

Acts 15: 1-22

Living a Life of Grace

5/8/16

But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”² And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.³ So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers.⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them.⁵ But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.”⁶ The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter.⁷ And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.⁸ And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us,⁹ and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.¹⁰ Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?¹¹ But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”¹² And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.¹³ After they finished speaking, James replied, “Brothers, listen to me.¹⁴ Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name.¹⁵ And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written,

*¹⁶ “After this I will return,
and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen;
I will rebuild its ruins,
and I will restore it,
¹⁷ that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord,*

*and all the Gentiles who are called by my name,
says the Lord, who makes these things ¹⁸ known from of old.'*

¹⁹ Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, ²⁰ but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. ²¹ For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues." ²² Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers,

(Pastor Prays)

In so many ways, Acts 15 is an unlikely passage to preach on Mother's Day. With all of its doctrine and disputes, there's very little sugar or sentimentality. There's no drugstore Mother's Day card sappiness. These words have iron.

Some have said that Acts 15 is the Magna Carta of Christianity, laying the bedrock of Christian liberty and free grace. And if we don't get these things right, then we reduce Christianity to a moral code with no real power to change, no hope to give and no real reason to embrace.

In Chapter 15, a dispute has worked its way into the church. In v. 1, there was a group of people insisting that you had to do some religious things, be circumcised and keep the 10 Commandments to be a Christian. V. 2 says no small dissension and debate broke out. That is Luke's way of saying they were having a free-for-all. In Chapter 15, the free grace of the Gospel was in dispute. The very foundations of the Christian faith were being undermined. And if they didn't get Grace alone, through Faith alone in Christ alone – if they didn't get that right– then they (and we) were just playing "spiritual Corn Hole," tossing a beanbag and hoping it hits.

I need more than that. Moms and kids and husbands and homes need more than that. We need *real* grace through a *bloody* cross applied by *genuine* faith. A life of Grace – I want you as a teenager who's bored or a Mom who's confused or a Dad who's slipping, I

want you to live a life of *unsearchable* Grace. I think the front door to that life is in Acts 15.

Life in Christ is a Life in God's Grace

That's doctrine and I think there are a couple of things we can learn from it:

Learn to keep the long view

Eternity is a long time to be alive, and although the urgency of the day demands our attention, we must live this day in light of the eternal.

We pick up the story in the aftermath of a really successful missionary journey. Paul and Barnabas really saw God work. And in Chapter 14, they've gone back to their home church (Antioch) to celebrate. In vs. 27 & 28, *And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.²⁸ And they remained no little time with the disciples.* Things were just good. The church was happy. Paul and Barnabas felt good.

Then comes Chapter 15:1 *But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."* Now that's a setback, a punch in the gut. That just sucks the wind out of your sails. It happens. It happens with people you love and organizations you love and children you love.

It's Mother's Day. Moms, it happens to you a lot and sometimes the intensity of the issue in the moment can seem overwhelming. That's when you've got to keep the long view. That's a marathon, not a sprint, and nothing you are dealing with has rattled the Throne Room of God. He is not only *not* caught off guard, He is providently working all things. Isn't that what we believe? He's working all things together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose. In your mind's eye, at the end of your life's highway, you place the cross, and every day, regardless of what the day brings, you walk to the cross. That's where the *judgment* of God meets the *love* of God in the *Son* of God.

Life in Christ is a life in God's grace. But you've got to keep the long view.

Pick Your Battles Carefully

I didn't say, don't battle. I think we are probably not battling enough, but everything doesn't have to be a fight. In v. 1-5, there is a heated debate and at the heart of the issue is how salvation works.

People who weren't Jewish, Gentiles like me and you, were repenting of their sins and placing their faith in Jesus and His perfect life - keeping the law, His atoning death - took the punishment, His victorious resurrection - eternal life. Vs. 1-5 tell us what the fight was about: *But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."*² *And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.*³ *So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers.*⁴ *When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them.*⁵ *But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses."*

They are adding to grace and anything that is added to free grace is worth fighting about. Grace and faith level us. We are even at the cross, and being even makes fellowship possible. The very heart of the Gospel is the Grace of God. It's worth fighting about. Listen, your theology, your doctrinal framework matters and as deeply as I desire unity and fellowship with other professing Christians, church unity stops at the shore of Biblical authority, and the Bible gives us salvation by God's free grace *alone*.

That's what they are fighting about in this story, and there are some things worth fighting about. But you have to pick your battles carefully: Essential Doctrines, Biblical Authority, Sexual Morality. I think those things are worth fighting about. The converse is true. Make sure you are *not* fighting about things that are *not* going to matter spiritually, Biblically or morally.

Life in Christ is a life in God's grace. Keep the long view and pick your battles carefully.

Choose Your Friends Wisely

This story is mostly about Paul. At least he takes center stage, but he has some really great friends standing with him. In v. 1-2, Barnabas is with Paul. In verses 7-11, Peter makes a speech and in v. 13 it's James. In this trio of friends, you have Barnabas, the encourager, Peter the rock, and James, the half-brother of Jesus.

There is no substitute for Christian friends that are bound together by the blood of Christ. They would pray together, study together, stand together, suffer together and glorify God together. There are very few substitutes for the simple grace of Christian fellowship. The New Testament is replete with "One Another's": Comfort one another, build up, serve, forgive, encourage, care for, minister to, pray for, be at peace with one another. In this text, they are *standing with* one another. Each of them were genuine followers of Christ and able to articulate the Gospel clearly.

I do believe you should have friends who are *not* Christians, but the ones you are closest to and depend on, the ones who reflect your character, should be followers of Christ.

Life in Christ is a life in God's grace. Learn to keep the long view, pick your battles carefully and choose your friends wisely.

Trust God Completely

I mean in everything, in every way. With broken health, unexpected tragedy, a wayward child, difficult marriage, unfulfilling job, we are made to trust God. In the story, Paul and Barnabas have been used to lead Gentiles to Christ. This is uncharted territory, so it is controversial.

They've gone to the "home office" in Jerusalem and v. 6 says the apostles and elders were gathered together to consider this matter. In v. 7, and after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and he gave a speech. He says four things about God that make me want to trust him:

1. He is the initiator – God made a choice among you.
2. He is a redeemer – Peter says "by me mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the Gospel" and believe that with the Gospel, he redeems those dead in sin.

3. He is a heart-knower – v. 8, God, who is the heart-knower. *Kardio – gnostor*

4. He is the purifier. V. 8-9 *And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us,⁹ and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.*

This is a good place to pause and talk to those of you here who are still questioning whether or not you believe in Christ. It's God who pursues in an act of providence. It is God who redeems. He does so with the Gospel. It tells us of our sin and our need for a Savior. It's God who knows your heart. It's God who will change your heart and He does so as a gift. Turn from your life of sin and by faith, turn to Christ. Life in Christ is a life in God's grace.

(Pastor prays)