

## Acts Chapter 15

In the church of Antioch Paul was going around and teaching the gospel of grace and suddenly these Judaizers came and they were saying, “There must be more than just being believing in Jesus, you must have Mosaic Laws, you must be circumcised”.

In chapter 14 after the missionary journeys Paul was coming back with Barnabas and they were then telling everybody about the works they were doing. They came back to Antioch, they were telling about all the great conversions that were happening, how people are coming to faith and suddenly it says here in Chapter 15

**1But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”**

Gone is the gospel of grace that says that by grace, by no works, nothing at all you are saved. Suddenly they are saying you must be circumcised. They are adding an additional thing and it was such a problem that it says here

**2And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.**

They had a big problem with the people who were teaching it because they were teaching Jesus plus. It has to be, you have to have Jesus plus circumcision. We have to think about it in our lives. What are we telling people, our children, new believers, what pluses are we adding on when we are telling people to be Christians? Jesus plus what? This was the problem that was being addressed because what Paul has been preaching so far all the time is this,

**Jesus + nothing = everything**

As soon as we add something it is no longer the gospel of grace. It is no more good news, we have nullified the gospel of grace and if you read in line with this the Book of Galatians especially chapter 1-2, these are great books to read in conjunction with this chapter as well. It was such a big problem that the church says, you got to go to Jerusalem (mother church) and you got to figure out what is this all about.

**3So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. 4When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. 5But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the Law of Moses.”**

There were some Pharisees (religious leaders) who became Christians. So these are not Pharisees as in Jewish Pharisees, these are former Pharisees who have become Christian. So they have a good intent. They actually want the people to be proper believers but they believe that you must have this additional circumcision because it is their culture and it is their customs and imagine being a Pharisee you grew up as a little Jewish boy and you being

circumcised and your family celebrated when that happened then you had every celebration and you went to your different schools that you went through and every time you pass you learn the law and your whole family, your whole life was around the Mosaic Law and you have been taught from young that you are the chosen people. So that was the kind of culture they grew up with. Now these people eventually then became Christians, they believed in Jesus and the death and resurrection of Jesus and the faith in Jesus but they believe that you must first kind of be a Jew to become a Christian. So they are saying on the way to Calvary you must pass by Mount Sinai. You cannot skip Mount Sinai on the way to Calvary because Mount Sinai is where all the laws were given. So you have to understand the whole Jewish laws and be part of those practices to then become a Christian. That is what they were thinking, that is what they were saying at this point of time.

### **Cultural Relativism versus Biblical Absolutism**

Cultural Absolutism means that when you say that whatever my culture dictates that is absolute. My culture dictates the way we do things.

Cultural Relativism means that you are saying there are different kinds of cultures and you can do these things differently according to different cultures.

Biblical Relativism means the bible is not really absolute depending on my interpretation and on my circumstance; right now it could mean different things. So that means there is no one true meaning of scripture, means it always depends on my interpretation of things.

Biblical Absolutism means that whatever the Bible says that counts truly. It holds absolute value in my life.

### **How we apply biblical truths in our different cultures that might look different?**

If you have Cultural Absolutism, if you hold on to your culture very strongly but have Biblical Relativism, meaning that I can interpret the Bible, however I feel like that means I will interpret the Bible according to my culture and my mood, what you will have is Situational Ethics. Depending on my current circumstance, depending on my current culture I will create an ethic or a moralism that comes out of that which is just pertaining to that situation. So it is Situational Ethics. If you have Cultural Relativism that means everybody's culture is okay but you have Biblical Relativism, you have antinomianism. Theologically, antinomianism is the belief that there are no moral law that God expects Christians to obey, everything is relative. My culture is relative, the Bible is relative, and so everything depends on my own interpretation of things. So that is antinomianism. They if you have Cultural Absolutism that my culture counts and the bible also counts then you have traditionalism. Then you are saying, yes the Bible means this and my culture interprets this in this way, hence therefore everybody in the world must live that way. It is like I was born in the 70s and that is how we interpreted it so now everybody has to interpret it in that way but we know that the world changes and custom changes and people change. So how we apply certain things might change holding up the same absolute Bible truth.

### **Cultural Relativism and Biblical Absolutism**

This is where you want to be that is mutual respect. We understand that different people have different cultures, different backgrounds, different histories, difference experiences and we

should value them and be sensitive to them, however not over and above the truth of scripture. Truth of scripture still holds above culture and the same truth might be interpreted differently according to culture. So this is what was happening there.

The Judaizers, the Pharisees were interpreting how Jesus needed to be received through their cultural lens. You must first be circumcised, you must obey the law. When they say you must obey the Law of Moses they didn't mean necessary the Ten Commandments, the Law of Moses is not just the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments is the moral law but there are 623 other laws which are ritual laws, which are ceremonial laws, so when people say Mosaic Laws or following the Law of Moses they are talking about mainly the ceremonial laws like circumcision, purifying yourself, washing, cleaning, all these kind of laws that were given to the Jewish nation to set themselves apart as a nation at that point of time.

### **What are some things that we impose from our culture today on people?**

The scripture does not say that you have to believe in Jesus and go to Bible study, believe in Jesus and go to church, believe in Jesus and read the bible. Because if that so then somebody in the Middle East who has a vision of Jesus comes to faith in Jesus, never has seen a Bible in his life, you are saying he is not a Christian. There is no church around them in their vicinity where they live, not a Christian.

### **If we have bad theology can we be Christian?**

I think there is none of us who dare to put up their hand and say, do you have good theology and everybody raises their hands. To somewhat extent we all have some theologies which are bad. Okay, we are all still sinful beings and we still have some problems in our theology as well. Even having good theology does not mean that you are saved the Bible says that

Lord, Lord have we not done many mighty things in your name, those people will say that saying Lord, Lord, they call Jesus Lord, they have good Christology. They know who Jesus is, they do many mighty works. They do lot of acts and deeds and Jesus turns around to them I never knew you. So having good theology, having lot of works does not define us as a Christian. There are other places in James where he says, it is good that you know that Jesus is one in James 2, even demons know that and shutter. Even demons have good theology, but demons are clearly not Christians. So I am saying having good theology does not make you a good Christian. Yes you can have bad theology and still be a Christian.

### **What happens if you are not generous can you still be a Christian?**

We are supposed to be cheerful givers. I am not talking about what we supposed to do as Christians, I am talking about the requirement of being a Christian, the requirement of having salvation and that is what people were putting onto the gospel, they say you must also be circumcised and the question we must ask ourselves is what are we imposing on other people. When we look at other people, we judge other peoples, we impose our values onto other people and I think we should be very careful about what we are doing because that was exactly what was happening there, people were coming down and people were saying you must have Jesus plus.

### **What is the truth that saves us?**

Jesus died for our sins. God became man. He lived a perfect life, lived the life we should have lived and then died to death we should have died. Pain for our sins and then died on the cross, rose again and with the same power that he rose again is now the power the lives in us and changes us and moves us if we believe. It is pure grace, 100% Jesus did everything, and we did nothing to contribute to this. We just believe that Jesus has done that and that's makes it good news because all of us falls short of the laws all the time.

The gospel is salvation because it cleanses us from our past, from our present, from our future. Gospel is freedom from the penalty of sin, it is freedom from the past all the sins you have created and the sins you are going to create because it is also freedom from the power of sin over you that means you have to strength in you right now to overcome sin and eventually it is the freedom of the presence of sin eventually completely. In heaven there will be no more sin.

**6**The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. **7**And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. **8**And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, **9**and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.

Peter in his speech was referring back to Cornelius story. Cornelius was the Roman that God saved and he is referring back to that story and saying, God has spoken through me that gentiles should be saved and you have witnessed it, you have seen how gentiles also had signs of the spirit because as they came to faith, they were speaking in tongues equally as the Jewish people who came to faith so they have the same kind of Holy Spirit working in them. So he is saying, look our experiences shows, the evidence of the Holy Spirit show that both Holy Spirit works in the gentiles and the Jews in the same way and he says having cleansed their hearts by faith. So he focuses on the word ‘faith’. And then he makes a **second point**.

**10**Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?

He is saying that all these Mosaic Laws, all these rituals and ceremonies, nobody was able to keep them anyways. He said why are you putting on top of the gentiles things that you could not keep anyways yourself and that is the question we must ask ourselves. When we start looking at other people and questioning their salvation and questioning and judging them whether they are Christian or not, can we uphold and keep all the things that we are judging those people with. Why are we imposing things on people that we cannot uphold ourselves and them judging them in that way? The gospel of grace does not do that. A sin is a sin and we shouldn't do them but doing them or not doing them does not determine our salvation, it does not depend on us, it depends on what Jesus has done and our faith in him.

**11**But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

So he focused on two things, **faith** and **grace**.

**12**And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

James is the brother of Jesus who at that time was like the head of the Jerusalem church. So everybody was following him.

**13**After they finished speaking, James replied, “Brothers, listen to me. **14**Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. **15**And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written,

Now he is saying listen the prophets have foretold this and he is quoting Amos here.

**16**“After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, **17** that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things **18** known from of old.’

Amos is an Old Testament prophetizing that gentiles will also come to faith. James quoted the scripture because he was speaking to the Pharisees, they were people who were claiming to be the people of the scripture, they hold on to the Old Testament, they claim Old Testament laws, proclaiming Mosaic Laws; he is speaking to them and giving them back their minor prophet. He is speaking to two types of people. The Jewish people will be saved (the tent of David) and he speaks to the gentiles will be saved. There is a difference in them but both will be saved in the same manner through Jesus Christ and then from there he gives them two applications.

**19**Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, **20**but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood.

He is saying to Jews first, don’t put burden on the gentiles and then he addressed gentiles. He mentioned those three things to gentiles because these things were rampant in the Greek and pagan cultures at that point of time. They were doing this in the pagan temples. They were having blood sacrifices, they were having temple prostitutes, and they were doing idol worship. So he is talking something which is very common in their culture at that moment. So he is speaking specifically, stop doing those things because they are not godly things. So he is giving pastoral advice. Why he mentioned those things is seen in his next statement

**21**For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.”

He is saying don’t do these three things because there are many Jewish people all around and you will stumble them. There are many people around who will feel that what you are doing is defiling them. So the same thing would apply to us today just to make the culture relative. If we want to reach out to our neighbors here, don’t be eating pork and drinking alcohol while doing it, not the most effective evangelism tool. Pastorally advice would be, if you are going to reach out to them, don’t do it over a beer and don’t invite them to Bak Kut Teh. It is just not right thing because it is defiling for them. It is unclean for them, they will say you are doing all these things, how can you be a good holy person. So they are speaking into cultural realities. So the for is a very important for there because it shows us why he listed those three things. So it is a pastoral advice. He is saying to be culturally relative when you do those things. Paul continues in other passages as well. 1-Cor 9:

**19**For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. **20**To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. **21**To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. **22**To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.

We see a good example in chapter 16

**1**Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. **2**He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. **3**Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.

Paul is not contradicting himself. Timothy didn't get circumcised so that he will be saved. Timothy got circumcised so he can reach out to the Jewish people. He became as a Jew so he can reach to Jews. He became all things so he might win some that is why he got circumcised for his ministry purpose.

So there are two things that we can learn from today's study.

1. For those under grace we are not to make non-biblical requirement of others. We are saved by grace not by works.
2. Because we are under grace we gladly restrict our freedom for the sake of others. So that we can reach them and share the gospel with them.

After they had the whole debate and after they came to this conclusion the Jerusalem council drafted a letter and it is an amazing letter. They sent people to explain the nuances of it.

**30** So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. **31**And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.

Why they were rejoicing and were encouraged. They had restrictions added on to them. There are couple of reasons for this.

1. They went to Jerusalem to find out whether the whole Mosaic Law needed to be impeded on them. The Jewish and gentile people rejoiced because they came together in common understanding. They were doing things for one another.
2. As they understood that they are saved by grace, their relationship with God was right, they were able to do second part to love one another right. So they came together and yes the gospel saved them but the gospel immediately had the effect that they were able to love another as well.

Imagine a college student write a note to parents.

*Dear mom and dad just thought I drop you a note to clue you in of my plans. I have fall in love with a guy called Jim. He quit high school after grade 11 to get married. About a year*

*ago he got a divorce. We have been going steady for two months and plan to get married in the fall. At any rate I drop out of school last week, although I would like to finish college sometime in the future. Mom and dad, I just want you to know that everything I have written so far in this letter is false, none of it is true but mom and dad it is true I got a C minus in French and I flunk Math and it is true I am going to need some more money for my tuition payments.*

The parents will rejoice, bad news sounds terrific depending on which condition it is said. This bad news that they have to restrain themselves for few things was terrific news and let to understanding that the gospel of grace fully saves them that the council fully agreed, yes you are completely Christians.

The gospel is at work with you completely when you have few restrictions just for their brothers. So that they reach out to their Jewish brothers and not stumble the Jewish brothers they rejoiced and that is the gospel of grace.