

Acts 15:1-35 – Sola Gratia

Intro (Get on the Bus) – I get to preach on Circumcision

- Batted around several sermon titles but I avoided any that played off the theme of Circumcision because in this text we come to a reaffirming of the Gospel of the Grace of God – *which distinguishes us from all other world religions (rules and pillars to be commendable to God), whereas in Christianity one must simply fall at the mercy of Christ and stop striving!*
- **Unbeliever – It is a great week for you to be here because a lot of people who object to Christianity do so because they think it is a strict religion that is ALL about rules and outer appearance – but in this passage you see what Christianity is really all about – rules cannot save you, but ONE can!**

Pray – Make much of your name... sanctify us in the Truth

Opening Illustration – Crucible – (The story’s main character John Proctor who is a respected man in the community – and its during Salem witch trials and they are going around on a witchhunt! And essentially there was no way to clear your name but to stave off death you can confess... Proctor does but the final scene is his giving objection to signing his name) *“Because it is my name! Because I cannot have another in my life...How may I live without my name? I have given you my soul; leave me my name!”*

- **In a much greater way, the Church is called to steward and promote God’s name in the World – and so one might come to a chapter like this and ask why are theological debates necessary or even why is Theology at all important?** *Because we are saying something about God and His name and He cannot have another one, and so we make sure with right doctrine that we are saying things that are true about His name!*

Main Idea – Religious rituals/works will not/cannot save us and Christian charity is necessary for Christian unity!

Context – Paul has returned from his first missionary journey to Antioch and he has reported how the gospel of the grace of God is bearing fruit among the gentiles and there was great rejoicing over this – *but then as it often seems along comes that fun party known as the circumcision party to throw water on the fire!*

- **They have a problem with what is going on – And their beef is not that the Gentiles are becoming Christians but its that they are not first becoming Jews – its not that they are being baptized, its that they aren’t also being circumcised**

(QUICKLY) Word of Warning as We Dive In – Let’s not think that we are not capable of the same things that the Pharisees were – *Unfortunately even in many “bible believing” churches we tend to preach the bible moralistically and rules based (Ruth loved her in-laws... Noah)*

- **We sometimes at least passively teach you will be accepted by God if you do these things and avoid these things – and if we do that we teach a Gospel plus instead of a grace alone – all you need to be right with God is Faith, not circumcision (can I get an Amen!)**

Up until this point we have seen the church surviving and thriving mainly against outside opposition (beatings, stoning’s, trials, chains) – **but now we see possibly an even more grievous threat, opposition from the inside** – *but what we will see again is the amazing track record of Christianity to survive and thrive against all challenges because God will protect His church – And we see this take place in a pivotal chapter (especially for those of us that are Gentiles) that one commentator calls the turning point of the book which justifies all that has happened before and sets the stage for all that is to come!*

I. Grace Disputed (15:1-5 – READ)

(V. 1) A threat to grace comes from these men from Judea (they even claimed to be of James – Galatians 2) who are TEACHING – **What a phrase** – *they are proselytizing this message and they had been effective in*

that Peter who had been sharing table fellowship with the Gentiles and even Barnabas were led astray by their hypocrisy (Gal. 2)

- **These men are saying in order to be saved you must be circumcised** (I am not going to go into detail here, you can discuss this in your GG's!) – **They are saying Jesus is not complete without Moses!**
- **In order to become a member of this church you have to have surgery, or as one said if you are in to math in order to be added to this church part of you needs to be subtracted** – *That'd probably hurt the new members class attendance (just a cut above what I am looking for)*

(V. 2) **Paul called these men troublemakers in Galatians and this is why Paul often wrote about Circumcision because it was a threat from within to the Gospel of Grace** – *it is the nagging question of the NT are the Gentile converts really brothers of the Jews without becoming Jews first?*

- **And the Pharisees had a biblical basis (albeit they misunderstood it) since the Law of Moses contained many ceremonial laws that promoted outward purity so that one could approach a holy God – And most significantly Gen. 17 said the distinguishing marker for those who belonged to the people of God was circumcision**
- **But this group of people loved to make rules about the rules (613 added)** – *ever googled silly rules (Detorit – Alligator, Kentucky – Ice Cream Cone in pocket)*

Paul (and now Barnabas has recovered from his hypocrisy) will have none of this and I love the phrase NO SMALL DISSENSION arose as they strongly oppose this teaching – *It becomes such a significant debate Paul and Barnabas are sent to Jerusalem to discuss this matter with the Apostles and Elders in Jerusalem*

- **This sets the stage for what is the most important business meeting of all time (with Grace team on one side and legalists on the other)** – with the future of the church in the balance and the way of salvation in question they will seek to answer:
 - o Who should be accepted and what must they do to be accepted?
 - o Is Christianity a reform movement or sect of Judaism or something more global?
 - o Is it Jesus alone, or Jesus and Moses?

(V. 3) **And on their way they continue doing what they have been doing testifying to the grace of God in the salvation of the Gentiles (HCSB Created Joy)** – *some are hearing about this and rejoicing and others are getting mad – How are we when hear of people not like us turning to faith in Christ?*

- (v. 4-5) *When they get there they are received by the church but quickly again opposed by this group of Pharisees that have become Christians*

2 Questions to Consider at this point – 1) *When is it ok to have no small dissension?* 2) *We should be constantly examining ourselves to see if we add anything to the gospel that we think makes people “acceptable”*

- **First, when is it ok to fight** – (Ill. Dad teaching us when it was ok to fight???) – **unfortunately some Christians fight all the time about silliness (color of carpet, flower arrangements)** – *but on the other hand especially in our tolerance culture its almost as if the only unforgivable sin is any type of disagreement or telling someone they are wrong* (I often see on Facebook wrong int of Matt. 7)
 - o **So you have some who fight over everything and some who will never take a stand on anything – so when is it ok? Well when the gospel is at stake or when a core Christian Doctrine (1st tier – our 9 core beliefs, there are times when doctrine needs to be clarified) we should be ready to contend for the Faith once for all delivered** – *because we love GOD (doctrine says something about His name) AND NEIGHBOR (we confront erring brothers because we love them, so that means our heart needs to be right when we do it)*

Second – in what ways do we imply that something other than the gospel makes one commendable to God? (Ex. Certain dress code... pants and tie, cant eat that, cant drink that, cant have that ink, cant dance, cant vote that way – it's a good question to discuss!)

V. Grace Defended and Displayed (15:6-21) – Read 6-12 (Peter’s speech)

As the Jerusalem council starts the leaders sort of gather to the side to debate the matter (MUCH – which can happen among even our elders at times) – *so we see it wasn’t quickly settled and then REMINISCENT OF ACTS 2 Peter stands up and address the assembled church and the delegates from Antioch with some amazing words*

- This will be Peter’s final appearance in the book of Acts and what a way to go out (Curtain Call – Ferris Bueller) – Peter has clearly recovered from his hypocrisy (WONDERFUL NEWS THAT GRACE and mercy are not only there at our regeneration but there when we mess up as well!)

(V. 7) Notice God is doing this work among the nations – *He made a choice that early on on the expanse of the Gospel to use Peter as a chosen means for gentiles to hear and believe!* (recounting 10 years earlier how Cornelius had come to faith)

- (v. 8) God bore witness to His choice how? By Giving the Gentiles the Spirit – **That’s all the evidence we need that God has chosen to make His name great among the gentiles** – *And Peter reminds them this is exactly how God demonstrated that the Jews were a part of what He was doing in the World “Just as He did to us!”*
- (V. 9) This demonstrates that He made “No distinction between us and them” – We have to see how radical this statement is – God is now making no distinction between those of Goliath and those of David
- These pig-eating, unclean, uncircumcised gentiles are now part of the people of God – **imagine your whole life you have been told how special you are and this has been made clear by comparing you to this other group of people** – *And now you are being told they are just as special as you are and they are being counted as part of the people of God without having to follow the one thing that made the people of God distinct...* (Quote Rom. 9) and now He is saying there is no difference between you and them!

This group (like all of us) is made clean, not by surgery (ritual purity) but by faith – *The Pharisees don’t see that Circumcision has come to an end because Jesus was circumcised (fulfilling the law) and he has accomplished through His work EVERYTHING THAT WE CANNOT ACCOMPLISH THROUGH OURS* – none of us are good enough or able do enough good works to be made right with God but ONE has made a way for us!

- Unbeliever – please here me Christianity is not about putting chains on but chains coming off – *If you are in this room and you think you will be ok with God based on what you have done your trust is in the wrong place, put it in another!*
- In light of this Peter now drives it home why are you putting God to the test – **how dare we not accept those whom God has accepted** – *How dare we put on them a yoke that didn’t liberate us nor make us clean! (let that sink in, because as I have tried to point out we do this!)*

Then in V. 11 Peter says something that stuns the congregation – Here is why – *cause everyone expected him to say something like this “we believe these gentiles can be saved by grace through faith in Christ just like us”*

- But Peter doesn’t say that, instead he says: **“I believe we Jews can be saved by faith just like these gentiles”** talk about a shock – **here is how it works if you want to be saved then you need to understand they don’t have to become like us, we have to become like them!** (Faith)
- And the response to this statement is stunned silence – *ever been in a preaching moment where something was said and there were no audible amen’s just stunned silence!*
- Peter has made clear that if any of us are to be saved it is of Grace alone – *If the circumcision party (and if we) would just grasp that there is no room for boasting a the foot of the Cross*
- (v. 12) Paul and Barnabas pick up the mic that Peter just dropped and again recount what God has done through them!

(Read V. 13-21) – James’ Defense – We now turn to a pivotal moment as James (the one the circumcision party had claimed they spoke on behalf of) stands up to address the congregation and strikingly he will affirm all that has been said

- He says listen to me and he says something striking “God is taking a people for His name from the Gentiles” – *this had only been said of the Jews in the OT and he is making the point that Gentile believers belong to True Israel and they have been chosen by God to belong to His people!*
- And James doesn’t appeal to experience but he shuts the whole thing down by appealing to the Scriptures – *Councils and Conventions have no authority unless their conclusions are in accord with the Scriptures and these guys who write scripture appeal to Scripture!*
- James says the Prophets agree with this – **Amos looked to a time of a restored and rebuilt tent (the tent of David had fallen but was restored 3 days later when the Davidic King walked out of a borrowed Tomb)** – *And then James concurs with Peter and Paul that the day of the inclusion of the Gentiles in to God’s people is now dawning!*
 - o And He is pointing out that God is doing this – *This is not some afterthought but a divine plan foretold by the prophets that a day was coming when God would save for Himself out of the nations a people* – *The Global Kingdom marches forward as all over the world people from every ETHNE bow the knee to a circumcised Jewish Davidic King!*

(Verse 19) So in light of God making this plan from of old to make a name for Himself among the nations – *lets not trouble them with Circumcision*

- **James does however give 4 Convictions (Greek verb means something stronger than express an opinion and something lesser than I rule, so conviction seems good to Stott)** – that are not needed for salvation but for fellowship among the brothers
- **Note: There is much debate here between whether these are moral laws or ceremonial laws especially since one is always wrong but the others Paul says are ok in other places** – *but I think the evidence clearly points out that these are ceremonial and not moral because if they were moral he is leaving out a major portion of the 10 Commandments and Paul later makes clear that the food ones have no moral bearing but for the sake of others conscious abstain around them!*
- **In addition, all of these mentioned are associated with Pagan Temple Worship Festivals (including the one that seems moral) and so he is saying for sake of your brothers avoid these festivals** – *it is not an admonition to eat Kosher but instead it is likely an appeal to not take place in these festivals*

Here are the 4:

- 1) **Meat offered to idols** (meat sold in the temples that had been sacrifice to idols)
- 2) **Sexual immorality** (A kind of prostitution associated with Pagan festivals and Marriage within bloodlines)
- 3) **Strangled Meat and 4) Bloody meat** (interesting one, I like my steak still mooing when I eat it)

Application: The ceremonial laws have been fulfilled in Christ, but there are principles we can gather here – James is essentially asking for the Gentiles to sacrifice some of their freedoms for the sake Fellowship especially when it comes to offending a weaker Jewish brother

- **Be sensitive and a person of Christian charity who is careful in how they observe their freedoms** – *in the company of a weaker brother lay some things down (alcohol a good example)* – I think this especially applies to many of you who will be moving overseas
- **On the one hand don’t flaunt your freedoms and on the other don’t be so easily offended**
- **Tbone says it like this:** *“As those under grace, we are not to make extra-biblical requirements of others, and as those under grace, we gladly restrict our freedom for the sake of others!*

Now notice how the decision of the council (spoken by James) is unanimously ratified and delivered – *the apostles, and elders, with the whole church* – **One thing we see here is that leaders lead, but the congregation is involved!**

- We also see throughout as we have noted in previous weeks the Importance of the Church – *they were sent by the church, received by the church, the decision was ratified by the church* – Missiology and Ecclesiology are not Enemies!
- With this letter they send leading men among the brothers with the letter to essentially vouch for it (LOVE THAT PHRASE – They send some of their best) – *and notice strikingly they are making it clear these men have our backing while those in v. 1 did not have our backing!*

Imagine receiving this letter – put yourself in their shoes – *you have been troubled and harassed and now you receive a letter from your brothers in Jerusalem (lets listen to the whole thing and then notice some things about it)*

- It has a familial tone addressing them as brothers – **even has bromance going on with Paul and Barnabas (V. 25) – why the Bromance?** They have risked their lives for the sake of the name! (David and Katie)
- **James makes clear the Spirit (the helper of the church) guided this decision and He is doing His work of promoting unity with the brothers**
- The Letter delivers the decision of how to maintain unity and they would “do well” if they would for the sake of their brothers observe them – **Stott says of this:** “*the abstinence here recommended must here be understood... not as an essential Christian duty, but as a concession to the consciences of others.*”

Some thoughts on the Council as we move to close – *some denominations take this chapter and make it determinative for how the church should be ordered but I think that is off for a few reasons and I don't think it is at all the point of the passage:*

- 1) **This is not giving us a doctrine of church polity – this council is unique – the apostles are there!** *I think we can see the benefits of councils and meetings to help with doctrinal decisions, but we are not apostles!*
- 2) They weren't holding these meetings annually – this was a special called meeting to solve a serious problem – *they were deciding a crucial matter for salvation – we don't do that today!*
- 3) **Their authority here covered the globe while presbyteries and conventions these days cover usually only one country**
- 4) **We don't see the Catholic teaching of a Pope here** – Peter isn't the final decision maker here, James has last word (and even he appeals OT scripture which is a problem for our catholic and orthodox friends)
- 5) **One thing we do see though is Unity and Mission clarity of the gospel is paramount – Some today say apostles were about mission and not doctrine and that they never drew lines over theological debates, only problem with that is the NT and this chapter!** We cannot say lets just be about mission, we have to know what message we are taking to nations!

(READ 30-35) So they Gather the church together (reminiscent of Acts 14) and read the letter and a party breaks out – **You'd rejoice too if you realized your sensitive surgery had just been called off!**

- They were now definitively told they would not have to become Jews in order to become fellow heirs with them under the reign of their now brother Jesus – *And as a sign of unity and that they are indeed brothers is demonstrated in that the two leading men stay and encourage the brothers before they are sent off in PEACE back to IDC Jerusalem!*

Conclusion – It is easy for us to fall back in to thinking that our performance is what merits us favor with God – so where do we look?

- **We look to the one who made no distinctions in whom He set His affections on** – *a woman at a well or a Pharisee coming under cover of night!*
- **We look to the one who alone could keep that Yoke and who in turn says I give a lighter Yoke** – *The one who perfectly kept and fulfilled the Law and then stood in the place of Lawbreakers (like us) at the cross as hour after hour he absorbed the wrath that our Law-breaking demanded!*
- **And we look to the one that was vindicated as the true righteous one** – *Fully displayed when on a Sunday morning like this one His heart started beating again and He vacated a tomb to start a global reign that includes us Gentiles!*

Unbeliever – This is what we preach to you today – You cannot do enough good to merit favor with God will you turn from trusting in your work to trusting in the Work of this Davidic King? *Will you believe today? Will you receive the freest and greatest gift ever offered?*

- **We hold out to you today not circumcision, not rules, we hold out to you Christ** – *Come to Him you who are weary and heavy laden and He will give you rest!*

Believer – Are you thankful today for Grace? What is our response?

- **Lets consider ways in which we might make distinctions** – *We may not do this with the same ferocity as the Pharisees but it is there within us* – The gospel does not need to be supplemented by anything Else!
- **Lets consider also how we will fight for the Solas (the essentials of the faith) unwilling to compromise** – *But then also how we will sacrifice liberties (and make concessions) for the sake of fellowship* – **Newton said of Paul, “in non-essentials he was a reed, in essentials an Iron Pillar!”**
- **But hear me, the wrong response to this sermon is to think I just need to go home and try harder** – *the right response today is to be like the church at Antioch Rejoicing because of the Encouragement* – **“IT IS FINISHED!”**

Had this council not happened who knows what would’ve have come of the advance of the Kingdom – you might have had 2 distinct churches – **But we can take heart that God will protect the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ**

- *He will protect it from stoning’s, beatings, imprisonments, Sword and He will protect it from people like us because it is His name and He cannot and will not have another!*