

Paul: From Persecutor to Preacher

Lesson 5: Grace, Not Law: The Jerusalem Council -- Acts 15:1–21

The young church had a crisis on its hands, and it struck at the very heart of the gospel. The mission to the Gentiles was bearing fruit; Gentiles were turning to Christ in growing numbers. But then certain men came down from Judea to Antioch with a message that landed like a thrown stone: “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” In other words, faith in Jesus was not enough. To be saved, a Gentile would have to become, in effect, a law-keeping Jew first. The grace of God in Christ would be just the beginning; the rest you would have to add yourself.

Paul and Barnabas would have none of it. Luke says they had “no small dissension and debate” with these men. This was not a quarrel over preferences; it was a fight for the gospel itself. If a person must be saved by grace plus law-keeping, then it is not really grace at all, and the cross of Christ is not really enough. So the church wisely sent Paul, Barnabas, and others up to Jerusalem to lay the matter before the apostles and elders. The future of the gospel for every Gentile believer, including most of us, hung on the answer.

After much debate, Peter stood up and cut to the core. God had already shown His hand, he said, by giving the Holy Spirit to believing Gentiles and cleansing their hearts by faith, making no distinction between them and the Jews. Why, then, would anyone lay on these disciples a yoke “that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear”? And then came the sentence that settles everything: “We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” Salvation, for Jew and Gentile alike, is through the grace of the Lord Jesus, not through the law of Moses.

Barnabas and Paul told of all God had done among the Gentiles, and James, citing the prophets, brought the verdict: do not trouble these Gentiles who are turning to God. The gospel of grace had been defended and preserved. This lesson stands on holy ground, because what was decided here is the difference between a gospel that can save and a counterfeit that cannot. We will work to understand exactly what was rejected and what was upheld, so that we hold the grace of God neither as a license to sin nor as a wage we must earn.

Group Discussion: The men from Judea did not deny Jesus; they simply added a requirement: faith in Christ plus circumcision and law-keeping (Acts 15:1). Why is “Jesus plus something I must add” such a deadly distortion of the gospel? What kinds of “plus” requirements do people still attach to the grace of God today?

Personal Reflection: Peter described the law as a yoke “that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear” (Acts 15:10). Many of us still try to earn God’s acceptance by our performance and end up exhausted under that yoke. Where in your walk with God are you living as if His love had to be earned rather than received by grace?

Read Acts 15:1–21

Study Questions

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

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Galatians 2:15–16, justified not by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ; Galatians 5:1–6, the yoke of slavery versus faith working through love; Ephesians 2:8–10, saved by grace through faith, created for good works; Titus 3:4–7, saved not by works of righteousness but by His mercy through the washing of regeneration; Romans 3:27–31, boasting excluded, yet the law upheld