



**The Problem with Rules
Grace vs Legalism The Struggle Begins
Acts 15:1-5**

Scripture quotations are taken from the following translations:

ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

**Scripture quotations taken from the New American Standard Bible® (NASB),
Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973,
1975, 1977, 1995, 2020 by The Lockman Foundation
Used by permission. www.Lockman.org**

Scripture quoted by permission. Quotations designated (NET) are from the NET Bible® copyright ©1996, 2019 by Biblical Studies Press, L.L.C. <http://netbible.com> All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (NLT) are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

The Good News Translation Bible (GNB) text used in this product is being used by permission. Copyright © American Bible Society, 1966, 1971, 1976, 1992

Scripture taken from the Holy Bible: International Standard Version® Release 2.0. (ISV) Copyright © 1996–2011 by the ISV Foundation. Used by permission of Davidson Press, LLC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED INTERNATIONALLY

Scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition Bible (NRSVue), Copyright © 2021, National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide

**Scripture taken from the New King James Version (NKJV).
Copyright 1979, 1980, 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.**

**Scripture taken from The Holy Bible: The Contemporary English Version (CEV).
©1995 by The American Bible Society, Thomas Nelson, Nashville TN.**

Scripture quotations marked (CSB) have been taken from the Christian Standard Bible®, Copyright © 2017 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Christian Standard Bible® and CSB® are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers.

Taken from the Complete Jewish Bible (CJB) by David H. Stern. Copyright © 1998. All rights reserved. Used by permission of Messianic Jewish Publishers, 6120 Day Long Lane, Clarksville, MD 21029. www.messianicjewish.net

Why is it that we, as the church, cannot just have a bit of calm and peace? Spiritual warfare is why. Because Satan hates us since we love the Lord and are obedient to Him. Satan hates the Lord too and he and his minions, fallen angels as well as demons, have one purpose and that is to destroy the work of the Lord on planet earth and maximize disorder in the various local churches.



1 Peter 5:8–9

“Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. Stand firm against him, and be strong in your faith. Remember that your family of believers all over the world is going through the same kind of suffering you are.” (NLT)

We must be on the alert for Satan since he is sneaking around like a lion looking for his next target, but also remember this, all we must do is stand firm, and resist him. He is a defeated foe and the only power he has over the believer is that which we give to him. As we resist him, he has no power. And he is not omnipresent like God is.

1 John 4:4

“But you belong to God, my dear children. You have already won a victory over those people, because the Spirit who lives in you is greater than the spirit who lives in the world.” (NLT)

Don't ever forget that.

So, why the warning as we go into Acts 15?

Easy, because there are those times where the source of the attack will surprise us and challenge us. There are indeed those times where the attack, and some are rather vicious, come from within the “church” and not from the world where we expect it.

Yes, there are indeed those running around who masquerade as followers of Jesus Christ, asserting some level of spiritual authority and they are nothing more than phonies.

Living in the last days as we do, deception has not decreased, it has increased. Attacks have not decreased, they have increased. And we must be on the lookout.

Jude, a half-brother of Jesus, would later write about these folks who still show up even today.

Jude 12–13

“These are hidden reefs at your love feasts, as they feast with you without fear, shepherds feeding themselves; waterless clouds, swept along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted; wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars, for whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved forever.” (ESV)

Paul and Barnabas have been back from the first missionary trip for almost two years now. The Lord had provided a harvest and the church in Antioch had been rejoicing over the fruit that the trip yielded. Gentiles turning to Christ and in large numbers. Wow.

“But now Gentile evangelisation had begun to spread on a scale not previously dreamed of, and in areas where the Jerusalem church could no longer exercise effective control. That Gentiles should confess the crucified and risen Jesus as Lord was a great thing, no doubt, but many Jewish Christians held that more than this was necessary. Jewish Christians had not only the background of Israel's ancestral faith, but also, in Israel's ancestral law, they had the basis of sound morality. The admission of so many converts from paganism, who had no such background or basis, was likely, they feared, to lower the church's ethical standard. What would be the surest safeguard against this danger? According to several Jewish Christians there was one simple way: those Gentile converts must be taught to keep the law of Moses.” (Bruce 2017, Ac 15:1-5)



In other words, Jesus + suddenly pops up. This is not going to be the last time that well intended believers, who are not fully in tune with the Holy Spirit, will conclude that the only way that the rabble who are coming to Christ can be kept in line is by making a few rules here and there. In other words, legalism. Legalism is incredibly popular today in our libertine culture. As the culture drags even more into the world and all that it can have, the stronger the pressure to force some kind of compliance to a set of standards and codes. That way we can truly know if you are saved or not. How did this all start?

Acts 15:1–2

“Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” And after Paul and Barnabas had a heated argument and debate with them, the brothers determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.” (NASB 2020)

What is the source of the problem? Recently saved pharisees who have not been adequately disciplined, the source is in Jerusalem. And how will this be resolved, at the source, in Jerusalem.

Is this the same situation Paul discusses in Galatians 2? Yes, it is.

Galatians 2:1–10

“Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain. But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. **Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery—to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.** And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me. On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles), and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.” (ESV)

We discover by putting the two stories together that this was an intentional invasion of alleged Jesus followers who were also Jewish and legalists to boot. They came for one purpose only, to find out what was going on and to change things to what they thought was the correct view. We do not see that there was prayer and fasting prior to this group heading north to Antioch. We do not see that anywhere. What is happening has nothing to do with the Lord.

From their traditional background, this group said it was necessary to circumcise the Gentile men and direct them to observe the entire Torah. In other words, circumcision is symbolic of a total Torah lifestyle including the 613 mitzvot required of Jews. (Kasdan 2022, 112)

See why Paul called this lifestyle of the law slavery. Jesus plus circumcision plus following the 613 other rules and regulations, and then we know you are really saved.

The church in Antioch, though led by Jewish believers, had a sizeable gentile base. Uninvited, a group shows up from the church in Jerusalem, which is led by James the half-brother of Jesus, but I doubt he sent them. When legalists decide they will enforce their legalism on others, there is usually not a whole lot



of prayer that takes place, in my personal opinion, it looks more like the assembly and dispatch of a SWAT team coming to force compliance with edicts made elsewhere.

These alleged believers show up, uninvited, and then start off rather quickly telling leadership how wrong we are to actually believe the Bible.

Let us state something that irritates us perhaps as much as it irritates those who have come to hate religion: far too many Christians do not represent the heart and character of God in word or attitude. Some of us shudder when we see what some people do in the name of Christianity. We would like to police our own ranks but find it hard when free will and free speech allow almost any doctrine and teaching to exist, all in the name of Christ. (Hayward and Beeson 2017, 29)

Up to this point, it has been the grace of God on full display, but the team from Jerusalem wants to change all of that to a legalistic template. This template continues on today and I am not proud to say that I have given into all of these, but I have at a point in my life. Legalism is insidious and as your pastor, I want us to all be free in Christ. But I do get it that harshness does indeed appeal to some.

There are seven things, seven characteristics of legalism that, when being applied, are those things we need to be on the lookout for. This list is inspired by recent work by Hope for the Heart ministry.

The Template of Legalism

What are the tactics? What is it the legalists are driving to. Religious abuse and tyranny actually. To enslave believers and put everyone on a guilt trip.

1. **Performance based Christianity** – which is not what the Bible teaches.
 - Ephesians 2:8 **“For it is by God’s grace that you have been saved through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts, but God’s gift, so that no one can boast about it.”** (GNB)
2. **Religious based perfectionism** – If you say, “I’m not doing enough for God. And what I have done wasn’t perfect,” you are in the process of being sucked in. (Hope for the Heart 2024, 60)
 - 2 Corinthians 12:9 **“And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.”** Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” (NKJV)
 - All of that to say if you are chasing down and doing more and more for the Lord as the solution to getting over your guilt and self-condemnation, stop. Read Romans 8:1 **“There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus,** who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.” (Romans 8:1, NKJV) and please please please do not go back trying to win God’s favor by doing things. Stop it. He already loves you and me more than we can even comprehend.
3. **But I don’t deserve what God has done for me.** None of us do. Don’t beat yourself up over it and stop condemning yourself. See Romans 8:1.
4. **Religious OCD, the dark side.** It is okay to exercise 1 John 1:9 “If we confess our **sins**, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from **all** unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9, ESV), it is in our Bibles for us to do so. But don’t pick up what you just confessed and turned from and then carry it around some more. Stop thinking there is no way He could ever forgive me for what I have done. News flash, He did, sins in this verse is plural, many = ALL.



- “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his **beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.**” (Colossians 1:13–14, ESV) Again, sins, plural. He wants to restore our souls and give us peace, not have us engage in obsessive compulsive thinking about our sin.
 - Psalm 23:3 “**He restores my soul;** He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name’s sake.” (NKJV)
 - Isaiah 26:3 “**You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you.**” (ESV)
5. **Guilt** – Yes, we all have it. If you are in Christ, if you are one of His kids, do not let Satan take you captive with this one. Guilt trips are popular go to points for the legalist serving the purposes of Satan. “Jesus came to the cross in full awareness and acceptance that His death would purchase freedom for anyone and everyone burdened by sin—whoever would come to Him. God offers love, restoration, holiness, and righteousness through Christ.” (Hope for the Heart 2024, 61)
- To continue on wallowing, yes, I did indeed use that term, in guilt, because somewhere someone taught me that it was required to prove I am saved, to prove that I am sorry for what I did and guess what, this is slavery. It is exactly where Satan wants to take us and is indeed where legalism goes. It is not what Jesus died on the cross for.
 - Galatians 5:1 “**For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.**” (ESV)
 - Stop it. You are free in Christ.
 - 1 Peter 2:16 “**Live as free people, not using your freedom as a pretext for evil, but as God’s slaves.**” (NET 2nd ed.)
6. **Unhealthy fear and dread of God.** Usually reflected in the attitude that I deserve to be punished, I deserve to be put down, He doesn’t want a relationship with me, I am nothing more than someone to be punished. Before coming to Christ, Jesus died for you. After coming to Christ, Jesus died for you. Let me really clear about one of His major attributes, love. God is love. It is who He is.
- 1 John 4:7–14 “Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love. **God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins. Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us. And God has given us his Spirit as proof that we live in him and he in us.** Furthermore, we have seen with our own eyes and now testify that the Father sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.” (NLT)
 - Joel 2:12–13. ““But even now,” says the LORD, “repent sincerely and return to me with fasting and weeping and mourning. Let your broken heart show your sorrow; tearing your clothes is not enough.” **Come back to the LORD your God. He is kind and full of mercy; he is patient and keeps his promise; he is always ready to forgive and not punish.**” (GNB)
7. **Self-righteousness - I am so glad I am not like all those other people who live immoral lives.** The problem with a condemning view of others is first of all forgetting we are all sinners saved by grace, but for the grace of God, there we are. Secondly, it shows we are not interested in seeing others come to Christ, because we are better than them, they can never measure up to my standards. And if they try, I’ll point out how wrong their theology is, and on and on.



- First of all, reality. Because of the Holy Spirit in us as followers of Jesus Christ, and for some of us, being given the spiritual gift of discernment, this is a toughie.
- Self-righteous behavior has an extremely long history. From the Talmud.
- It was taught: R. Judah says, "A person must recite three blessings each day: 'Blessed [art Thou, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe,] who did not make me a gentile'; 'Blessed [art Thou, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe,] who did not make me a boor'; 'Blessed [art Thou, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe,] who did not make me a woman.' (Neusner 2008)
- This is not the blanket garbage thrown at us by the world these days where they say judge not. But the context is a bit more than most would like it to be. "But what is forbidden here is the sort of fault-finding mentality and speech which is likely to rebound against the one who exercises it." (France 2007, 274)
- Matthew 7:1–5 **"Do not judge others, so that God will not judge you, for God will judge you in the same way as you judge others, and he will apply to you the same rules you apply to others.** Why, then, do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, and pay no attention to the log in your own eye? How dare you say to your brother, 'Please, let me take that speck out of your eye,' when you have a log in your own eye? You hypocrite! First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will be able to see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye." (GNB)
- The critic who is blind to his or her own failings is living in a make-believe world where one can exempt oneself from standards which others are expected to conform to. (France 2007, 275)
- Welcome to the epitome of legalism, the inordinate pointing at others who fail to meet your standards.
- Enter the folks from Jerusalem.
- One more thing before we leave this, we are expected to judge wisely.
- 1 Corinthians 6:1–3 "If any of you have a dispute with another Christian, how dare you go before heathen judges instead of letting God's people settle the matter? **Don't you know that God's people will judge the world? Well, then, if you are to judge the world, aren't you capable of judging small matters? Do you not know that we shall judge the angels? How much more, then, the things of this life!"** (GNB)

The grace of God by which He saves us, changes everything.

The message of the New Testament is simple, direct, and unmistakable. We are saved by God's grace through faith alone, not on the basis of any good works we have done. The sole responsibility of a Christian is to believe in the love and grace which God freely offers. This clear message stands in sharp contrast to the teachings of those who want us to trust in Christ and obey certain rules or practice certain rites. These teachers call their message a gospel, but it isn't really good news at all. They claim that in order to be acceptable to God, we need to do adequate works. Law and works are placed side by side with grace as a two-part ticket to righteousness. Contrary to these teachers, however, the New Testament insists that it is not law and works that justify, but God's grace and our response of faith. (Smith 1994, 132)

Repeating again what we have looked at earlier, **"For it is by God's grace that you have been saved through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts, but God's gift, so that no one can boast about it."** (Ephesians 2:8, GNB)

What the unsanctioned team from Jerusalem was doing was sowing discord in the church and they were able to so to the point that Paul and Barnabas had to go to Jerusalem to get the situation resolved. How typical of folks to leave their home church and then spread the poison elsewhere and not back at home.



What was being advocated by those from Jerusalem leads to those exact seven points we just covered. Grace is important. Putting our faith in any work as a demonstration of our so-called faith cuts us off from the grace of God, in other words, it is a complete waste of time. Call it what it is, approaching God on my conditions, not His.

Legalism, theological systems that sound good but enslave, doctrines that tickle the fancy and enslave while doing so, are all still popular today. "From the materialistic excesses of the prosperity movement ("Of course God wants all His children to drive Mercedes. You only drive a Toyota? How unspiritual can you be?") to "new" revelations about the only proper way to be baptized, strange twists of doctrine are the rule nowadays, not the exception." Acts 17:11 should be in our tool kit. Let me show you how this works. (Smith 1994, 114)

Acts 17:11

"Now these people were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so." (NASB 2020)

We haven't come to Acts 17 yet, but one of the communities Paul and Silas went to was Berea. They were serious students of the word there. They showed up in synagogue and listened to the team, then they would verify truth by checking out God's word for themselves. We all must do that.

I will continue to warn and teach God's word, so we get everything.

We want the whole counsel of God and that is what keeps us from deception. Let's look at our text again.

Acts 15:1–2

"Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brothers, **"Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."** And after Paul and Barnabas had a heated argument and debate with them, the brothers determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue." (NASB 2020)

I am going to pronounce a theological term on the circumcision allegation, well, let me show you the text first then the pronouncement.

In order for us to Acts 17:11 the statement in verse 1, first, what is said? "Unless you are circumcised according to the customs of Moses, you cannot be saved." First of all, is that said anywhere in the Torah? Nope. The opposite though exists.

Jeremiah 9:25–26

"A time is coming," says the LORD, "when I will punish all those who are circumcised in body but not in spirit—the Egyptians, Edomites, Ammonites, Moabites, the people who live in the desert in remote places, and yes, even the people of Judah. And like all these pagan nations, the people of Israel also have uncircumcised hearts." (NLT)

Do we know of anyone who was saved in the Old Testament who was circumcised and was declared by God to be saved prior to be circumcised. Yes, Abraham was.

Or how about an uncircumcised gentile man providing fruits of salvation. See Daniel 4, written by a gentile who I believe was saved, Nebuchadnezzar.

Back to Abraham though as this gets to the point we want to determine, is what is being alleged by the crew from Jerusalem fact or flaming bull feathers.



Genesis 15:2–6

“But Abram said, “Lord GOD, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” Abram also said, “Since You have given me no son, one who has been born in my house is my heir.” Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “This man will not be your heir; but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir.” **And He took him outside and said, “Now look toward the heavens and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” Then he believed in the LORD; and He credited it to him as righteousness.**” (NASB 2020)

Did you just catch that? If we are applying Acts 17:11, we heard what the folks from Jerusalem said, and we went to the Torah to prove it, or not. Abraham was not made righteous by circumcision, he was made righteous by believing. It was after that, that God made the Abrahamic Covenant with him.

What about circumcision then? Fast forward more than a few years. Now Abraham has a child through Hagar, and Ishmael, his son, is 13 years old and God comes to him with a sign to be performed in every male who is subject to the covenant. **Abraham has been saved for over a decade.**

Genesis 17:10–11

“This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. **And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you.**” (NASB 2020)

Not salvation, but a sign. So, now that we have applied Acts 17:11 to what the folks in Jerusalem are saying, we are able to pronounce our theologically sound edict, bologna. What thou art proposing is nothing more than hot steamy fresh heresy.

I don't know if the heresy thing was part of the debate though.

But there was serious debate and the leadership there in Antioch recognized this as the problem it really is. Paul adds in Galatians 2 that there was the involvement of the Holy Spirit in this as well since there appears to have also been prophetic revelation that took place as the leadership prayed about what to do about the situation Satan had just thrown them into. The folks who came to Antioch appear to have never sought the Lord about their pronouncements, heretics seldom do and if they do they misquote, deceive and lead astray to the point that applying Acts 17:11 can become a major exercise in itself.

Of course, Paul added his editorial comments about those who came from Jerusalem being false. That is a word of knowledge expressing what he discerned they were, tools of the devil, literally.

Galatians 2:4–5

“Even that question came up only because of some **so-called believers there—false ones, really—who were secretly brought in. They sneaked in to spy on us and take away the freedom we have in Christ Jesus. They wanted to enslave us and force us to follow their Jewish regulations.** But we refused to give in to them for a single moment. We wanted to preserve the truth of the gospel message for you.” (NLT)

I do have a question though, why in the world did Paul have to bring this up in a letter back to those he and Barnabas taught and ministered to there in Galatia? Because it appears that as he, Barnabas and the team headed north to Jerusalem, the self-appointed sin sniffers went further south and having learned of the locations the team had visited in Galatia, went there themselves to spread their poison.

Just one more known characteristic of false teachers and legalists today. I think that is why they always show up at Calvary Chapels.



The leadership in Antioch are working to keep the church healthy. They have seen and then prayed about those who were coming into the body under the guise of being from the mother church in Jerusalem, when in reality they were, as Paul says, false. They were doing what pastors must do to keep the church a healthy spiritual system. Five of the seven churches Jesus addresses in Revelation 2 & 3 are either on the verge of being unhealthy or have become systemically unhealthy spiritual systems.

The legalists from Jerusalem were trying to impose legalism as an alleged completer for the church, the thing that would make them healthy.

Fortunately, the leadership had discernment and saw through this attempt of the enemy. But the enemy continues to try and infiltrate today. Some places we are aware of around us have allowed some of these wolves in. It would be like looking at a building that needs work.

“Cracks and crevices are exposed, the foundation is unlevel, the roof leaks, and several windows are broken. You can’t just cover rotting floors with new carpet or simply slap on a fresh coat of paint to make a broken structure inhabitable. No, major repairs are necessary before such a structure can become a safe and comfortable home.

Once someone identifies a spiritually abusive system and escapes its toxic confines, the thought of returning to a spiritual environment—a new, different church, study group, or circle of believers—can be frightening. Many who have suffered within a spiritually abusive system—or even merely struggled within a spiritually broken system—long to experience spiritual growth and maturity, but they must first find help and hope through safety and security.” (Hope for the Heart 2024, 62)

Safety and security is what is driving the leadership and why the upcoming conference in Jerusalem.

Acts 15:3–5

“Therefore, after being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and they were bringing great joy to all the brothers and sisters. When they arrived in Jerusalem, they were received by the church, the apostles, and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to keep the Law of Moses.”” (NASB 2020)

Paul, Barnabas and the team going to Jerusalem are stopping at all the churches along the way. They work their way down the coast of Phoenicia, present day Lebanon, stopping at churches and giving them their missionary report.

This really is a wise thing to do since these churches are most likely in communication with the mother ship in Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas report, and one more group of followers begin to rejoice in the Lord and what He is doing in seeing all now able to come to Christ if they believe. They are focusing in on the Lord and the work of the Lord and staying away from the false.

We teach the word and what the truth of the word is. The reason, when the false comes, you immediately smell it. There is something, just not totally right.

As they do this, they are not only bringing joy to all who hear, but it is a practical lesson in the grace of God. His unmerited favor is now applicable to everyone on the planet no matter what their lineage is. From a social media perspective, this is creating a positive buzz. Remember, social media in that day and age was sandal net.



The wisdom of sharing with other believers along the way to Jerusalem shows up in the initial positive greeting that they receive.

Acts 15:4

"When they arrived in Jerusalem, they were received by the church, the apostles, and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them." (NASB 2020)

So far, so good. It is looking positive, but this is a conference and there are colleagues of those who went to Antioch, there in Jerusalem.

With no prayer, no leading of the Holy Spirit, no seeking of the Lord on the matter, we obtain their "religious" opinion.

Acts 15:5

"But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, **"It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to keep the Law of Moses."**" (NASB 2020)

The Bible tells us, over and over again, in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament, believe. The result of that is salvation.

Romans 10:8–9

"But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." (ESV)

Believe that Jesus died on the cross for our sin and that God then raised up from the dead and "you will be saved."

Romans 3:22–24

"We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are. For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet God, in his grace, freely makes us right in his sight. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins." (NLT)

But here stand a group of men who are used to being held in esteem due to their education and learning.

That is the problem. They are not talking to the Lord about what they are saying, they are not relying on the Holy Spirit for guidance, they are instead relying on their own "religious sensibilities" and falling right into the trap Satan had laid for them.

This is the group the began the requirement that church membership requires you to do stuff to prove you are really saved. You have to be baptized in our format, you have to memorize and parrot back all that we believe, you must wear certain kinds of clothing and conform to our hairstyle and beauty tips, and on and on and on.

For those saved pharisees, they had been so into dead religion that they found it hard to extract themselves from that. "Two thousand years later, not much has changed. Those of us who want to be numbered among the highly committed still hate the idea of being average and ordinary. It scares us to death. We assume that God's favor is reserved for the most dedicated. We can't imagine a kingdom of God with room for stragglers, strugglers, doubters, or the weak. So we've created a new set of litmus tests and boundary markers to show that we're still at the front of the line." (Osborne 2012, 90)



I wish it wasn't like that. We are to truly be fruit inspectors, not litmus test givers. As we grow in Christ, we realize that we all grow in Him at different speeds, but there is, thankfully, a Biblical way of knowing if someone is truly living for Christ. You see, all of us have the Holy Spirit and He impacts how we live. It is called the fruit of the Spirit.

Paul, again writing to the churches in Galatia, those who were being talked to by the legalists, there is a better way to know. First ask the question, Spirit or flesh. What is or is becoming the major thing we see in the life of the one we are talking to? Legalists are trying to control the flesh without considering what the Holy Spirit does.

Galatians 5:16–24

“Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” (NRSVue)

I find it interesting that Paul included the team from Jerusalem, the ones running around and causing quarrels, dissensions and factions in his definition of those who are in the flesh. That is actually a word of knowledge and is the truth.

The fruit of the Spirit, are those characteristics that the Holy Spirit develops in each one who belongs to Jesus.

When we overlay grace onto all of this, then why do we need anything other than Jesus?

Romans 8:31

“What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?” (NRSVue)

As followers of Christ, God is not against us, He is for us. He has given us His Holy Spirit to guide us, to direct us, to change us. He did not give us a list of dos and don'ts.

Once we discover the wonder of God's grace, we need no longer be locked in by the law. We can approach life freely because we love God and won't want to do anything to harm the loving relationship we have with Him. When we know the joy of fellowship with God, we won't want any barriers, any blocks, to come between us. In fact, the more we experience of God's love, the more He Himself becomes the primary desire and focus of our life. The coercive aspects of the law become unnecessary. We find ourselves longing to please God simply because we love Him. (Smith 1994, 7)

I am going to stop here because there, we will yet get to the conference, but I think we now understand what it is and why it is Paul and Barnabas were so disturbed by what the group from Jerusalem was doing.

If you don't know Jesus, but you come from a background of religious rules, good news, there is freedom in Christ. Join us.



ABC's of Salvation

- A. Acknowledge that you are a sinner, tell Him that.
- B. Believe that Jesus died on the cross for our sin and that He rose from the dead.
- C. Confess that Jesus is Lord. Tell someone about what you have done.

Works Cited

- Bruce, F. F. 2017. *Acts: Bible Study Commentary*. Nashville, TN: Kingsley Books.
- France, R. T. 2007. *The Gospel of Matthew, The New International Commetnary on the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.
- Hayward, Chris, and Ray Beeson. 2017. *Wounded in the Church: Hope Beyond the Pain*. Kindle Edition. New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House.
- Hope for the Heart. 2024. *Spiritual Abuse: Religion at Its Worst, Keys for Living Llbrary: Crisis and Trauma*. Dallas, TX: Hope for the Heart.
- Kasdan, Barney. 2022. *THE Acts of the Emissaries: The Early History of the Yeshua Movement, A Messianic Commentary*. Clarksville, MD: Lederer Books:L An Imprint of Messianic Jewish Publishers.
- Neusner, Jacob. 2008. *The Jerusalem Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers.
- Osborne, Larry. 2012. *Accidental Pharisees: Avoiding Pride, Exclusivity, and the Other Dangers of Overzealous Faith*. Kindle Edition. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Smith, Chuck. 1994. *Why Grace Changes Everything*. Kindle Edition. Costa Mesa, CA: The Word for Today.