

**Journey of Paul:  
Saved by Law or Saved by Grace?  
Acts 15  
Englewood Baptist Church  
Sunday Evening, August 29, 2010**

The last time we studied the book of Acts together, I shared with you a brief outline. These are the broad strokes of Acts, the natural divisions in the book. Acts is about the missionary movement of the gospel, how it began in the small city of Jerusalem and then proceeded forth. Remember, Jesus had told his followers in Acts 1:8, “Don’t go anywhere just yet. Wait for the Spirit to come upon you, and once He comes, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” So, essentially, Acts is the fulfillment of Jesus’ prophecy.

**Acts in Broad Strokes**

<b>Chapters 1-7</b>	<b>The preaching of the gospel in Jerusalem</b>
<b>Chapters 8-12</b>	<b>The preaching of the gospel in Judea and Samaria</b>
<b>Chapters 13+</b>	<b>The preaching of the gospel to the entire Roman world</b>

Acts 13 marks the moment when Paul and Barnabbas were set aside as the first global Christians. They were called to go and to preach the gospel to non-Jews and to create a more culturally diverse kingdom. This is all went well at first, and the two preachers began to see a Holy Spirit revival take place with the Gentiles. These “pagans” were coming into the kingdom at an alarming rate.

There was just one problem.

The Jews weren’t sure they were ready for all this. Paul had been preaching salvation by faith alone and at the moment of surrender and faith, a Gentile could pass through the door of salvation. The Jews caught wind of this and they weren’t so sure. Yes, Gentiles could be saved. Of course! But they must pass through the hallway of Judaism before they could pass through the door of salvation. A man must have a little Moses with his Jesus. It was grace that set us free, but we still have to honor the traditions.

Look what happens in Acts 15:1-21. I’ll read it to you.

One of the most difficult ideas to swallow is the idea of salvation by grace alone. Good things just don’t come at no cost to us.

**Image of a beach:** All of us would like to go there, right? But we know we can’t go for free. We have to save up our money and use piggy banks for years to sit on that sand.

How about this...

**Image of a Disney World:** What child wouldn’t give his right arm to spend a full week with Mickey? All those rides and fun foods and the fireworks at night. Everybody wants

to go to Disney World, but all you have to do is hop online and see the rates, and reality comes crashing home. That destination doesn't come cheap.

Well, if a week on the beach, or a week at Disney is expensive, how much more should an eternity in heaven cost you and me? Everything on earth seems to cost money. And here comes Paul and Baranbas preaching to all these lost pagans, repent of your sins and you can be saved today! You can be saved by faith and you don't have to work for it. And those Gentile people were responding. They couldn't believe it was possible to be set free and to have such hope.

It was the Jews, though, that couldn't quite let go of Moses as they grabbed a hold of Jesus.

Let's study tonight these two things tonight from Acts 15. I want you to see:

The Debate  
The Decision

#### The Debate

Let's look first at the debate. V. 1 summarizes the situation: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." This brought Paul and Barnabas into a sharp dispute.

I think the word sharp is telling. My wife and I have had some disagreements, some debates over the course of our marriage. But we have had a few SHARP ones. Those are the ones that seem to be fueled with emotion; where both parties are ready to die on this hill if that's what it takes. When people get into sharp disputes, such as this, it can often lead to divorce in a marriage, to the death of a friendship, to the split of a church.

The Jewish and Gentile church was ONE church, with ONE Lord, and ONE gospel, but the Jews were trying to create two. The Jews were refusing to join arms with the Gentiles, probably even resisting the Lord's Supper with the mixed company. And Paul was not a happy camper. This had created an uproar in the church at Antioch, a Gentile dominated church. It says that Paul and Barnabas, in v.2, *were appointed to go* and to talk this over. Somehow I wonder if Paul didn't raise his hand and volunteer. He was zealous for grace over law, which is the entire theme of the book of Galatians.

I want to show you something that I find extremely refreshing about this debate. I want you to notice v.6-7...

Did you see that? It was after much discussion that Peter got up and spoke. What I find so encouraging about this passage is the charity and grace that was shown in the midst of disagreements. Peter let other people share their point of view. He didn't call the meeting to order and shove his opinion down their throats. Neither did Paul. There was a freedom to discuss these things openly.

I wish I saw more of that. Most people won't even stop to consider another person's point of view. With respect and honor, Peter and Paul and Barnabas listened to the brethren share their hearts and concerns. After much discussion, Peter weighed in, and this is what he said...

Read vv.7-11.

Now that sounds like the best speech that Simon Peter ever delivered. He sounds so confident and so sure of himself that the Gentiles deserved equal treatment as the Jews, even though they cared nothing about Passover feasts, or avoiding pork products, or circumcising their sons. They were completely different, and yet God saw no distinction between them.

Now this sounds really gracious of Peter to be so open-minded, but turn with me one moment to Galatians and see that this was not always his stance.

Read Galatians 2:11-16.

Most scholars believe that this collision between Peter and Paul took place before the Jerusalem council. Peter repented of his racism, and his hypocrisy. He was saying one thing and living another. But if you look back at Acts 15, who is the first one to speak on behalf of the Gentiles? It is Peter. Peter had changed his mind, and changed his behavior. He no longer feared the circumcision group. Salvation was by grace, and not by the works of the law.

Now let me just stop right here and bring some contemporary application. Some of you might be listening and saying, "Well this is good history, but what does this have to do with today?"

### **Two Applications For Acts 15:**

1. **People are always seeking to add rules to grace.** Some of these are more discreet than others. Some preachers will add to the gospel by adding this rule, "if you want to know that you are truly saved, then make a donation to our ministry, and the Lord will smile down upon you." Other preachers say, "If you want to be saved, you had better get in the water and be baptized because there is no salvation apart from baptism." Still other preachers say, "If you want to be saved, then you must do community service or have a ministry in the church or give all your money to the poor." These are legalist additions to the Gospel, and they lead people down the road of the law. And let me just tell you what the law does to those who try to follow it perfectly. Peter says it well in v.10, "Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on our necks a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?" Peter says, "The law doesn't save because no man has ever been able to stick to it?" Let's not go back to working our way to God, because it has never worked!

Do you want to become the most miserable Christian on earth? Then here is how to do it. Try to prove you're a Christian by being perfect. Don't think a bad thought. Don't pass up a single invitation to give or serve. Be at church EVERY time the doors are open. Wake up every morning and have at least 2 hours of Bible study and nothing less. Don't ever speed. Don't ever say a cross word to your wife. Don't ever miss an appointment and so betray your word. Be sure that you tithe religiously down to the nickl. Be careful not to lose your patience or to speak out of turn. Be perfect in every way and prove that belong to God. Try that experiment. Trust me. You'll be done by noon. You can't do it. That's why Paul said to the Galatians, "by observing the law, no one will be justified."

Jesus did the work. We receive the grace. Grace plus the law ceases to be grace. So what does this mean? It means you can rest. You can rest.

Recently I have been reading a book on fasting. One particular section tells of a woman who chose an unusual fast. She did not quite eating, she quit criticizing. For a period of time, she would not offer her opinion or critique of anyone. It was a spiritual experience. And the question at the end of the chapter said this, "What sinful attitude should you fast?" And the Lord said to me, "Guilt." I am not supposed to walk around everyday feeling guilty and condemned. We sing it in a song, "No guilt in life, no fear in death." And so I decided for one week, I would refuse to accept the invitation to feel guilty. Every time I hung up the phone, I refused to ask myself, "Did I cut her off? Should I feel guilty for hanging up?" When a church member pointed out a weakness in my ministry, I walked away and said, "Lord, I'm not going to walk away feeling condemned." When I had to call and cancel a friend for lunch, I fasted from the feeling of guilt. You try this sometime and keep a log of how many times a day you are tempted to live in condemnation. It's like a yoke around your neck.

The Bible says that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ! Do you know why? Because He already took the guilt and paid the price. We can certainly be convicted about bad behavior, but we don't need to walk around every day trying to be perfect. We're not. And Paul was ready to go to blows to set us free from the yoke of the law. Legalism says I need to do more, be more, love more in order for God to love me. And it's that mindset that drives people mad. That's what this argument was really about. Paul didn't want to go back there. That was like when the Hebrews wanted to turn around and go back to Egypt? Crazy.

## 2. **Culture and race have no bearing on grace.** Look with me at v.9...

God makes no distinction based upon background, or customs, or race. We are all one in the kingdom of God.

As I was beginning to write that statement on Thursday, my phone reminder beeped and I needed to stop studying and go to a lunch appointment. The appointment had been on my calendar for two weeks. Let me introduce you to Spencer and Marcus.

