

Paul: From Persecutor to Preacher, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 5: Grace, Not Law: The Jerusalem Council

Acts 15:1–21

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson stands on some of the most important ground in the New Testament: the Jerusalem council of about A.D. 49, where the gospel of grace was defended against those who would add law-keeping to it as a requirement for salvation. The historical setting is a genuine crisis. Gentiles were being saved, and a faction insisted they must also be circumcised and keep the law of Moses to be saved. Paul and Barnabas opposed this fiercely, and the matter was brought to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. Peter, then Barnabas and Paul, then James, all testified, and the verdict preserved the gospel: salvation is through the grace of the Lord Jesus, for Jew and Gentile alike, not through the works of the Mosaic law.

Teach the central point with confidence: salvation is by grace, not by law-keeping or human merit. But this lesson must be handled with care, because the same passage is sometimes pressed into a different error, the idea that since we are saved by grace and not by works of the law, then we are saved by 'faith only,' apart from repentance, confession, and baptism. That conclusion does not follow, and the council never drew it. Be precise about what is being rejected. The 'works of the law' in view are circumcision and the keeping of the law of Moses as a means of salvation, along with any attempt to earn salvation by law-keeping so as to boast. What is rejected is human merit, not the obedient response of faith that God Himself commands. Salvation is by grace through a faith that obeys.

This lesson also aims at the heart. Many sincere believers live exhausted under a yoke of performance, secretly fearing that God's love must be earned and kept. Others swing the opposite way and treat grace as permission to live carelessly. Help students find the biblical center: grace that is utterly free, received through an obedient faith, and productive of grateful, faithful living. Press them to examine which error they are prone to, and to rest in the grace of the Lord Jesus. Send them home freed from earning, guarded from cheapening grace, and full of gratitude for a salvation they could never deserve.

Question 1

Student Question:

Certain men taught, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1). What exactly was at stake in this teaching, and why did Paul and Barnabas treat it not as a minor difference but as a threat to the gospel itself?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Identify the precise claim. These teachers did not deny Jesus or reject faith in Him. They simply added a requirement: faith in Christ was not enough; a Gentile must also be circumcised and keep the law of Moses to be saved. It sounded reasonable, even pious, to many. But Paul saw it for what it was, a different gospel that could not save.

Explain why the addition is fatal. If salvation is by grace plus law-keeping, then it is no longer by grace; it has become a wage we partly earn (Romans 11:6). And if our standing depends even partly on our performance, the cross of Christ was not sufficient, and our assurance rests on something we can never complete. Paul understood that 'Christ plus' is really 'Christ minus,' because it dethrones grace.

Show the stakes for the whole church. This was not a debate about customs; it was about whether the gospel that saves the world is the gospel of grace or a gospel of merit. Had the council ruled the other way, the church would have become a sect of law-keeping, and the good news for the nations would have been buried under requirements no one could meet.

Apply it to discernment. The same error returns in many forms whenever people make God's acceptance depend on something they add to Christ. Teaching students to spot 'Jesus plus' thinking equips them to guard the gospel in their own hearts and in the church.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The sufficiency of Christ: 'Jesus plus' is a denial of grace (Galatians 5:2–4)
- Salvation by grace cannot be mixed with salvation by merit (Romans 11:6)
- The gospel of grace as the message that can actually save the nations
- Discerning 'Jesus plus' distortions in every age

Discussion Prompts

- Why is adding a requirement to faith in Christ so dangerous?
- How does 'Christ plus' actually become 'Christ minus'?
- What was at stake for the whole future church in this dispute?

Question 2

Student Question:

It is easy to slip into thinking that God's acceptance depends on our performance, our church attendance, our good record, our religious effort. Where do you catch yourself trying to add your own merit to the finished work of Christ? What would change if you truly rested in grace?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The Judaizers' error lives on in the human heart. We instinctively want to contribute something to our standing with God, to feel we have earned at least part of His favor. Help students notice

the subtle forms this takes: measuring their acceptance by how their devotions went, how religious they have been this week, how they compare to others.

Name the cost of this merit-thinking. It produces either pride (when we think we are doing well) or despair (when we know we are not). Either way, it shifts the foundation of our standing from Christ to ourselves, and that foundation cannot bear the weight.

Move toward resting in grace. Ask students what would actually change, in their peace, their joy, their service, if they truly believed their acceptance rested wholly on Christ and not on their performance. Invite each to name one area where they will deliberately rest in grace this week rather than try to earn.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The instinct to earn God's favor and add to Christ's finished work
- Merit-thinking breeds either pride or despair
- Acceptance grounded in Christ alone, received by grace
- The peace and freedom of resting in grace

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you try to earn what Christ has already given?
- Does your merit-thinking tend toward pride or despair?
- What would change if you rested fully in grace?

Question 3

Student Question:

Peter declared that no one should lay on the disciples a yoke "that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear," but rather, "we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will" (Acts 15:10–11). What does this teach about the way of salvation for both Jew and Gentile, and why is the law unable to do what grace does?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Peter calls the law a yoke no one could bear. This is not a slur against God's good law; it is an honest admission that the law, given to a sinful people, could expose sin and demand righteousness but could not produce it or forgive it. No one, not even the faithful fathers, ever kept it perfectly. To require law-keeping for salvation is to require the impossible.

Notice the leveling truth: "we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." There is one way of salvation for everyone, Jew and Gentile alike, and it is grace. The Jews were not saved by law and the Gentiles by grace; both are saved the same way, by the grace of the Lord Jesus. This unifies the whole people of God under one gospel.

Explain why grace can do what law cannot. The law could say what was right but could not give life (Galatians 3:21). Grace, grounded in the death and resurrection of Christ, actually forgives sin, cleanses the heart, and grants the Spirit. What the law could only demand, grace supplies. This is why the gospel is good news and the yoke of law-salvation is bad news.

Apply it to assurance. Because salvation rests on the grace of the Lord Jesus and not on our flawless obedience, the believer can have real assurance, not based on a perfect record, but on a perfect Savior. This frees us to obey out of love rather than dread.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The law as a yoke no one could bear or be justified by (Acts 15:10; Galatians 3:10–11)
- One way of salvation for all: the grace of the Lord Jesus (Acts 15:11)
- The law could reveal and demand righteousness but not produce or grant it (Galatians 3:21)
- Grace forgives, cleanses, and gives the Spirit, doing what law could not
- Assurance grounded in a perfect Savior, not a perfect record

Discussion Prompts

- In what sense was the law a yoke no one could bear?
- Why is there only one way of salvation for Jew and Gentile?
- What can grace do that the law never could?

Question 4

Student Question:

Living under a system of earning is exhausting; living in grace brings rest. Think honestly about your own heart. Are you serving God out of grateful love, or out of fear that you must keep Him pleased? Name one place where you most need to trade the yoke of performance for the rest of grace.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question lets students feel the weight of the yoke Peter described. Many serve God faithfully on the outside while inwardly exhausted, driven by a low-grade fear that they are never quite doing enough. The gospel offers a different motive altogether: grateful love in response to grace already given.

Help students discern their true motive. Service done to earn God's favor breeds anxiety, comparison, and burnout. Service done in response to grace breeds joy, freedom, and endurance. The same activity can flow from opposite springs; the question is which spring is feeding it.

Move toward rest. Invite each student to name one area, a ministry, a discipline, a relationship, where they have been performing for God rather than resting in Him, and to consciously receive His grace there this week. Obedience does not disappear; it changes from a payment into a thank-you.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The exhaustion of performance-based religion versus the rest of grace
- Grateful love as the gospel's motive for obedience (2 Corinthians 5:14–15)
- Discerning whether service flows from fear or from grace
- Obedience as a response of gratitude, not a payment for favor

Discussion Prompts

- Do you serve God from grateful love or from fear?
- What does performance-driven religion do to your heart over time?
- Where do you most need to trade performance for rest?

Question 5

Student Question:

At the council, the “works of the law” being rejected were circumcision and the keeping of the law of Moses as a means of being saved (Acts 15:1, 5). Why can no amount of law-keeping or human merit justify a sinner before God, and how is this different from the obedient response of faith that God Himself calls for in the gospel?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question requires careful definition, and it sets up the heaviest block at Question 9. First, be clear about what the council rejected. The ‘works of the law’ in dispute were specifically circumcision and the law of Moses, urged as necessary for salvation. More broadly, Paul rejects any attempt to be justified by our own law-keeping or merit, the kind of obedience by which a person could earn a standing and boast before God (Romans 3:27–28; Ephesians 2:8–9).

Explain why such merit can never justify. Every person has already sinned, so no future obedience can erase the debt already owed; the law condemns the lawbreaker rather than rescuing him (Romans 3:20). Justification by works would require a flawless record no sinner possesses. This is why the door of merit is permanently closed, and why grace is our only hope.

Now draw the crucial distinction. Rejecting ‘works of the law’ as a means of earning salvation is not the same as rejecting all obedience. The obedient response God calls for in the gospel, believing in Jesus, repenting of sin, confessing Him as Lord, being baptized into Christ, is not an attempt to earn or to boast; it is the empty-handed way a sinner receives the free gift. Faith reaches out and takes hold of grace; it does not purchase it.

Use a simple contrast. A drowning man who grabs the rope thrown to him is saved by the rescuer, not by his grabbing; yet he must grab the rope. Repentance and baptism are not wages we earn but the God-appointed way we lay hold of the salvation Christ freely offers. So the council rules out merit without ruling out the obedience of faith. Keep that line bright, because confusing the two leads to the opposite errors of legalism on one side and 'faith only' on the other.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The 'works of the law' rejected are circumcision and Mosaic law-keeping as a means of salvation
- No human merit can justify, because all have already sinned (Romans 3:20)
- Justification excludes boasting, not the obedient response of faith (Romans 3:27–28)
- Faith, repentance, confession, and baptism receive grace; they do not earn it
- The bright line between earning salvation and receiving it on God's terms

Discussion Prompts

- What specifically were the 'works of the law' the council rejected?
- Why can no amount of obedience erase a debt already owed?
- How is receiving grace by an obedient faith different from earning it?

Question 6

Student Question:

Grace can be twisted in two opposite directions: into legalism (earning salvation by rule-keeping) or into license (treating grace as permission to sin). Which of these two errors are you personally more prone to, and how does a right understanding of grace correct it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question names the two ditches on either side of the gospel road. The Judaizers fell into legalism; others in the early church fell into license, treating freedom as a cover-up for evil (1 Peter 2:16; Jude 4). Both distort grace, and most of us lean toward one or the other.

Help students diagnose their bent. The legalist needs to hear that acceptance is a free gift, not a wage, and to stop trying to earn what Christ has given. The one prone to license needs to hear that grace teaches us "to renounce ungodliness" and to live self-controlled, upright lives (Titus 2:11–12); grace is not permission to sin but power to stop.

Show that the same gospel corrects both. A right understanding of grace humbles the legalist (you cannot earn it) and sobers the libertine (it cost the blood of Christ and it changes how you

live). Invite each student to name their tendency and one way the truth of grace addresses it this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The two distortions of grace: legalism and license
- Grace as a free gift that humbles the legalist (Romans 11:6)
- Grace as transforming power that corrects the libertine (Titus 2:11–12)
- Freedom in Christ is never a cover for sin (1 Peter 2:16)

Discussion Prompts

- Which error are you more prone to, legalism or license?
- How does grace humble the one trying to earn it?
- How does grace confront the one who abuses it?

Question 7

Student Question:

When the dispute threatened to divide the church, the believers did not settle it by majority opinion or by the loudest voice; they searched the Scriptures and submitted to apostolic teaching, as James did in citing the prophets (Acts 15:13–18). What does this teach about how the Lord's church should resolve doctrinal questions?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Notice the method of the council. There was real debate, but the question was finally settled not by counting votes or by the force of personality, but by appeal to God's revealed will, the testimony of the apostles to what God had done, and the witness of the Scriptures (James quotes Amos). The standard was the word of God, not human preference.

Teach that this is the pattern for the church in every age. Doctrinal questions are not to be decided by what is popular, what feels right, or what the culture prefers, but by what God has said. For us, that means the completed New Testament, the inspired apostolic teaching, is the authority to which all questions are submitted.

Highlight the place of godly process. There was open discussion, the hearing of evidence, and respected leaders speaking in turn, all under the authority of Scripture. The church is not a place where truth is invented; it is a place where revealed truth is recognized and obeyed together.

Apply it to congregational life. When disagreements arise, the right instinct is to ask, 'What does the Scripture say?' rather than 'What do I prefer?' or 'Who has the most influence?' This protects both the truth and the unity of the church.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Doctrinal questions settled by God's revealed word, not opinion or personality
- The authority of apostolic teaching, now the completed New Testament
- Godly process: open discussion under the authority of Scripture
- The church recognizes and obeys revealed truth rather than inventing it

Discussion Prompts

- How did the council actually settle the dispute?
- What is the final authority for resolving doctrinal questions?
- How should we respond when our preference conflicts with Scripture?

Question 8

Student Question:

Doctrinal disagreements still arise among God's people. When you face them, do you tend toward stubborn pride, conflict-avoiding silence, or humble submission to Scripture? How can you contend for the truth, as Paul did, while still pursuing the unity and peace of the church?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the council's example into the student's own conduct. Paul shows that contending earnestly for the truth and seeking the peace of the church are not opposites; he fought hard for the gospel and then helped preserve the fellowship of Jew and Gentile believers. Help students hold both together.

Name the common failures. Some defend their views with a pride that wounds and divides; others avoid every hard conversation in the name of peace, letting error go unaddressed. Neither is faithful. The goal is to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), with conviction and humility together.

Move toward a wiser pattern. Encourage students to submit their own opinions to Scripture first, to engage disagreement with humility and patience, and to distinguish matters worth contending for from matters of preference. Ask each to consider one relationship or setting where they need either more courage or more gentleness.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Contending for the truth and pursuing unity are not opposites
- Speaking the truth in love, with conviction and humility (Ephesians 4:15)
- Avoiding both wounding pride and cowardly silence
- Submitting personal opinion to Scripture before engaging others

Discussion Prompts

- How do you usually handle doctrinal disagreement?

- How can you contend for truth without harming unity?
- Where do you need more courage, and where more gentleness?

Question 9

Student Question:

The heart of the council's decision is that we are "saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 15:11), not by the works of the law. Yet the same Scriptures that exclude law-keeping and human boasting never present a bare "faith only" that omits repentance, confession, and baptism. How do we hold these together rightly, affirming that salvation is entirely by grace through faith, while also confessing that saving faith is an obedient faith that responds to Christ on His terms?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal summit of the lesson, and it must be taught with both clarity and balance. Begin by affirming the council's great truth without reservation: salvation is by the grace of the Lord Jesus, not by the works of the law. No one is justified by circumcision, by keeping the law of Moses, or by accumulating enough good deeds to earn God's favor. Grace is free, and human merit is excluded so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:8–9).

Now guard against the opposite error. Some take this truth and conclude that we are therefore saved by 'faith only,' a faith that needs only to believe and may omit repentance, confession, and baptism. But the New Testament never draws that conclusion. The only place the phrase 'faith alone' appears in Scripture, it is denied: "a person is justified by works and not by faith alone" (James 2:24), where James means that genuine faith is never the barren, do-nothing kind. Saving faith is living and active; it obeys.

Show how grace and obedient faith fit together. We saw it in Paul's own conversion: saved by grace, yet told to "rise and be baptized and wash away your sins" (Acts 22:16). We hear it from Peter at Pentecost: "repent and be baptized . . . for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). Paul teaches that we are "baptized into Christ Jesus" and into His death (Romans 6:3–4), and that all who were baptized into Christ have "put on Christ" (Galatians 3:26–27). None of these are works of the law by which we boast; they are the God-appointed, empty-handed way a believing, repentant sinner receives the free gift of grace.

Make the distinction explicit, because everything hinges on it. The 'works' excluded are works of human merit, by which a person tries to earn or to boast. The obedience included is the response of faith, by which a person receives what they could never earn. To confuse the two is to fall into one of two ditches: either adding merit to the gospel (the Judaizers' legalism) or subtracting obedience from faith (the 'faith only' error). The biblical center is grace, received through a faith that hears, believes, repents, confesses, and is baptized into Christ, and then lives faithfully.

Land it pastorally. The point is not to turn grace into a checklist, but to tell people the truth: God's salvation is a gift you cannot earn and dare not cheapen. Help students rest fully in grace while coming to Christ exactly as Scripture directs, and living out of grateful obedience thereafter. This honors the council's verdict and the whole counsel of God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Salvation is entirely by the grace of the Lord Jesus, not by works of the law (Acts 15:11)
- Human merit and boasting are excluded (Ephesians 2:8–9)
- Scripture denies salvation by 'faith alone' in the sense of barren faith (James 2:24)
- Saving faith is an obedient faith: hearing, believing, repenting, confessing, being baptized (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27)
- Baptism and repentance receive grace; they are not meritorious works of the law
- The biblical center between legalism and 'faith only'

Discussion Prompts

- What does the council rule out, and what does it not rule out?
- How does James 2:24 guard us against a bare 'faith only'?
- How can baptism be essential without being a meritorious work that earns salvation?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole council, the dangerous addition to the gospel, the yoke no one could bear, and the verdict that we are saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus. Name one specific way you sense Jesus using this account to form you, whether to free you from earning, to guard you from cheapening grace, or to deepen your gratitude for a salvation you could never deserve.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the lesson into a personal response. The threads are clear: the sufficiency of grace, the freedom from a yoke we could never bear, and the call to hold grace rightly, neither earning it nor abusing it. Ask students to name one concrete way the Lord has met them.

Offer the three doors. Some need to be freed from the exhausting effort to earn what is already given. Some need to be guarded from a casual grace that excuses sin. Some simply need their gratitude deepened, marveling that they are saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus and not by anything in themselves.

Close with worship. The council preserved the gospel that saves the world, including the people in your class. Send them home resting in grace, living in glad obedience, and grateful beyond words for a salvation they could never have deserved or earned.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Freedom from earning what grace freely gives
- A reverent guard against cheapening grace
- Deepened gratitude for undeserved salvation
- Glad obedience flowing from grace received

Discussion Prompts

- Which door does this lesson open for you: freedom, guarding, or gratitude?
- What one change will you carry into this week?
- How does resting in grace reshape the way you obey?