

The Book of Acts, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 21: The Jerusalem Council

Acts 15:1-35

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Acts 15 records the Jerusalem Council, where the gospel of grace was defended against those who would bind the law of Moses on Gentile believers. This is a doctrinally sensitive lesson. What is at stake is the heart of the gospel: that we are saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus, received through faith, and not by keeping the law of Moses. Also at stake are the unity of the church, the danger of legalism, and the way the church resolves doctrinal disputes by Scripture, testimony, and consensus under God.

Handle the balance with great care, exactly as the church requires. On one side, defend the gospel of grace: salvation is not earned by law-keeping, circumcision, or human requirements, but is a gift of God's grace through faith in Christ. On the other side, do not drift into a faith only message that strips away the obedient response of faith. The same Acts that teaches salvation by grace also shows that faith responds in repentance, confession, and baptism, and that grace is no license to sin (note the moral requirements the council retained). The heaviest doctrinal weight falls on holding grace and obedient faith together, against both legalism and antinomianism.

Yet aim at the heart. This chapter calls students to rest in the grace of Christ rather than the exhausting effort to earn acceptance, to guard against legalism and the binding of human rules, to let grace produce glad obedience rather than license, and to pursue both truth and unity in the church. Help them lay down the heavy yoke and walk in the freedom of grace expressed through obedient faith.

Question 1

Student Question:

The men from Judea insisted that unless the Gentiles were circumcised and kept the law of Moses, they could not be saved (vv. 1, 5). Why is adding such human or legal requirements to the gospel so dangerous, and what does it do to the message of grace?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The teaching that troubled the church struck at the very heart of the gospel. By insisting that faith in Christ must be supplemented with circumcision and law-keeping to be saved, these teachers were making salvation depend on human works rather than on the grace of Christ. This was not a minor adjustment; it was a different gospel.

Adding requirements to the gospel is dangerous because it changes the basis of salvation. If we must earn our standing with God by law-keeping or human rules, then salvation is no longer by grace but by works, and Christ's death becomes insufficient. Paul fought this battle fiercely in Galatians: if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose (Galatians 2:21), and those who seek to be justified by law have fallen from grace (Galatians 5:4).

This kind of teaching also enslaves and divides. It places people under a burden they cannot bear, robs them of assurance, and creates a hierarchy of those who keep the rules and those who do not. It exchanges the freedom of the gospel for the bondage of legalism.

Help students see what is at stake. The gospel is good news precisely because salvation rests on Christ's finished work received by faith, not on our performance. To add human requirements as conditions of salvation is to undermine grace and to put people back under a yoke Christ came to lift. The church must guard the gospel of grace against every such addition.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Adding requirements to the gospel as a different gospel (Galatians 1:6-9)
- Salvation by grace through faith, not by law-keeping or human rules
- Christ's death rendered pointless if righteousness comes by law (Galatians 2:21)
- Legalism enslaving, robbing assurance, and dividing
- The church's duty to guard the gospel of grace

Discussion Prompts

- Why is adding requirements to the gospel so dangerous?
- What does legalism do to the message of grace?
- Where do you see the tendency to add human requirements to the gospel today?

Question 2

Student Question:

The teaching that troubled the church added human rules as conditions of acceptance with God (vv. 1, 5). Where do you notice legalistic tendencies in your own heart, adding extra requirements, judging others by rules God did not give, or measuring acceptance by performance? How does grace confront this?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Legalism is not just an ancient error; it lives in every religious heart. We are prone to add our own requirements, to judge others by rules God never gave, and to measure acceptance, ours and others', by performance rather than grace.

Invite honest reflection. Where do I add extra requirements to the faith, making my preferences or traditions into tests of fellowship? Where do I judge other believers by standards God did not

set? Where do I measure my own standing with God by how well I have performed rather than by His grace? Legalism is subtle and self-righteous, and it creeps in easily.

Grace confronts legalism at its root. The gospel declares that we are accepted not because we have kept the rules but because of Christ. This humbles us, for we are saved sinners, not rule-keeping achievers, and it frees us from measuring ourselves and others by performance. Grace levels the ground at the foot of the cross.

Encourage students to let grace reshape their hearts. Where I have been legalistic, judging others or driving myself by performance, grace calls me to repent, to extend to others the grace I have received, and to rest my acceptance on Christ alone. A heart gripped by grace becomes humble toward itself and generous toward others.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Legalism as a tendency of every religious heart
- Adding human requirements and judging by rules God did not give
- Measuring acceptance by performance rather than grace
- Grace humbling us and freeing us from performance-based standing

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you notice legalistic tendencies in your own heart?
- Do you judge others or yourself by rules God did not give?
- How does grace confront and free you from legalism?

Question 3

Student Question:

Peter testified that God cleansed the Gentiles' hearts by faith and declared, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will (vv. 8-11). What does this teach about the basis of salvation, and why is it good news that we are saved by grace rather than by the law?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Peter's testimony goes to the heart of the matter. God gave the Gentiles the Holy Spirit and cleansed their hearts by faith, making no distinction between them and Jewish believers. And Peter states the basis of salvation plainly: we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will. Jew and Gentile alike are saved the same way, by grace.

This teaches that salvation rests on God's grace, not on the law. Grace is God's unmerited favor, His saving kindness shown to us in Christ, who lived, died, and rose for our salvation. We are saved not because we have earned it by keeping the law, but because God has freely given His

Son for us. As Paul writes, by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Why is this good news? Because no one can be saved by the law. Peter calls the law a yoke that neither we nor our fathers were able to bear. If salvation depended on perfect law-keeping, all would be lost, for all have sinned (Romans 3:23). Grace is good news precisely because it offers salvation to those who could never earn it.

Help students rest in this truth. Our salvation does not hang on our own flawless performance, which would leave us forever insecure, but on the grace of the Lord Jesus, which is sure. This is the bedrock of assurance and gratitude: we are saved by His grace, freely given, and received by faith.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Salvation through the grace of the Lord Jesus (v. 11)
- God cleansing hearts by faith, making no distinction (vv. 8-9)
- Grace as God's unmerited saving favor in Christ (Ephesians 2:8-9)
- The law unable to save, a yoke none could bear (v. 10; Romans 3:23)
- Grace as the bedrock of assurance and gratitude

Discussion Prompts

- What is the basis of salvation according to Peter?
- Why can no one be saved by keeping the law?
- Why is salvation by grace good news?

Question 4

Student Question:

Peter described the law as a yoke neither they nor their fathers could bear (v. 10). Do you ever try to earn God's acceptance by your own effort and performance, carrying a burden grace was meant to lift? What would it look like to rest more fully in the grace of the Lord Jesus?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Peter's image of an unbearable yoke describes the exhausting effort to earn God's acceptance by our own performance. Many believers carry this burden without realizing it, striving to be good enough, anxious that they never quite measure up, relating to God as a demanding taskmaster rather than a gracious Father.

Invite honest reflection. Do I carry the yoke of performance? Do I feel I must earn God's acceptance by my efforts, and feel condemned when I fall short? Do I relate to God on the basis of grace or of my own measuring up? This burden is heavy, and grace was meant to lift it.

Resting in grace does not mean ceasing to obey or care about holiness; it means grounding our acceptance in Christ rather than in our performance. We obey from a settled place of being loved and accepted, not in a desperate effort to win love we already have. Jesus invites the weary to come to Him and find rest, for His yoke is easy and His burden is light (Matthew 11:28-30).

Encourage students to lay down the heavy yoke. What would it feel like to rest my acceptance fully on the grace of the Lord Jesus, to stop striving to earn what He has freely given? This is the freedom of the gospel: not the freedom to do as we please, but the freedom from the crushing weight of earning our salvation. We are accepted in Christ; from that rest, we serve Him with joy.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The unbearable yoke of earning acceptance by performance
- Grounding acceptance in Christ rather than our measuring up
- Obedience flowing from rest, not desperate striving
- The easy yoke and light burden of Christ (Matthew 11:28-30)

Discussion Prompts

- Do you carry the burden of trying to earn God's acceptance?
- How does that burden show up in the way you relate to God?
- What would it look like to rest more fully in grace?

Question 5

Student Question:

Peter said God cleansed the Gentiles' hearts by faith (v. 9), and yet throughout Acts that faith expresses itself in repentance, confession, and baptism into Christ. How do we hold together salvation by grace through faith and the obedient response that faith makes, without falling into either legalism or a faith that stops short of obedience?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question addresses the careful balance the church must always maintain, and it deserves clear teaching. The Jerusalem Council defended salvation by grace through faith against legalism. But we must not overcorrect into the opposite error, a faith only message that strips away the obedient response faith makes. Both errors miss the truth.

On one side stands legalism, the error the council condemned: the idea that we are saved by keeping the law, by works we perform to earn God's favor, by human requirements added to the gospel. This makes salvation a wage we earn and empties grace of its meaning. Against this,

we affirm with Peter that we are saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus, His cleansing our hearts by faith, not by works of law.

On the other side stands a faith that stops short of obedience, the idea that mere mental assent saves apart from any response, that one can be saved by faith only with no need to repent, confess Christ, or be baptized. But this is not the faith Acts describes. The same Peter who says God cleansed their hearts by faith had told the crowd at Pentecost to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins (Acts 2:38). Saving faith is never bare belief; it is a living, obedient faith that responds to the gospel. As James says, faith without works is dead, and faith is completed by works (James 2:17, 22).

How do we hold these together? By seeing that grace and obedient faith are not opposites but partners. Salvation is entirely a gift of grace; we cannot earn it, and the obedient response of faith, including baptism, is not a meritorious work that earns salvation but the God-appointed way faith reaches out and receives the gift. When the penitent believer is baptized into Christ, he is not earning salvation; he is, by faith, receiving the grace God freely offers. Baptism is an expression of faith, not a work of law (Colossians 2:11-12, where it is contrasted with circumcision and tied to faith in the working of God).

Help students walk this line carefully, as the church always has. We reject legalism: we are saved by grace, not by law-keeping or human rules. And we reject a faith that stops short of obedience: saving faith repents, confesses Christ, and is baptized into Him, then lives faithfully. The gospel of grace and the obedience of faith belong together. We are saved by grace, through an obedient faith, to the glory of God alone.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Salvation by grace through faith, not by works of law (vv. 9-11)
- The rejection of legalism, which makes salvation a wage earned
- The rejection of bare faith that stops short of obedience
- Saving faith as a living, obedient faith (James 2:17, 22)
- Baptism as an expression of faith receiving grace, not a work of law (Colossians 2:11-12)
- Grace and obedient faith as partners, not opposites

Discussion Prompts

- What two errors must we avoid regarding faith and works?
- How is the obedient response of faith different from earning salvation by law?
- How do grace and obedient faith belong together?

Question 6

Student Question:

Grace is not a license to sin; the council still asked the Gentile believers to abstain from idolatry and sexual immorality (vv. 20, 29). How does genuine grace produce glad obedience rather than careless living, and where is grace calling you to greater holiness rather than license?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Having freed the Gentiles from the law of Moses as a means of salvation, the council did not leave them without moral direction. The letter asked them to abstain from idolatry, sexual immorality, and certain practices. Grace does not abolish holiness; it produces it. Freedom from the law as a way of salvation is not freedom to sin.

This corrects a misunderstanding of grace. Some imagine that if we are saved by grace and not by works, then how we live does not matter. Paul confronted this directly: are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! (Romans 6:1-2). Grace teaches us to renounce ungodliness and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives (Titus 2:11-12).

Genuine grace produces glad obedience. When we grasp how freely and dearly we have been saved, the response is not careless living but grateful devotion. We obey not to earn salvation but because we have been saved, not from fear but from love. The grace that saves also transforms, making us eager to please the One who redeemed us.

Invite students to consider where grace is calling them to greater holiness. Are there areas where I have presumed on grace, treating it as permission to sin? Genuine grace never leaves us where it found us; it calls us upward into holiness. Encourage one specific area where grace, rightly understood, calls them not to license but to glad, grateful obedience.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Grace producing holiness, not license (vv. 20, 29)
- Freedom from the law not being freedom to sin (Romans 6:1-2)
- Grace training us to live godly lives (Titus 2:11-12)
- Obedience flowing from gratitude and love, not fear

Discussion Prompts

- How does genuine grace produce obedience rather than careless living?
- Where might you be tempted to treat grace as permission to sin?
- Where is grace calling you to greater holiness?

Question 7

Student Question:

The council resolved this serious dispute through the testimony of witnesses, the Scriptures, and the consensus of the apostles and elders, concluding it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us (vv. 6-29). What does this teach about how the church should handle doctrinal disagreements?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The way the council resolved this dispute is a model worth studying. They did not split in anger or decide by mere majority feeling. They gathered the responsible leaders, listened to testimony of what God had done, appealed to the Scriptures (James cited the prophets), reasoned together, and reached a consensus they could describe as it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.

This teaches several things about handling doctrinal disagreements. First, serious questions deserve serious, prayerful attention, not hasty division. Second, the Scriptures are the final authority; James settled the matter by appealing to what God had revealed in the prophets. Third, the testimony of God's evident work and the wisdom of godly leaders have their place. Fourth, the goal is a unity grounded in truth, not compromise that abandons it.

For us today, doctrinal questions are settled supremely by the completed Scriptures, our final authority (2 Timothy 3:16-17). We do not have new revelation as the apostles did, but we have the same approach: bring the question to God's word, reason together humbly, seek the counsel of godly leaders, and pursue a unity that rests on truth.

Help students apply this. When disagreements arise, the temptation is to divide quickly, dig into positions, or decide by personality and power. The council shows a better way: humble, prayerful, Scripture-anchored deliberation that seeks both truth and unity. The church is strongest when it handles its disagreements this way.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Serious doctrinal questions deserving prayerful, careful attention
- Scripture as the final authority in settling disputes (2 Timothy 3:16-17)
- The testimony of God's work and counsel of godly leaders
- Unity grounded in truth rather than compromise
- Humble deliberation seeking both truth and unity

Discussion Prompts

- How did the council resolve this serious dispute?
- What is the final authority for settling doctrinal questions today?
- How should the church handle disagreements in a way that seeks both truth and unity?

Question 8

Student Question:

The council pursued both truth and unity, refusing to compromise the gospel while working to keep the church together (vv. 22-31). When you face disagreements in the church or in

relationships, do you tend to sacrifice truth for peace, or peace for truth? How can you pursue both as the council did?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The council achieved something difficult: it defended the truth of the gospel without needlessly fracturing the church, and it pursued unity without compromising the truth. Holding both together is one of the hardest and most important tasks in the Christian life.

Invite honest reflection. In disagreements, which way do I tend to fall? Some of us sacrifice truth for the sake of peace, avoiding conflict, going along, refusing to take a stand even when truth requires it. Others sacrifice peace for the sake of truth, being right in a way that is harsh, divisive, and loveless. Both are failures.

The biblical goal is to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), holding firmly to what is true while pursuing peace and unity as far as it depends on us (Romans 12:18). Truth without love becomes harsh and divisive; love without truth becomes weak and compromising. The council shows us both held together.

Encourage students to grow in this balance. In a current disagreement, am I tempted to compromise truth to keep peace, or to wound peace in defending truth? The mature path holds firmly to truth while working humbly and lovingly for unity, refusing to sacrifice either. This is the way of the council, and the way of Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Holding truth and unity together
- Speaking the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15)
- Pursuing peace as far as it depends on us (Romans 12:18)
- Avoiding both compromising truth and wounding peace

Discussion Prompts

- In disagreements, do you tend to sacrifice truth for peace or peace for truth?
- What does it look like to speak the truth in love?
- How can you pursue both truth and unity in a current disagreement?

Question 9

Student Question:

The whole council came down to one great truth: Gentiles and Jews alike are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, not by keeping the law of Moses (vv. 9-11, 19). Summarizing the gospel this chapter defends, how are we saved, and how does this protect us from both the error of earning salvation and the error of a faith that never obeys?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, and it gathers the whole chapter into a clear statement of the gospel of grace, carefully balanced. The council settled that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, the same for Jew and Gentile, and not by keeping the law of Moses. This single truth, rightly held, protects us from two opposite and deadly errors.

The first error is salvation by works, the idea that we earn our standing with God by law-keeping, religious performance, or human requirements. This was the error of the men from Judea, and the council rejected it. We are not saved by our works, our circumcision, our law-keeping, or our merit. Salvation is the gift of God's grace, purchased by Christ's blood, which no one can earn. By works of the law no one will be justified (Galatians 2:16). To trust in our own performance is to fall from grace (Galatians 5:4).

The second error, equally dangerous, is a faith that never obeys, the idea that we are saved by faith only, a bare belief that requires no repentance, no confession, no baptism, no faithful life. This is not the gospel either. The same Scriptures that exclude salvation by works of law everywhere call for the obedience of faith. Faith without works is dead (James 2:26). Jesus said not everyone who says Lord, Lord will enter, but the one who does the will of the Father (Matthew 7:21). The faith that saves is the faith that obeys the gospel, repenting, confessing Christ, being baptized into Him, and living faithfully.

So how are we saved? By the grace of God, through an obedient faith, on account of the blood of Christ, to the glory of God alone. Grace is the source: God's unmerited favor. Faith is the means by which we receive it, and that faith is living and obedient, expressed in the response the gospel calls for. Works of merit are excluded, for we cannot earn salvation; but the obedience of faith is required, for true faith always responds. This is the consistent teaching of Scripture, and it is the balance the church must always defend.

Pastorally, this protects the gospel and the soul. It guards us from the bondage and pride of trying to earn salvation, and from the deception of a faith that claims Christ while refusing to obey Him. It humbles us, for we are saved by grace and not by our works; and it summons us, for grace calls forth an obedient, faithful life. Help students hold this gospel with clarity and joy: saved by grace, through an obedient faith, for the glory of the Lord Jesus.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Salvation through the grace of the Lord Jesus, not law-keeping (vv. 9-11)
- The rejection of salvation by works and human merit (Galatians 2:16; 5:4)
- The rejection of a faith only that never obeys (James 2:26; Matthew 7:21)
- Saving faith as a living, obedient faith responding to the gospel
- Grace as the source, obedient faith as the means, Christ's blood as the ground
- The gospel guarding against both legalism and antinomianism

Discussion Prompts

- According to this chapter, how are we saved?
- How does the gospel of grace guard against earning salvation by works?
- How does it also guard against a faith that never obeys?

Question 10

Student Question:

Looking back over this whole chapter, the defense of grace, the danger of legalism, and the pursuit of truth and unity, name one specific way the Lord is calling you to grow, in resting in grace, laying down legalism, or pursuing truth and peace, and what is one step you will take this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone draws the lesson to a personal response. Acts 15 calls us to rest in the grace of Christ, to lay down legalism and the effort to earn acceptance, to let grace produce glad obedience rather than license, and to pursue both truth and unity in the church.

Invite each person to name one concrete step. Perhaps it is to lay down a heavy yoke of performance and rest in grace, to repent of a legalistic or judgmental attitude, to let grace move them toward holiness in some area, or to handle a disagreement with both truth and love.

Keep the focus on the gospel of grace received through obedient faith. The chapter defends the heart of the good news, and the right response is both grateful rest and glad obedience. Transformation flows from a heart that has truly grasped grace.

Close by reminding students that the same grace of the Lord Jesus that saved Jew and Gentile alike is at work in them, lifting the burden of earning acceptance, producing obedience from gratitude, and binding them together in truth and love.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal response to the gospel of grace
- Resting in grace while pursuing obedient holiness
- Laying down legalism and performance
- Pursuing truth and unity together

Discussion Prompts

- What most challenged or moved you in this chapter?
- What specific step toward resting in grace, laying down legalism, or pursuing truth and peace will you take?
- How can this group encourage and pray for you?