was permissible for me to wear those thing – but

it wasn't beneficial for anyone – I never did because making people see me with those jeans on wouldn't have been helpful or beneficial to anyone – RIGHT! – **I have the freedom to live as I want as long as it's not sinful** – but when I learn to limit my freedom with love – I start asking questions like, **How does this benefit the kingdom? – How does this impact our church family? – How can this affect my witness? – How does this help or hurt brothers and sisters in the faith who might be struggling with certain things?**

Listen church, the freedom that we have in Christ doesn't give us the license to do whatever we want – **The freedom that we have in Christ does give us the power and the ability to love people more than I love my preferences!** – Let's live with that kind of freedom! – A freedom that says and believes that Jesus + Nothing = Everything and but then lives in that freedom with the mindset that **Because of grace – Jesus gets my everything!**

LANDING:

We all have hills – but my prayer is that grace will be that hill for all of us! – That grace will be the hill that we choose to die on over any other hill – Some of you in here are exhausted because you have been carrying a yoke that you were never meant to carry – You have been living with a Jesus + Something mentality – If that's you I want you to hear this – **YOU ARE SAVED BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH IN CHRIST JESUS – HIS GRACE IS MORE THAN ENOUGH!** – Take the yoke off and lay it down at His feet this morning!

Some of you in here are using grace as permission to do as you please – to worship idols – to live like you want – to do what you want and look at what you want – If that's you I want you to hear this – **YOU ARE SAVED BY GRACE – BUT JESUS DESERVES YOUR EVERYTHING!** – Live in that kind of freedom! – Not the freedom to do as you please.

And then something for all of us to hear – **WE ARE SAVED BY GRACE ALONE THROUGH FAITH ALONE IN CHRIST ALONE** – We need to stop troubling those who are turning to God with unnecessary burdens – And we need to help them turn fully to God as we strive to do the same thing! – AMEN!

Let's Pray!