

The Book of Acts

Lesson 21: The Jerusalem Council -- Acts 15:1–35

The young church faces its first great doctrinal crisis, and the gospel itself is at stake. Certain men come down from Judea to Antioch and begin teaching the new Gentile believers a chilling message: unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved. In other words, faith in Christ is not enough; you must also take up the law of Moses to be saved. Paul and Barnabas see the danger at once and oppose it sharply, and the church sends them up to Jerusalem to settle the matter with the apostles and elders.

After much debate, Peter stands. He reminds them how God gave the Gentiles the Holy Spirit, just as He did to the Jews, making no distinction, having cleansed their hearts by faith. Then he asks a pointed question: why are you putting God to the test by laying on the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers were able to bear? And he states the heart of the gospel plainly: we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will. Salvation is by grace, not by the law.

Paul and Barnabas tell of the signs God did among the Gentiles, and then James, the Lord's brother, rises to give the verdict. He points to the prophets, who foretold that God would rebuild the fallen tent of David and that the Gentiles would seek the Lord. His judgment is clear: do not trouble the Gentiles by burdening them with the law of Moses. The gospel of grace has been defended. Salvation is not earned by law-keeping; it is received by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus.

But grace is not a license to sin. The council writes a letter, carried by trusted men, asking the Gentile believers to abstain from idolatry, from sexual immorality, and from certain practices that would needlessly divide them from their Jewish brothers and sisters. The letter is read in Antioch, and the church rejoices at its encouragement. A line has been drawn that the church will defend forever: we are saved by the grace of Christ, received through an obedient faith, and not by the works of the law.

Group Discussion: The men from Judea taught that faith in Christ was not enough and that the Gentiles had to keep the law of Moses to be saved (v. 1). Why is adding human requirements to the gospel of grace so dangerous, and where do you see that tendency still at work today?

Personal Reflection: Peter spoke of a yoke that neither they nor their fathers were able to bear (v. 10). Do you ever carry the heavy yoke of trying to earn God's acceptance, rather than resting in His grace? What would it feel like to lay that burden down?

Read Acts 15:1–35

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Galatians 2:15-21, justification through faith in Christ and not by works of the law; Ephesians 2:8-10, saved by grace through faith, created for good works; James 2:14-26, faith without works being dead and completed by works; Titus 2:11-14, grace training us to renounce ungodliness and live godly lives; Romans 6:1-4, grace as no license to sin, but the call to walk in newness of life