

## What is Required for Salvation?

Lesson for November 5, 2023

### Unit III: Christ Frees, Law Enslaves

**Adult Topic:** Enlarging Our Vision

**Background Scripture:** Acts 15:1-21

**Printed Text:** Acts 15:1-11

**Key verse:** “<sup>8</sup> God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. <sup>9</sup> He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.” (Acts 15:8-9, NIV)

When a young pastor was a youth worker many years ago in an ethnic community, he attended a church that had Scandinavian roots. Being a rather forward-looking and creative young man, he decided he would show the youth group a missionary film. We're talking simple, safe, black-and-white religious- oriented movie. That film projector hadn't been off an hour before a group of the leaders in the church called him in and asked him about what he had done. They asked, "Did you show the young people a film?" In all honesty he responded, "Well, yeah, I did." "We don't like that," they replied. Without trying to be argumentative, the youth worker reasoned, "Well, I remember that at the last missionary conference, our church showed slides--"

One of the church officers put his hand up signaling him to cease talking. Then, in these words, he emphatically explained the conflict: "If it's still, it's fine. If it moves, it's sin!" You can show slides, but when they start movin', you're gettin' into sin.

C. Swindoll, *The Grace Awakening*, Word, 1990,

In this week's lesson we find, like this illustration that "Some laws become obsolete and, like scaffolds, no longer serve the purpose for which they were originally designed" (*Unifying Principle*, Sunday School Commentary. Townsend Press, 2023).

### Key Terms

1. **Circumcised** (verse 1) – Cutting around. This rite, practiced before, as some think, by divers races, was appointed by God to be the special badge of his chosen people, an abiding sign of their consecration to him. It was established as a national ordinance (Genesis 17:10-11). During the journey through the wilderness, the practice of circumcision fell into disuse, but was resumed by the command of Joshua before they entered the Promised Land (Josua 5:2-9). It was always observed afterwards among the tribes of Israel, although it is not expressly mentioned from the time of the settlement in Canaan till the time of Christ, about 1,450 years. As a rite of the church, it ceased when the New Testament times began Ga 6:15; Col 3:11 Some Jewish Christians sought to impose it, however, on the Gentile converts; but this the apostles resolutely resisted (Acts 15:1; Galatians 6:12)

It was a sign and seal of the covenant of grace as well as of the national covenant between God and the Hebrews. (1.) It sealed the promises made to Abraham, which related to the commonwealth of Israel, national promises. (2.) But the promises made to Abraham included the promise of redemption (Galatians 3:14) a promise which has come upon us. The covenant with Abraham was a specific form of the covenant of grace, and circumcision was a sign and seal of that covenant. It had a spiritual meaning. It signified purification of the heart, inward circumcision effected by the Spirit (Deuteronomy 10:16, 30:6; Ezekiel 44:7; Acts 7:51; Romans 2:28; Colossians 2:11)

- 2. Purified** (verse 9) – Having been washed and made pure or clean again. In biblical usage the term "purification" refers to a certain rite in the external worship of God. Purification seeks to remove legal uncleanness so that the purified individual may resume normal activity in society. When humanity fell into sin, it tainted everything about us. We were unable to do anything to make ourselves pure or clean again. We needed someone far greater than we were in order to be purified of our sin.

Having been washed and made pure in Christ, however, we are clean. We do not need to be purified ever again as long as we believe that Jesus has done this already for us.

- 3. Test** (verse 10) – The Hebrew word translated as “test” in the Old Testament is *bachan*. It means to “examine, investigate, prove, scrutinize.” “Fire tests the purity of silver and gold, but the LORD tests the heart” (Proverbs 17:3, NLT).

## Lesson Background

After Peter’s experience with Cornelius and members of his household, Paul and Barnabas spent approximately three years traveling through the region of Galatia, establishing congregations comprised of both Jews and Gentiles (Acts 13-14). As a result of the first missionary journey, Gentiles had come to faith in large numbers. Believing that the physical rite of circumcision was superseded by the more important requirement of circumcision of the heart (Jeremiah 4:4; Romans 2:29), Paul and Barnabas did not require Gentile males to be circumcised. They taught that the physical rite of circumcision had been replaced by a far more demanding spiritual act—the removing of the nature that resists God’s way of life within every human heart (Romans 8:7).

While unbelieving Jews resisted the preaching of the gospel to Gentiles, some Jewish believers (known as Judaizers) were insisting that Gentile converts must be circumcised and keep the Old Testament Law of Moses. Gentile converts were truly grateful to be included in the salvation God brought about through the Jews. To some, grateful Gentile converts submitting to circumcision and to law keeping might not appear to be such a huge concession. But they did not understand the implications of circumcision. Paul did, and he, along with Barnabas, strongly opposed the teaching of these Judaizers – those who believed that Gentiles must enter into the faith by converting to Judaism. This issue stirs up enough controversy that the leaders of the church gather in Jerusalem to settle it. The first church council was called. This decision is a watershed event, not only in the Book of Acts, but in the history of the church.

## Lesson in Depth

### I. Conflict: Pro-circumcision Advocates (Acts 15:1-2)

After Paul and Barnabas returned from their first missionary journey and reported God's work through them to the church, some Jewish Christians came to Antioch, protested, and insisted that to be saved a person must believe in Jesus and also obey the ceremonial laws that God gave Moses. In other words, for a man to be saved he must be circumcised; for men and women to be saved they must first adopt (or also adopt after believing in Jesus) the teachings and practices in the law of Moses. They taught that to be saved a person must also become like the Jews in practice, which included keeping all of the Jewish food laws (keeping kosher).

**Teaching the brethren** who were new Gentile believers in Jesus Christ – look at the opportunity in the church for people to teach – you don't overreact to this by setting up all types of hurdles and obstacles so that only the Senior Pastor can teach and control all of the doctrine in the church – that is not how you respond to this problem – you deal with the false teaching when it crops up. Not surprising that things should come to such a head, given what we have been learning about the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas. God had “opened a door of faith to the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27) and they were pouring into the church at rates that were now becoming disproportionate to the new Jewish converts. What had begun as a trickle with the Ethiopian eunuch and then the house of Cornelius in Acts 10 was now becoming a flood – should have been an occasion for great joy – it was something that God was accomplishing -- not anything that Paul and Barnabas could bring about. Imagine the impact on these new converts – What do you mean that I am not really saved yet? Their joy was now replaced by doubt and confusion. That is always the effect of Legalism – it is the ultimate **Joy Killer**.

The issue at hand was the very gospel message itself – Paul and Barnabas had not been advocating circumcision for these Gentiles. They were not trying to make Jewish proselytes as if Christianity was just the final appendage to the overall Jewish system. They recognized the major new initiative that had begun at Pentecost: the Messiah had arrived and was now building His church: *“For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.”* (John 1:17)

**Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them:** Their first response was to persuade. We can imagine there was **no small dissension and dispute with them** indeed. These two who saw God work so powerfully through the Gentiles would not abandon that work easily.

In this, Paul and Barnabas showed the hearts of true shepherds: To confront and dispute with those who insist on promoting false doctrines in the church.

**They determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem:** When persuasion did not end the issue, Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem to have the matter settled by **the apostles and elders**. They couldn't just agree to disagree on this issue, because it was at the core of what meant to be a follower of Jesus.

## II. Paul and Barnabas Celebrate the Work (Acts 15:3-5)

Responsible to discern the will of God and encourage gifted leaders to take initiative in going out to accomplish God's work; the vision of individuals (sensing what God has called them to do) should mesh with the wisdom of the church in recognizing and encouraging and supporting that call. A church that never sends anyone out and is only concerned with its own internal growth is not accomplishing all of its mission for Christ.

Being "**sent on their way**" involves commitment, fellowship, and financial support as well as prayers and continued concern for the results of the mission.

**"They were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren."** Building support for their position; no legal gag order. The facts were undeniable – look at what God had accomplished in converting these Gentiles; what role did circumcision and the Mosaic law play in these mighty works of transformation?? Look at the joy that comes from celebrating the truth of the **grace of God** versus the doubt and confusion and tension that comes from **a legalistic approach**.

**Some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up:** Many of those who opposed Paul and Barnabas were Christians who had been **Pharisees**. The **Pharisees** were well known for their high regard for the law, and their desire to obey the law in the smallest details.

If the Pharisees believed anything, they believed one could be justified before God by keeping the law. For a Pharisee to really be a Christian, it would take more than an acknowledgment that Jesus was Messiah; he would have to forsake his attempts to justify himself by the keeping of the law and accept the work of Jesus as the basis of his justification.

In Lystra, Paul and Barnabas did not allow the pagans to merely add Jesus to their pantheon of Roman gods. They commanded that they had to turn from their vain gods to the true God (Acts 14:14-15). These Pharisees who had become Christians had to do the same thing: Turn from *their* efforts to earn their way before God by keeping the law, and look to Jesus. You can't just add Jesus and now say "Jesus helps me to justify myself through keeping the law."

Paul himself was a former Pharisee (Philippians 3:5) who became a Christian. But he came to know that Jesus didn't help him do what a Pharisee did, only better. He knew that Jesus *was* his salvation, not *the way* to his salvation. Paul wrote: *knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.* (Galatians 2:16)

**It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses:** These former Pharisees taught two things. First, Gentile converts must be *initiated* into Judaism through circumcision. Second, that Gentile converts must *live under the law of Moses* if they were to be right with God and embraced into the Christian community.

Basically, their teaching was: “Gentiles are free to come to Jesus. We welcome them and want them to come to Jesus. But they have to come through the Law of Moses in order to come to Jesus. Paul and Barnabas, among others, have allowed Gentiles to come to Jesus without first coming through the Law of Moses.”

**It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses:** We can imagine how they would have even made a case from the Old Testament for this teaching. They might have said Israel has *always* been God’s chosen people and that Gentiles must become part of Israel if they want to be part of God’s people.

### III. Confirmation of the Council (Acts 15:6-11)

**The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter:** The official leaders of the church met to deliberate and decide between Peter, Paul, and Barnabas’ practices and teaching and the teaching of the Jewish Christians who believed as the practicing Pharisees in the church believed. The question raised by the Jerusalem council was immense: Are Christians made right with God by faith alone, or by a *combination* of faith and obedience of the Law of Moses? Is the work of Jesus by itself enough to save the one who trusts in Jesus, or must we add our work to Jesus’ work in order to be made right with God? Their solution would determine whether or not the church would teach that salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ or salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ plus obeying the law of Moses.

Acts 15:6 refers to the private session in which the leaders discussed the issue and settled upon the procedure to be pursued in presenting the case to the whole congregation. Verses 7-29 then describe the general session which followed. Very important to spend the time and be objective in looking into important matters – perform the due diligence – look at the opportunity for much debate; not being intolerant – that is when you shut off all dialogue and don’t allow people to have a voice – it is really the modern culture that is intolerant towards Christians – you are not allowed to express your truth claims and especially to advocate for the exclusive nature of the gospel.

**And when there had been much dispute:** This would have been amazing to see. Christians serious enough about the truth to **dispute** for it! In the midst of this, Peter, as one of the leading apostles, **rose up** to make his opinion known on the matter.

**Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago:** Peter began with a history lesson, recounting the work God had already done. He then made the point that **God** had fully received the Gentiles apart from their being circumcised (**God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us**). If God had **acknowledged** these Gentiles as full partners in His work, then why shouldn’t the church? If God received them, so should the church!

In saying, “**Made no distinction between us and them,**” Peter made an important observation. It came straight from his vision of the clean and unclean animals, from which God taught him this principle: *God has shown to me that I should not call any man common or unclean* (Acts

10:28). Those *of the sect of the Pharisees who believed* thought that the Gentiles were inherently “common” or “unclean” (in the sense of unholy) and had to be made holy and clean by submitting to the Law of Moses.

**Purifying their hearts by faith.** Peter showed *how* the heart is purified: **by faith**, not by keeping of the law. If they were purified by faith, then there was no need to be purified by submitting to ceremonies found in the Law of Moses. Christians are not only *saved* by faith; they are also *purified* by faith.

**Why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?** Peter wisely answered another objection. One might ask, “What is the *harm* in bringing Gentiles under the Law of Moses?” Peter was correct when he observed that the law was **a yoke** which **neither our fathers nor we were able to bear**.

This is demonstrated by a survey of Israel’s history. At the birth of the nation at Mount Sinai, they broke the law by worshipping the golden calf. At the end of Old Testament history, they still broke the law by disregarding the Sabbath and marrying pagan women (Nehemiah 13). From beginning to end, Israel could not bear the **yoke** of the law.

Those *of the sect of the Pharisees who believed* made a critical mistake. They looked at Israel’s history under the law with eyes of nostalgia, not truth. If they had carefully and truthfully considered Israel’s failure under the law, they would not have been so quick to also put Gentiles under the law.

Paul made the same argument in Galatians 3:2-3. If the law does not save us, why would we return to it as the principle by which we live? In light of the finished work of Jesus, it offends God to go back to the law. This is why Peter asked, “**why do you test God?**”

**But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they.** Peter concluded with the observation that it is **through grace** that all are saved – both Jew and Gentile – and not by obedience to the law. If we are made right with God by grace, then we are not saved by grace *and* law-keeping.

Peter also insisted there is only one way of salvation: **We [Jews] shall be saved in the same manner as they [Gentiles].** Jewish Christians were not saved, even in part, by their law-keeping; they were made right with God the same way Gentiles were: **Through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.**

“Peter, the Jew, would normally have said it the other way around. He would have said, ‘We believe that they can be saved by grace through faith, *just like us.*’ That is, *they can be like us.*” (Boice) Yet Peter turned it around and noted that **all are saved by grace alone through faith alone**, Gentiles and Jews. By grace, God sent an angel to Cornelius. By grace, Jesus sent Peter to Cornelius and his family, and by grace Jesus sent Paul and Barnabas into the mission field. By grace, many Gentiles believed the good news of Jesus that they preached. By grace, these Gentiles received the Holy Spirit and God saw their hearts. They did not need, nor was it desirable for them to also be compelled, to adopt and obey the law of Moses.

## Lesson Summary

The Bible exposition on Acts 15:1-5 helps us see the first part of rightly handling difficult decisions between believers - one has to detect the problem. This issue of the need for circumcision is a significant one that would have longstanding implications.

What God did through the Jerusalem Council is amazing. It is perhaps the clearest sign of the Spirit's work. How do we know? Just think how most people handle tense issues.

They become divisive in heart and/or separate physically. Before the separation, tremendous pressure builds up. Hatred arises with words like venom, hoping to cause their victim great damage. Sometimes things like these might even happen in the church. If one has seen such things in the past, then he will be quite cautious in taking up a role in a church again. Be careful, though. The greatest time of danger is when everything is going well. You are off guard.

In this case, Paul and Barnabas just came back from the first missionary journey. People in all parts of the world (really just Cyprus and modern-day Turkey) were coming to know the Lord. Even their church, Antioch, was becoming a big hub for the advance of God's kingdom.

This whole situation happened at a time when people thought nothing could go wrong. Be careful. Always be careful but especially when one is doing well and one's self-confidence and pride tends to swell.

Every significant advance in the kingdom of God will be challenged! Opening the door to the Gentiles was a significant surprise and the devil was not taking a back seat. Notice that this meeting started with general discussion and debate, followed by relevant testimony and experience, and ended up with analysis of the scriptures. They detected, discussed, and resolved the problem (though the resolution is not included in this week's lesson).

1. **Detect the problem** (15:1-5). The greatest threat to the church is ignorance. Being so self-absorbed that one does not even spot the enemy's attack. In this week's lesson, we find some leaders visiting the Antioch church and telling the believers that they needed to be circumcised according to the custom of Moses or they could not be saved. Paul and Barnabas debated with them and observed that they needed to get a joint understanding of this whole issue, or the church would soon become just another Jewish synagogue with slightly different teachings.

Circumcision came prior to the law at Abraham's time but was part of the Old Covenant and identifying oneself with God's people. Many Jews thought that if they were circumcised, then they were God's child. This mindset is very similar to those who depend upon baptism in the church.

The real issue had to do with salvation, though it could look like a simple clash of cultures. How should the non-Jewish believers interact with the Jewish believers? The Jews kept the Law, that is, the many laws taught in the Book of Moses (first five books of the Bible). The

Gentiles perhaps did not even know anything about the laws. They would go to the same church, though. They would eat the Lord's supper together.

Something deeper was at stake, however. Remember in 15:1 that they said unless they are circumcised, they cannot be saved. So, the whole issue moves from a cultural one to a critical salvation issue. What about all those Gentiles who believed in Jesus? Are they really believers? Or put in our own context, are we who are not Jews but believe in Jesus really saved?

2. **Discuss the problem (15:6-11).** The discussion started as a good debate. Both sides were allowed to speak. The leaders including the apostles and elders were there. After a while, Peter began to share. Peter had a particular part in all of this. It was, as he said, through his mouth that the Gentiles would first hear the gospel. There are three major points in verses 7-9.
  - a. **God revealed the Gospel to the Gentiles (15:7).** Peter began sharing what happened when he was led to visit Cornelius in Joppa as recorded in Acts 10. Peter was reluctant but the Spirit in the vision compelled him to respond to Cornelius. This was God's choice, not his. He considered those foods in the dream unclean but God, who made food, stated they were now clean.

Peter's point is clear. God initiated this work of bringing the Gospel to the Gentiles, not him. Peter revolted at the whole idea! Philip was another example. The Spirit escorted him to the Ethiopian eunuch and to Samaria (not fully Gentiles but the same 'God did it' beginning). This whole thrust reminds us of Jesus words in Acts 1:8. The Holy Spirit would lead them into Samaria and all the world sharing the Gospel.

If God initiated the work, then we should observe what He is doing among the Gentiles. How do we know God is doing it? By the special signs and response of the people. The miracles and speaking in different languages confirmed God's hand in it.

- b. **God confirmed their belief by sign of Holy Spirit (15:8)** Peter emphasizes that they heard the word of the gospel, believed in Jesus and received the Holy Spirit by God who best knows the heart. Peter explains this is the same thing God did among them (the Jews in Acts 2). God confirmed that they were genuine believers by the giving of the Holy Spirit. There really is no difference between 'us' the Jews and 'them' the Gentiles.

The way God did things is significant. Peter step by step identifies this process which they fully knew. As a zealous Jew, he no doubt went through this logical observation many a time, verifying it in his own soul. This following third point becomes the powerful conclusion.



- c. **God saved them by faith (rather than works)** In verse 9 Peter clinches the argument, “Cleansing their hearts by faith.” In other words, they do not need the law to gain faith. They were saved by faith. They do not need the Law to be saved or to retain their faith.

Peter continues explaining that the Jews have not been able to keep the Law. Why give the Gentiles the extra burden? The Jews are saved under the same grace of Christ Jesus (in contrast to works). All are saved through the same grace.

There are no essential differences between the Jew and Gentiles. They are saved through the same means and retain their faith the same way. The Gentiles do not need to keep the Old Testament law to be saved or even to be ‘good’ Christians.

The confirming signs in the new works are not signs of a true believer. They are confirming that the situation is a genuine work of God to non-believers as well as to the existing church which still had many hangups to get used to.

Finally, salvation is by faith (v. 9) through grace (v. 11).

- **By Faith** - Salvation is gained by belief rather than by works (such as keeping the Law)
- **Through Grace** - Emphasizes salvation is not earned but given to unworthy and sinful people, whether Jew or Gentile (equally qualify).