

The Acts of the Apostles

Sermon Number: 24

Acts 15:22 – 41

November 13, 2011

The Letter to the Gentiles

In the message last Sunday “No Distinction”, I presented what I consider to be perhaps the most important element of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Justification, the sovereign act of God in the salvation of any sinner is by grace through faith alone.

Paul had to learn this basic truth and that is what he argues for in Romans 4 where he writes that it was the faith of Abraham that was the basis of his justification and that works of obedience can have no part in salvation. And this occurred 400 years before the Law was given to Moses. So how then can you impose law-keeping of any form in order to be saved and maintain the Gospel?

There was a council, a meeting, called at Jerusalem to settle once and for all the issue of how would God save a Gentile, a non-Jew. In the intense discussion and debate regarding the claim of the Judaizers, viz. that a Gentile must be circumcised according to the Law of Moses or they cannot be saved, Peter stood up and made this absolutely startling statement that must have shaken most of the Jews present in the depths of their being:

But we believe that we [Jews] will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they [Gentiles] will. Acts 15:11 ESV

Any system of theology or eschatology that even suggests that God has a different method of dealing with the Jews as opposed to any other group of people in the matter of justification is a lie and is heresy! **God justifies individuals!**

Well, after the Jerusalem Council was almost concluded James, the leader at Jerusalem, calls upon the OT prophets, specifically Amos 9:11-12, to show that what Amos prophesied about and what all the prophets agreed upon was that it was Gentiles and Jews together in one body of Christ that make up the “tent of David that has fallen.”

The Gospel cannot be based upon anything involving human merit, even the race or ethnicity of one’s parents, and especially based on someone becoming a proselyte to Judaism. [Cf. John 1:11-13]

After referring to “the words of the prophets,” James states the consensus of what the Council has concluded in the matter of the salvation of Gentiles.

Acts 15:19-41

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

- 1) The Jewish leaders of the church should not make it difficult for Gentiles to be saved.
- 2) Gentile believers should be considerate of their Jewish brethren in the matter of eating certain things that while indifferent in and of themselves, would offend the Jews' conscience. Meat offered to idols and things strangled [unbled] were especially odious to the Jews.
- 3) The Gentiles should abstain from sexual immorality. It is not that the Jews were chaste; it was that the Jews had the Word of God and the Gentiles were just learning what the Scriptures teach about sexual activity. The Jews heard the words of Moses every Sabbath in the synagogues.

The Letter to the Gentiles

Acts 15:22-29

²² Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, ²³ with the following letter: "The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. ²⁴ Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, ²⁵ it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶ men who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. ²⁸ For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: ²⁹ that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell."

Two leaders from the Jerusalem church were chosen to return with Barnabus and Paul to Antioch and deliver the letter which affirmed the outcome of the council.

According to Everett F. Harrison. *Acts: The Expanding Church*, p 239, the council accomplished five important things:

1. The gospel of divine grace was reaffirmed.
2. The unity of the church was safeguarded.
3. The evangelism of the Gentiles could proceed without hindrance. Most of Paul's churches were founded after the council and they were Gentile churches.
4. The Gentile churches that had already been established were given encouragement [Cf. 16:4-5].
5. The future of the church as a whole was guaranteed.

To this commentary I will add a few of my own observations.

Vs. 23 The Gentiles are "brothers" who share a common faith.

Vs. 24 The trouble-makers have no authority and their teaching should be ignored.

Vss. 25-26 The ministry of Barnabus and Paul is approved by the council.

Vs. 27 The letter will be certified by word of mouth by two witnesses.

Vs. 28 The conclusion of the council is of the Holy Spirit.

Vs. 28-29 The Gentiles are free from the Law.

Vs. 29 The Gentiles were wished success in the gospel.

Everything seems to be going well:

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. ³² And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. ³³ And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them. ³⁵ But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

Everything seemed to be going well; but all was not well between Paul and Barnabus. Paul will begin his second missionary journey and he wishes to revisit the churches he and Barnabus had planted on their first trip.

Paul apparently had not planned to go over into Europe when he left Antioch but we shall see in the next chapter that Paul was open to the leading of the Holy Spirit to “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” [16:9]

The decision of the Jerusalem Council not to impose Jewish law on the Gentiles began a significant transition for the early church. Up until this time the church was largely a Jewish sect, i.e., Jews that became Christians. With the barriers removed and as Paul travels in the Roman world, the Gospel spreads into pagan regions.

Acts 15:36-41

³⁶ And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are." ³⁷ Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. ³⁸ But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. ³⁹ And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, ⁴⁰ but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹ And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

While Luke does not give us many details about the disagreement between Paul and Barnabus it was a matter that they could not resolve at that time.

Paul and Barnabus agreed to revisit they churches they had planted. Barnabus wanted to take John Mark with them but Paul did not trust Mark and considered him not to be “worthy” because he had deserted them on their first trip.

Now Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. And John left them and returned to Jerusalem,... Acts 13:13

Mark was Barnabus’ cousin to and he was willing to give Mark a second chance. Paul thought Mark was a deserter and disloyal. The Greek language indicates that the dispute was “angry.” Lurking in the back of Paul’s mind was that Barnabus had temporarily yielded to the Judaizers and Paul had confronted him for his hypocrisy.

Gal 2:11-14

¹¹ But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹² For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. ¹³ And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. ¹⁴ But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?" ESV

Even an apostle can be wrong when he is not being led by the Holy Spirit. Such was the case with Paul and his assessment of Mark. Mark wrote one of the four gospels and Paul later changed his mind about Mark.

Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry. 2 Tim 4:11

³⁹ And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, ⁴⁰ but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹ And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

God can bring good out of a bad situation. The result of this split was that there were two teams of missionaries going into two different parts of the region.

Barnabus took Mark and sailed to Cyprus. Paul chose Silas and revisited the churches in Asia Minor. Silas was a leader in the Jerusalem church and was a Roman citizen the same as Paul. As Romans they could travel under the protection of the Roman government.

We surely need to strive for peace in the church. We should never presume that if we generate a conflict that God is going to bring something good out of it.

The Judaizers wanted to impose the Law of Moses on the Gentiles and when that movement failed the Gospel was opened more freely to the whole world.

Paul and Barnabus could not agree about Mark and instead of one missionary team there were two. That was not the initial intent of Paul and Barnabus but that is how God worked it out.

Let me bring this brief message to its conclusion by emphasizing the importance of what is before us.

The Gospel is that Jesus died for sinners.
Jesus died for Jewish sinners, but not only for Jewish sinners.

When you add circumcision, baptism, or any act of obedience as being necessary “in order to” be saved you have corrupted and polluted the Gospel beyond its effectiveness.

When I consider the best moment I have ever had in any spiritual sense; if I trust that thought, act, or feeling to in any way contribute to my being justified I have just declared that the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ to be a grand waste of God’s time and effort.

Oh to grace, what a debtor I am!

If you do not have the assurance that Jesus Christ is able and is willing to save a sinner like you then ask one of the men of the church and we will point you to the Savior of sinners.

Amen.