



25 | ACTS 15:1-35

LAW OR GRACE?

Grace alone saves us! The law can only condemn!

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Call to Worship

A day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness. ¹¹ For the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord bestows favor and honor. No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly. ¹² O Lord of hosts, blessed is the one who trusts in you! —Psalm 84:10-12

Songs

Living Hope
Free from the Law
Only a Holy God

Not in Me
Goodness of God

Announcements

WELCOME: We are glad you are here! Be sure to grab a Welcome Packet if you are visiting with us.

GIVING: You can give over Zelle through your bank with no fees (use secretary@livinghopechurch.net). We also have a collection box on the Welcome Center. Malachi 3, “Test me in this” Proverbs: “**Give of your firstfruits.**” We believe blessing comes by putting God first.

Introduction

As Paul comes back from his first missionary journey, there is a great **battle between love and legalism** in the newly planted churches of Galatia.

Things were going incredibly well—too well for the enemy’s taste, and the inevitable **satanic counterattack** soon came.¹ Many people were coming to Christ in the Gentile world, but **false teachers** soon came and were teaching that **grace is not enough to be saved.** They said you need **Jesus plus the law.**

The major theological controversy was simple enough: **What is required for salvation?** In fact, this is the major theological issue for all times and eras: What does it mean for a person to become a Christian and part of God’s people? **Is it works or grace?**² **Is it performance or promise?**

False teachers have plagued the church throughout its history. They are emissaries of Satan, sent to destroy the church’s power and corrupt its proclamation.³ Paul warned the leaders at Ephesus to be on the lookout for wolves that will destroy the flock.

Acts 20:29–30 | I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.

Peter said the same thing.

2 Peter 2:1 | There will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them.

The teaching of legalism for salvation or sanctification is dangerous. We are saved and sanctified by the Spirit, the same power that raised Jesus from the dead.

Key Thought: We must guard ourselves against coming to God with a works-based, performance mindset. We’ve been set free in Christ. Grace alone saves and empowers us! Legalism can only condemn!

Christ’s life and death satisfies the law and brings us to God, perfect and unblemished before his throne! His resurrection gives us the power for holiness that far exceeds any written law.

¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1996), 190.

² James M. Hamilton Jr. and Brian J. Vickers, *John–Acts*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar, vol. IX, *ESV Expository Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 475.

³ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Acts*, vol. 2, *MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 62.

1. THE DETOUR FROM GRACE (15:1-5)

The **most destructive** of the “destructive **heresies**,” since it damns men, **is the teaching that salvation is by human works**.⁴ We get a taste of this in Acts 15. Paul and Barnabas are back from their first missionary journey, and the greatest threat to the gospel is a false gospel of works righteousness. With all the grace of salvation that was advancing, Satan sent his minions against the gospel. False teachers taught things that put God’s grace into question.

In our passage there was a group of people who were zealous to keep the law. **Grace teaches Jesus plus nothing**. They were teaching Jesus plus the law. That’s a false gospel.

A DETOUR OVER DOCTRINE

Acts 15:1 | But 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.”

Good-bye, free grace! Good-bye, joy! These cunning false teachers—Judaizers—did not deny salvation by grace per se. They simply said salvation came by “grace plus...”—specifically “grace plus circumcision”⁵ and “**grace plus law keeping**.” Most people don’t deny God’s grace. They are much more deceptive. They add to it. The apostles are going to teach us here that **we are saved by grace alone**, plus nothing. No law keeping or ceremonies or sacrifices required.

A DETOUR WITH DEBATE

And so the argument began. There were Judaizers, **professing believers who believed after salvation you needed to be circumcised** and keep the law of Moses. Paul and Barnabas argued with them. It was so intense they decided to settle it with the twelve apostles in Jerusalem. After Paul’s first missionary journey to Galatia, he has to settle an argument in Jerusalem before venturing forth on his second missionary journey to Europe.

Acts 15:2 | And 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.

Paul and Barnabas knew what the apostles would say. They heard Peter preach faith alone in Christ alone at Pentecost, but they needed the verification of the apostles in Jerusalem.

So they departed for the holy city Jerusalem to get an audience with the twelve. This passage is the first reference in Acts to the legalists who dogged the steps of Paul wherever he went and were dealt with specifically in his letter to the Galatians.⁶ **The four Galatian churches are those that Paul and Barnabas just planted: Antioch of Pisidia,**

⁴ MacArthur, *ibid*.

⁵ R. Kent Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1996), 190.

⁶ William H. Baker, “Acts,” in *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, vol. 3, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1995), 906.

Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. The debate and dissension were over the question of grace versus law. Is salvation completely and forever free, or must I do certain things to keep it?

A DETOUR DIRECTED BY THE LORD

God is not up in heaven ringing his hands when these detours come. In fact, God has good plans even though bad people and bad circumstances try to interrupt the expansion of Christ's kingdom. Therefore, because Paul and Barnabas know that God is sovereign, they don't stop their joy. They don't stop rejoicing and praising God for all the good things he is doing.

Acts 15:3-4 | So, 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.

Even though they had to make a detour before Paul's second missionary journey, they see that God wanted them to use this detour to encourage the brothers in Phoenicia and Samaria. Often what we think is a detour is really God's direction. **We must always understand that we are not under the tyranny of our circumstances but under the sovereignty of our loving God.**

It's easy to get our eyes off Jesus when problems and distractions arise. No matter what is trying to detour your faith, you keep your eyes on the prize. Keep your eyes on Jesus. That's what the Paul and Barnabas did when coming to the twelve. They encouraged each other and the apostles and elders at Jerusalem with all that God had done. They weren't panicking or wondering if the wheels were going to come off Christ's kingdom. God is fully in charge, and they know it.

A DETOUR DEMANDED BY FALSE BROTHERS

Are there those in the church that claim to be brothers but are not? Yes. We see that at least they are confused. Look at their claims before the twelve apostles. **They demand that after faith, the believers need to add the law in order to be true Christians.**

Acts 15:5 | But 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."

They are presenting a false gospel. You are going to have that in the church. Many immature believers might propose wrong things. We have to be patient with them and teach them and bring them around to sound doctrine. There may even be false brothers, who are not brothers at all, wolves in sheep's clothing. We have to let the elders take the time to examine false doctrine. **Realize that shepherds are here to protect the church from being torn to pieces by the wolves.**

2. THE DISCUSSION ABOUT GRACE (15:6-18)

The twelve apostles meet with the first missionaries and the elders of Jerusalem, led by James, the brother of our Lord, the pastor at the church of Jerusalem. They discuss the essence of the true gospel, that it is by grace through faith, and that there are no works or keeping of the law that is required to merit salvation.

A DISCUSSION OF THE GOSPEL

Here is the great Jerusalem council with Peter. The spokesman for the twelve leads the way.

Acts 15:6-9 | The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. ⁷And 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. ⁸And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, ⁹and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.”

Peter says, basically that this is a matter that’s already been settled (back in Acts 11 with Cornelius’s conversion). Peter’s witness is that the people were saved by grace alone through faith, and they were given the Holy Spirit. **Justification is by faith alone in Christ alone.** Peter preached the word of the gospel of grace that was to be accepted by faith alone. The apostles preached this same gospel that they were commissioned to preach by Jesus. Consider Paul’s custom in Acts 17.

Acts 17:2-3 | According to Paul’s custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.”

God makes no distinction between those who keep the Jewish customs and those who do not. All who come to know by Jesus Christ “have cleansed their hearts by faith” (15:9). The implication is that salvation is by God’s grace through faith alone in Christ alone. And it’s to the glory of God alone. God does it from beginning to end. The five solas of the Reformation are a summary of the Jerusalem council.

FIVE SOLAS

Sola scriptura: “Scripture alone”

Sola fide: “faith alone”

Sola gratia: “grace alone”

Solus Christus: “Christ alone”

Soli Deo gloria: “to the glory of God alone”

This is the same gospel we believe today. Jesus is still “the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father” except through him (Jn 14:6).

A DENUNCIATION OF LEGALISM

Peter continues on. Remember he’s the one who preached Pentecost after denying Christ three times. If there is anyone who knows about grace and needs grace, it’s Peter.

You can see from his words here that he's righteously indignant at the idea of any legalistic, performance-based way of coming to God. Hear his words. Peter says:

Acts 15:10 | "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?"

The Pharisees who claimed to be believers had said in verse 5, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses." Peter basically says, "No! This is false. Legalism kills, and our forefathers can testify to it." Legalism cannot save, Peter says.

The law is good, Paul tells us later. **The law is the reflection of the character of Christ in us.** We serve something greater than the law of Moses, dear saints. We have the law of the Spirit of Christ in us, which far exceeds the written law. **The Spirit himself has circumcised and tenderized our hearts to surrender to him in all things** (Deut 19:16; 30:6). *We cannot do this work with the power of the flesh.*

The apostles will later tell us that the law was never given to make us righteous. That's a yoke that no one can carry. Remember the words of David.

Psalm 130:3-4 | If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? ⁴ But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared.

Salvation was never, ever by works or performance. The law was not given to save anybody. The law was given to "increase the transgression" so that the abundance of grace could be experienced. Why did God give the law? Paul answers it in Romans 5.

Romans 5:20 | Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.

People in the Old Testament saw their sin because of the mirror of the law. Like a mirror showing our flaws, the law increased the awareness of our trespasses, and God's grace abounded. He could have destroyed his people, but in grace he forgave them and preserved them, and pointed them to Christ.

Galatians 3:24, KJV | The law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith.

People needed to see the reality of their sins so they could experience the actuality of salvation by grace. The law is our schoolmaster that points us to Christ. Why did God give the law to the Old Testament saints if it doesn't save anyone? Paul tells us another reason in Galatians.

Galatians 3:19 | Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made.

God had to preserve his people. Without the law, they would have destroyed each other. God has always been a God of grace. Remember that's how he revealed himself to Moses.

Exodus 34:6 | The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in

steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷ keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin...

Legalism had to be denounced at the Jerusalem council. It never saved anyone. Anyone who has ever been saved has been saved by grace.

A DECLARATION OF SALVATION BY GRACE

Rejecting legalism, Peter's plea for the gospel is clear. He reiterates what we still believe today: that **the gospel of God's grace is through faith alone in Christ alone.** That can never change.

Acts 15:11 | "But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

Peter, who had denied the Lord three times, understood that the gospel had to be a gospel of pure grace, requiring nothing but our sincere trust. Peter was a forgiven sinner. If salvation were by works, he was of all people most condemned. The gospel he preached was salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone. This is what he tells the apostles. Peter tells them straight up: salvation is by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ for them and us and everybody. **Paul later summed it up well** when he spoke to the church at Ephesus.

Ephesians 2:8-9 | For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

A DESCRIPTION OF SIGNS AND WONDERS

The assembly there was so moved by Peter, that the Jerusalem council fell silent.

Acts 15:12 | 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.

As the silence blanketed the great council, Barnabas and Paul spoke about how **the Spirit confirmed their testimony with signs and wonders as they preached the glorious gospel of God's grace through faith in Christ alone to the Gentiles.** Remember how Hebrews 2 talks about why the signs and wonders were done. They were there to confirm the gospel.

Hebrews 2:3-4 | How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, ⁴ while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

Let us never compromise the gospel. It may be confirmed by signs and wonders, but our faith doesn't stand on any miracle. The modern prosperity gospel is heretical for many reasons, one of which is, they have turned their worship away from Christ to the experience of miracles. We don't worship miracles, we worship Christ. The gospel does not stand on any miracle, but on its own authority. The gospel is always **by faith alone, through grace alone in Christ alone, to the glory of God alone.** Christ plus nothing. A person who believes the gospel will worship Christ alone. Here we stand. We can do no other.

A DEPENDENCE ON THE SCRIPTURES

James begins to discuss how **the gospel of grace results in the birth of the New Testament church**. He's going to let us know that there is agreement from Scripture that the church, the rebuilt Israel ("tent of David") is made up of both Jews and Gentiles. Notice, they defend the gospel of grace to the nations by what we call "**sola Scriptura**," the doctrine of "Scripture alone." That is they didn't defend the gospel from the authority of their own experience, but they turn to the Scriptures.

Acts 15:13-15a | After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. ¹⁵And with this the words of the prophets agree."

Peter had told them, "When we preached the gospel, God confirmed their faith with signs and miracles." Paul and Barnabas said the same thing. Both Peter and James and Paul are always appealing to the Scriptures as their final authority. Remember Peter had before appealed to this from Joel 2, which tells us that signs and wonders would accompany the Spirit's anointing on all humanity, from the youngest to the eldest, from the poorest to the richest. Little ones would prophesy, people from various nations would dream dreams. That was happening in the ministry of Peter as well as Paul and Barnabas, and it continues today.

A DISCUSSION OF THE CHURCH

Now James begins to discuss **how the gospel of grace results in the birth of the New Testament church**. He's going to let us know that there is agreement from Scripture that the church, the rebuilt tent of Israel ("tent of David") is made up of both Jews and Gentiles.

A Testimony of the Church

James now reflects on Peter's testimony of how God is bringing Gentiles in among his people.

Acts 15:13-15a | After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. ¹⁵And with this the words of the prophets agree."

Peter had testified of all the conversions of Gentiles he'd seen in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria even all the way to Antioch. Peter had seen thousands saved. What a testimony. And that's exactly what the Old Testament Scriptures say will happen over and over.

All the Old Testament predicts that the Gentiles would come into Israel and worship the Messiah. For example, Isaiah says that in the "latter days"—that the time of Jesus crucifixion until the second coming, the Lord is going to establish his house, his forever family, and all the nations will flow into it.

Isaiah 2:2 | It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it.

A Prophecy of the Church

James could have quoted literally hundreds of prophecies like this, but he chooses to quote **Amos 9:11-12**.

Acts 15:15b-18 | Just as it is written, 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, ¹⁷that 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 ¹⁸known from of old.’

Notice, James and the apostles defend the gospel of grace to the nations by what we call **“sola Scriptura,”** the doctrine of “Scripture alone.” That is, they didn’t defend the gospel from the authority of their own experience, but they turn to the Scriptures.

James agrees with Peter that the New Testament church is a continuation of the old covenant people. **He calls the church the “rebuilt tent of David.”**

James is quoting a passage in the prophet Amos, where he promises Israel to be raised up, possessing Edom, a neighboring nation, as well as **“all the nations who are called by my name”** (Amos 9:11-12). **The prophecy of Amos was fulfilled when Jesus himself, Yahweh in the flesh returned and he rebuilt the “tent of David.”** He rebuilt Israel that had fallen so that, as Amos says, **“the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord” including “all the Gentiles who are called by my name.”** The church is the rebuilt Israel. The people of national Israel are the “picture” of what is coming. God’s ultimate plan is not just for Israel, but for Israel to expand to all the nations, which is what has happened! The church not only of Israel, but of all nations, with Christ as her head, is the ultimate Israel. Glory to God!

This is very similar to the concept that Paul teaches us in the book of Romans that the church is the result of the Gentiles who believe being “grafted in” to Israel. Paul gives the illustration of a wild olive tree (outside the olive garden of the Lord) being grafted into the olive tree in the garden of the Lord (*cf* Rom 11:17-24).

Romans 11:17 | But if some of the branches [*of Israel*] were broken off, and you [*Gentiles*], although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree [*Israel*].

As Israel is called the Lord’s garden of olive trees, so are we in the New Testament church because we’ve been grafted into Israel. Jesus uses metaphor of the grape vine.

John 15:5 | I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

Not only that, but because we are grafted into Israel, Paul later tells us that **all the promises of Abraham our ours by faith.**

Galatians 3:29 | If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise

James sums up the council’s conclusions. The Old Testament prophets foretold a time when the Gentiles would be called by God’s name and grafted into Israel (15:17). The true

remnant of believing Israel now had to accept these Gentile brothers and sisters in this new covenant.⁷ Jews and Gentiles abide together in the church under a new covenant.

3. THE DECISION FOR GRACE (15:19-29)

The great concern of the apostles now becomes very pastoral. They don't want the sheep to feel burdened by having to keep the law. They want the believers to walk in the grace and love of Christ. There are a few things they need to separate from for the sake of holiness, but the great desire of the apostles is for the saints to be **free from the burdens of legalism**.

THE FELLOWSHIP OF GRACE

Sometimes in order to have fellowship, we have to do away with some parts of our culture. For the Gentiles there were several elements of pagan Roman culture that had to be left behind so they could fellowship with the Jews. Here the apostles outline a simple way of living in grace for sake of the Jews. The way of grace is always so much simpler than legalism.

Acts 15:19-20 | 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.

Four things are prohibited by the apostles. These things have to do with **Christian holiness** and **Christian love**.

First, the new Gentile believers were to have nothing to do with the **idol worship** of their culture (“things polluted by idols”). Those coming out of pagan idolatry were to have nothing to do with “things polluted by idols” such as sacrifices sold at the market, since, while it is not directly a sin to eat meat in this way, it could defile the conscience of someone coming from that life.

Avoiding **sexual immorality** may sound like a “no-brainer,” but that was not the case for people coming from centuries of pagan practice.⁸ Temple prostitution was also very much connected to Gentile worship, such as the worship of Diana. Illicit sex was an integral part of the pagan Gentile worship. Temple priestesses were often little more than prostitutes.⁹ And while divorce was not very common among the Roman elite, sexual relations with mistresses and slaves for both genders was commonplace and somewhat accepted. First-century Gentiles could not have been expected to come by biblical, sexual morality naturally; it would have represented an entirely new way of living for the Gentile believers.¹⁰ This was a major cultural mindset that had to change in coming to Christ.

The walk of the Christian is to be one of holiness and separation from the world. We don't worship idols or live for pleasure. Our pleasure is in the Lord, and we enjoy everything by enjoying him first. Why were the apostles concerned about these things?

⁷ Lawrence O. Richards, *The Teacher's Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1987), 782.

⁸ James M. Hamilton Jr. and Brian J. Vickers, *John-Acts*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar, vol. IX, *ESV Expository Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 479.

⁹ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Acts*, vol. 2, *MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 71.

¹⁰ Hamilton, *John-Acts*, 479–480.

Because they were all connected with the idolatry of the temple cults of Roman polytheism. Each town had different gods, but they almost always moved toward the sacrificing of animals to demons and temple prostitution.

The next two prohibitions also had to do with **Christian love**. They were to give up unbutchered meat or “**things strangled**” (where the blood was not drained). This was not only part of the pagan rituals, but it also was something tremendously offensive to the Jew, which could have **made it very hard for a Jew to have fellowship with a Gentile brother** (cf Lev 17:10–14; Deut 12:16, 23–25).

The last thing was they were **to abstain from was “blood”** which they were not to drink (cf Lev 7:26; 17:12).

Morality was not the issue at the Jerusalem Conference. Fellowship was, and the decrees were a way for Gentile and Jewish Christians to respect each other’s culture so they could fellowship together.¹¹ All of these things would have not only made fellowship with the Jews impossible, but they were commonly connected to idol worship. These four activities made it immediately possible to build the new Jewish-Gentile churches. This would allow the Gentiles to live out the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

They don’t add anything else. They make sure they stay far away from any remanence of idolatry and anything that would divide their fellowship. Isn’t it a joy that we are not under the law, but under grace?

2 Corinthians 3:17 | Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

THE FAMILY OF GRACE

The law of Moses is read in every synagogue everywhere; so these requirements should come as no shock to the Gentiles.

Acts 15:21 | For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.

Gentiles should have a heart for Jews who need Jesus. At this point, the new covenant church was growing out of the old covenant people. Gentile Christians should be sensitive to their scruples and not give them offense in these ritual matters, for they too may be reached with the gospel.¹² The gospel of grace is growing, and if you want to reach Jews, it’s best not to be offensive in hanging on to these pagan habits and holdovers.

THE FREEDOM OF GRACE

The church is God’s forever family, and **shepherds need to be gentle with the sheep**. It is vital that we treat the sheep with love and meekness. This is why the apostles went out of their way to send the best men to the Gentiles as well as to inform them with a personal letter. Listen to what they wrote.

Acts 15:22-29 | 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,

¹¹ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 332.

¹² Polhill, *ibid*.

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 name 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.”

They were to stay away from sexual immorality and from things sacrificed to idols. They were to live a life free from the slavery to idols and immorality. **They did not say, “Keep the law of Moses” or “Become Jewish.”** So much of the Mosaic law was symbolic and ceremonial. Christ has come. Now **they needed to keep their eyes and on Christ and live for him** and live a life of **simple devotion** to Christ. Leave behind those things that enslave or distract.

The legalists among Paul wanted to treat these practices with heavy burdens of legalism, but the apostles were simply telling them live a life separate from the old practices of the world.

Living a life out of grace instead of legalism is absolutely essential to living in the power of the Spirit and living out of the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, etc.). We are called to walk in the freedom of the Spirit, not the burden of legalism and rule keeping.

The **difference between love and legalism** can be **illustrated** with **marriage**. This year Jill and I celebrate 25 years of marriage. On that day, if I give my wife 25 roses, and she says, “Thank you!” If I reply, “Oh honey, don’t worry about it. I’m your husband. **I’m required to give these to you.** It’s the right thing to do.” She would be crushed. What she ought to hear is, “Oh honey, I’m madly in love with you after 25 years. It’s my greatest joy to be married to you.” That’s the difference between love and legalism. In the same way, we ought to love Christ, not because of legalistic rules, but out of a heart of love, a heart filled with the Holy Spirit.

Paul will later tell the Romans that the law of the Spirit and love far exceeds the written law of Moses.

Romans 8:2-4 | For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. ³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Having written this sweet and simple letter to the Gentiles where the gospel was advancing, they were ready to deliver it.

4. THE DELIGHT OF GRACE (15:30-35)

Living in the grace of God is what brings true happiness.

THE DELIGHT OF GRACIOUS LEADERSHIP

The Paul and Barnabas bring the letter from the apostles in Jerusalem, and the church at Antioch is overwhelmed with gratitude.

Acts 15:30-31 | 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.

The formalism of the law never made anyone happy. Can you imagine all the laws: circumcision laws, clothing laws, food laws, the need to bring sacrifices to Jerusalem? All of that is done away with, say the apostles. It's now all about grace and your walk with the Lord! Now that's something to rejoice in. It's all about grace, God's free gift.

What was it that made the believers at Antioch of Syria rejoice? The missionaries, Paul, and Barnabas let the congregation know about their freedom in Christ. They rejoiced.

This is what they had preached in Antioch and everywhere. We new covenant believers have **a new relationship with the law.**

There are **many difficult things we have to address as pastors and elders.** We have to be **courageous** and instruct the church in difficult issues. **Saying the hard things that need to be said is an act of grace that protects the church.** This may not seem difficult to us today, but remember the church is in a great transition. They are moving from mainly Jewish in Jerusalem to predominantly Gentile in the various nations they are reaching. **The message of grace made the believers rejoice!**

The letter to this Gentile church at Antioch was a letter of instruction. They are told, basically, **to live in the grace of Christ and not under the burden of the law.** The believers in Antioch, which includes both Jews and plenty of Gentiles were grateful that they received **this message of grace from the apostles.** How encouraged they were to hear it.

The Old Testament law with all its ceremonies and types is such a beautiful picture of Jesus. But since Christ has come, and we have received him, why would we have to go back to all those ceremonies and types? Now that Christ has come, we need to keep our eyes on Christ. That's where true happiness can be found.

THE DELIGHT OF GRACIOUS DISCIPLESHIP

Judas and Silas were engaged in Christian discipleship. We might call it "biblical counseling" in today's language.

Acts 15:32-33 | 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.

Judas and Silas were prophets, very well educated in the Scriptures, and they took what was in the Scriptures and personally applied it to the believers' lives. They "encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words" from the Scriptures. They did this for some time.

Discipleship occurs when we share from God's word how to walk in the word with another believer. It's that simple. If we are only contributing information, we are not doing discipleship. Real life-on-life discipleship occurs when we apply God's word and walk in it.

We don't see Acts 15:34 in the ESV as it is a textual variant not found in the earlier Greek manuscripts, but here it is in the NKJV.

Acts 15:34, NKJV | However, it seemed good to Silas to remain there.

The substance of this detail does not affect the story of the text either way. Whether Silas stayed in Antioch or went back to Jerusalem is inconsequential. He will eventually join Paul on another missionary journey, but this does not happen right away as is clear from the text.

Regardless, it would be appropriate that Silas would participate in the delight of Christian discipleship as well. If he did indeed stay there, that would be a fantastic reason to stay.

THE DELIGHT OF GRACIOUS FELLOWSHIP

Paul later tells us that the church is the "pillar and ground" of the truth (1 Tim 3:15). The truth is most obviously established through the preaching of the word in the local church. That's exactly what they did.

Acts 15:35 | But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

Paul and Barnabas didn't want to leave. They loved the **fellowship** of their home church. They "remained in Antioch." Fellowship is necessary for Christian growth. Sunday church is not just about digesting a message, but it's about getting to know the family of God.

Fellowship includes the teaching and preaching of God's word. We learn about grace from the Scriptures, which Paul and Barnabas were faithful to teach. But the fact that they remained there with their "forever family" in Antioch made all the difference. It's through our fellowship and example that we can really have an impact on people on how to live out the word. **They didn't just deliver this letter. They lived it out,** life-on-life with their brothers and sisters in Christ.

The theology of the gospel of grace comes directly from the Old Testament. We are all called to preach the word. **We as pastors and elders don't get to edit the word or replace it** with popular psychology or with health and wealth, syrupy sweet self-help nonsense. We are called to teach and preach the truth of God from the word of God: line upon line, precept upon precept, chapter by chapter, book by book through the entire Bible.

Why is this vital? It's the "word of the Lord"—it's **the story of the grace of Jesus from Genesis to Revelation.** Do you want to know him? Read and listen to his word. Meditate on his word day and night (Psa 1:2) Walk in his word (Jas 1:22-25). Live out his

word. And demand nothing less from your pastors and elders that they preach and teach the word of God. The word points to the grace of Jesus on every page.

Conclusion

The famous evangelist, D. L. Moody, helps us understand the difference between law and grace.

“The Law tells me how crooked I am. Grace comes along and straightens me out.”¹³—D. L. Moody

Our salvation from beginning to end is a free gift of God. We were not saved by the law and we cannot be sanctified and transformed by the law. Only God by his Spirit can change and transform the human heart.

Dear saint, you cannot be happy trying to fulfill the law. The law only points you to your own failures. **A lady cannot wash her face with the mirror.** The law is a mirror that shows you where you fall short. Trying to be saved or sanctified by the law is an endeavor in despair and misery. For cleansing, you need the water of grace! It is the free grace of God through the sacrifice of our Savior that washes away your sin. Wash yourself in the water of the grace of Christ. Turn your eyes on Jesus, and you will live above even the high standard of the law. You will live in the perfection and righteousness of Jesus Christ.

¹³ D.L. Moody. *The Overcoming Life and Other Sermons* (Chicago: Bible Institute Colportage Association, 1896), 42-43.