

I. Introduction

Good morning! Last week we started on Acts 15 where the gospel of grace was challenged, but not defeated. **Acts 15:5** tells of the challenge, **“Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, ‘The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.’”**

We saw that Peter gave a powerful answer refuting the challenge in **Acts 15:11**, **“No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”** And, after more testimony in support of the doctrine of grace was given, James quoted from the prophet Amos to show that the Old Testament Scriptures were in agreement with the teaching of grace and then pronounced the conclusion. **Acts 15:19**, **“It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.”**



The apostles and elders in Jerusalem were in full support of the doctrine of salvation by grace alone. It is very clear from this that no difficult burdens such as circumcision or obedience to the Law of Moses would be placed on the gentiles. The gentiles were to be freely welcomed to come to Jesus Christ and be saved. As Paul later wrote in his letter to Titus, **Titus 2:11**, **“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men.”**

GRACE
alone

The important issues had been decided, but James still gave some additional words concerning teachings that the gentiles would be instructed to follow. Let's read **Acts 15:22-33** and take a look at those things.

II. Scripture Reading (Acts 15:22-33, NIV)

Acts 15

22 Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers. 23 With them they sent the following letter:

The apostles and elders, your brothers, To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings. 24 We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. 25 So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul -- 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. 28 It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements:

29 You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.

30 The men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. 31 The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. 32 Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers. 33 After spending some time there, they were sent off by the brothers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them.

III. Teaching



I like how the letter begins, **Acts 15:23b**, “**The apostles and elders, your brothers, To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings.**” The letter is from the apostles and elders in Jerusalem, and therefore it is inherently a letter of strong authority. And yet, in addressing the gentile believers, the apostles and elders call themselves, “**your brothers.**” The fact of their leadership role as apostles and elders does not change, but as believers before the throne of God they are brothers, fellow Christians saved by the grace of God given at the cross of Jesus.

The letter goes on to make it clear that those who had been teaching circumcision and submission to the Law of Moses were not authorized to teach such things. The core of the letter follows in **Acts 15:28-29**. “**It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.**”

The apostles and elders sent a short letter in support of the doctrine of grace and the church in Antioch received it with gladness. The context indicates that the disciples of that time understood exactly what the letter meant and that they found it very encouraging. But in the years that followed, that clear understanding was somehow lost and disagreements about the meaning arose. Today, there are a variety of opinions about this letter. Here are some of the most common theories about the source of the requirements:

- 1.They are from the laws applied to aliens in Leviticus 17-18.
- 2.They are from the commands given to Noah after the flood.
- 3.They were given to enable gentiles and Jews in the church to share fellowship meals without offending the Jews.
- 4.They were given to protect the gentile believers from backsliding into idol worship since the things forbidden were all common in idol worship at that time and place.

So, which of these theories is correct? Where there is disagreement among Bible scholars and denominations, we should leave room for each person to follow their own convictions. However, I think there are strong arguments against all of the theories except the last one.

First of all, if the letter was based on Old Testament Scripture, it would probably say so. Second, the requirements listed here do not really match Leviticus 17-18 or what God said to Noah in Genesis. Further, from the context, the clear intent was to affirm salvation by grace and release the gentiles from the Law, so it would be strange to introduce requirements from the Law of Moses or even the Noahic Covenant here. So I think the first two theories are hard to accept. The third theory is also problematic. Jewish and gentile believers could already share fellowship meals if the Jews did the cooking; but if the gentiles did the cooking, they would likely serve pork and other things forbidden by the Law of Moses. So, if the letter was to promote table fellowship, then it would have to tell the Jews to accept gentile foods as well.

So, in my opinion, only the fourth theory seems to stand up to scrutiny. In particular, only the fourth theory explains why the requirement to avoid sexual immorality would be listed alongside the food commands. In the idol worship of Antioch and the surrounding area, it is said that there were temple prostitutes and that drinking blood and strangling animals for cooking were practiced. Directing the gentile believers to avoid these things that were closely related to idol worship would be natural and would not be introducing a new law, but would only be an exhortation for pure faith in Jesus.

The background is important, but the question most commonly asked in the church is, “*Do these rules still apply to us today?*” The importance of avoiding sexual immorality is taught throughout the Scriptures, so that part is easy to answer, but what about the food rules? Do Christians today need to avoid eating blood or the meat of animals that were strangled? Do we need to check to see whether the food we buy has been offered to idols?

If I am right in thinking that the point was to teach the believers to avoid things that were associated with idol worship, then the application for us is to avoid things associated with idol worship in our own cultures and in the place where we live. Since we live here in Japan, I will give a local example.

In many traditional Japanese homes, rice, fruits, and other food items are offered before the Butsudan in the morning and then eaten a few hours later. Should Christians take food from in front of the Butsudan and eat it? To me, this seems to



be the same as the food offered to idols that the apostles and elders instructed the gentile believers to avoid.

Will you lose your salvation if you eat it? Absolutely not; we are saved by grace, not by works. Is it sin to eat it? Not necessarily, if you do not believe in the idol and no one is watching, then it may not be sin to you. But usually someone is watching. Family members who believe in the Butsudan may believe that the food taken from the altar gives them spiritual power. If you join them in eating these things, it may harm your Christian witness to them.

In his letter to the church in Corinth, Paul discussed this issue in depth. I would encourage you to carefully read what Paul said about these things and pray about what you should do. As a start, here is what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:25-29:

25 Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, 26 for, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it." 27 If some unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience. 28 But if anyone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it, both for the sake of the man who told you and for conscience' sake -- 29 the other man's conscience, I mean, not yours. For why should my freedom be judged by another's conscience?

The first purpose of the letter from the apostles and elders of Jerusalem was to affirm the doctrine of salvation by grace. The letter probably also had a secondary purpose of smoothing relationships between the Jewish and gentile believers by asking the gentiles to refrain from some things that the Jews were particularly offended by.

But I think the primary purpose of the requirements given in the letter and the primary application for us today is to serve as a warning against involvement in idol worship. Idols have no power over Christians; the Spirit of God is in our heart and the Scripture promises us in **1 John 4:4, "You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world."** But we do not want to be a stumbling block to anyone and we should be careful not to fall into temptation. Let's continue with acts 15:22-41.

IV. Scripture Reading (Acts 15:22-41, NIV)

Acts 15

35 But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord. 36 Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." 37 Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, 38 but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. 39 They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, 40 but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. 41 He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

V. Teaching

Paul and Barnabas fell into disagreement concerning John Mark. He had apparently committed to traveling with Barnabas and Paul, but got discouraged and gave up part way through their first journey. Now Barnabas wants to give John Mark a second chance, but Paul says no. At Jerusalem, Paul had just won a great victory for the doctrine of grace, but I think this passage shows that it is far easier to preach the grace of God than it is to give grace to those around you. This was not Paul's best moment, but the Lord still used it for good. As a result of the disagreement, two missionary teams went out instead of only one.



John Mark got off to a shaky start in his ministry. But the Lord was not finished with him. By the grace of God and with the encouragement of Barnabas, this same John Mark later became the author of the gospel of Mark. And, eventually, he and Paul were reconciled and Paul spoke highly of him in later years.

When we see people just starting out in ministry we will often see them



make many mistakes. They may even give up and turn back. But remember John Mark and look on others with eyes of faith. Do not judge them by what they are now, but instead look with eyes of faith and see what they may become. And, when you look in the mirror, look at yourself with eyes of faith also. Maybe you have made some mistakes and have had some bad experiences. Maybe you have even gotten discouraged and given up on ministry. But remember, God has given us grace, so we need to learn to give grace to others as well, and even to ourselves.

Let's press on just a little more before we close for today. Acts 16:1-5.

VI. Scripture Reading (Acts 16:1-5, NIV)

Acts 16

1 He came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was a Jewess and a believer, but whose father was a Greek. 2 The brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. 3 Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. 4 As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. 5 So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.

VII. Teaching

This passage ends on a high note. **Acts 16:5, "So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers."** Praise the Lord! In this passage we also meet Timothy, who will become a close associate of Paul; we all know the letters that Paul wrote to Timothy. Here we see that Paul and Timothy begin to travel together as they deliver the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem to the churches.

It is very interesting what happens in **Acts 16:3. "Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek."** A short time earlier, Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem and got a decision from the apostles and elders that the gentiles did not have to be circumcised. But now Paul circumcises Timothy before taking him along. Is Paul wavering in his commitment to the gospel of grace? No, he is not. But now that the battle for the gospel of grace has been won in Jerusalem, Paul is willing to circumcise Timothy in order to make the preaching of the gospel go more smoothly among the Jews. Paul has rejected legalistic ritual, but Paul is also very practical. He rejects any argument that the Law of Moses is necessary for salvation, but he is willing to observe Jewish law when it is useful for the spread of the gospel of grace.

VIII. Conclusion

Some years later, in **Romans 15:7**, Paul wrote, "**Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.**" Accept the weaker brother or sister and meet them where they are. Have they failed in their first attempts to walk with Jesus? Don't give up on them, but instead, encourage them as Barnabas encouraged John Mark. Does someone insist on some ritual or practice that you are sure is unnecessary? As long as the doctrine of grace is not threatened, it is okay to simply give them what they ask, just as Paul did for the Jews when he circumcised Timothy.

Accept one another and accept even yourself, because Christ has accepted you. Do not be legalistic, but also do not insist on your freedom to the point where your actions cause others to stumble. And remember always, we all need grace.

I shared this last week, but I want to share it again today as we close. In November of 1999, the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church issued a, "*Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*," which includes the following paragraph:

"Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works."

The church of our Lord Jesus Christ is divided in many ways, but we should all look for and rejoice

in even small steps toward unity. Here at OIC, we come from many different church traditions and cultural backgrounds. So, we have many good opportunities to give grace and accept one another in love. I pray that our efforts will become small steps toward the unity that Jesus prayed for in **John 17:23**, **“I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”**

Let's pray.

IX. Prayer

ⁱ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html