

Acts 15:1-35

Saved by Grace, Living by Grace

Hello again, everyone joining us online and in person today. If you have been with us on our journey through the book of Acts in the Bible, you may recall that Paul and Barnabas have now finished their first missionary journey. They are back at their sending church in Antioch (in Syria in those days). A problem appears in the larger Christian Church when some people begin going around teaching a false message about the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ. Paul and Barnabas are sent to Jerusalem, where the Christian faith first grew up and in Acts is still at the center of the Christian world. There they help seek a solution to this messy problem.

This is an important part of the story of the Christian faith because the false teaching going around relates to the very foundation of the message of Jesus. If some people accept it, there will be not one Christian faith but the true one and a false one. The confusion and lack of unity that would come from this might badly limit the whole life of Christ' Church. There are big cultural questions involved in this problem, too. They present a risk that there could be, in effect, a Jewish Christian church, based in Jerusalem, and a non-Jewish Christian church, based in Antioch. They could end up competing with each other and even canceling out each other's work. They could have the Bible's New Testament somehow set up as the enemy of the Old Testament. This would not be the life of the kingdom of God, the kingdom of peace, which Jesus came to this world to bring. In other words, His work could even be largely defeated almost from the beginning.

Today's story is about how people can be saved. So it includes important basic teachings about the Christian faith. We can live in a right relationship with God through faith, not good works. But most people hearing this message in this church already know that—or should. And it may be easy to think of today's Bible story as being just about the *entry point* into a life of faith. You may think, "I'm already a Christian, so how does this connect with my life? Is it about what I should say when I tell people about Christ?"

Well, it is that, but far more. The message I hope we all receive clearly is that, just as we are *saved* by grace, not works, we also need to learn to *live daily* by grace. It may seem simpler to look at what we're supposed to do and not do, measuring ourselves and others by performance checklists. But the true Christian life is lived by grace, through faith. So how can we learn to do that more and more? Let's make a deeper understanding of that and commitment to it our goal this morning.

In v. 1 the claim is that you have "to be circumcised" to be saved. In v. 5 it is to be circumcised and to "obey the law of Moses." So they are not talking about only a strict rule or two. If you have to obey part of the law, you have to obey the whole thing. As James 2:10 says, "Suppose you keep the whole law but trip over just one part of it. Then you are guilty of breaking all of it."

And the truth is that none of us has ever faithfully followed the teachings of the whole law, except for Jesus Christ. So we all are guilty before the law. That

means that if we start placing on ourselves and others the responsibility of keeping it, it is fair that we are all judged guilty. That's because the law comes from God and is good. But we have to know that people on whom we place that responsibility will not keep it fully, as we have not. And the Lord does not give us the option of watering down His commands and expecting people to keep only part of them. He does not let us make other people the standard and say that if we are as good as the people around us, we are good enough. Then we can stand before God in a right relationship with Him in this life and get a place in heaven when we die? No. That undercuts the whole meaning of God's being pure and right and upholding justice. If we are responsible to keep His law, we are responsible to keep it all. And we simply do not. We continue to make choices that we should not. We commit sin. This is the problem we are up against, so it is crucial that we find the right solution to it. If we accept a false one, all is lost.

Who are these people teaching a false gospel? In v. 5 we read, "Some of the believers were Pharisees." These are not inside the Jewish religion now. They are what we today call Christians. But they still place a very heavy emphasis on following the Old Testament law. The leaders of the new Christian Church end up deciding that they are going too far with this emphasis. They are so concerned about obeying the law that they are making it impossible to live by grace. And that grace is at the heart of the message of Christ and His saving work on the cross.

As I think you know already, both grace and mercy are similar, both of them in the larger category of love. Grace is "unmerited favor." In other words, receiving it is getting something good, even though you have not earned it. Receiving mercy is *not* getting something bad even though you *do* deserve it. The greatest grace is the gift of life. The greatest mercy is not receiving death as punishment.

I had a kind of strange experience a couple of years ago. It may not be a really good example of grace and mercy, but hopefully it will be useful, so I'll tell you about it. I was in Washington, DC, U.S.A., at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport, waiting to get on an airplane to go to a family reunion at my niece's home in Nashville, Tennessee. If you have ever been there, you might recall that some of the gates are arranged in a circle around a communication desk in the center. That meant for me that I was hearing announcements from both the central desk staff and my particular gate staff, both at the same time, as I was trying to hear when it was my turn to get in line to board the plane. Along with the voices of many passengers talking, it was very difficult to hear clearly.

After the people with special needs entered, I heard a call that sounded like my section of the plane, though I wasn't sure. I went to a staff member at the entrance and said something like, "I'm in row 29. OK to enter?" She waved me through. But when I went into the plane, a flight attendant smiled at me and said, "Thank you for your service." That seemed odd. That's what people say to someone who's in the military. I thought, "Do I look like a member of the U.S. military?" Then I realized what had happened. I had boarded the plane when the people with special privileges to get on ahead of the others were boarding. I felt kind of embarrassed, confused, and guilty all at the same time!

In that situation, I was receiving something nice—a chance to board quickly and conveniently—even though I had done nothing to earn it. That’s grace, we could say. A staff member *could have* had said to me, “Hey, you! You’re not in the military, are you? Get out of here! You go to the back of the line!” But no one did. That’s mercy, we might say.

As Christians, God has had mercy on us and been gracious to us, so we are made free by His love. That is at the heart of what it means for us to be followers of Christ. So when false teachers come along and teach something that conflicts with this, even if they do not think they are doing anything bad, it has to be opposed.

Verse 10 says that they “put a heavy load on the believers’ shoulders.” Many translations have this “load” as “yoke.” That is what a farmer may put on the shoulders of a work animal like an ox to force it to stay in place and pull a heavy load, for example for plowing. It could be put on a human slave by a cruel master, too. The law is basically intended to make people free, to give us the guidance we need to live well. It is much like the rules of grammar, which help people communicate freely and clearly when we understand them and use them correctly. But when the law is misunderstood or misused, it can stop us from living as free human beings. It is a poor substitute for God Himself, the law Giver.

To use another visual image, the law is a lot like a mirror. It shows us where we are good and bad, right and wrong. But it does not have any more power to change us than a mirror does to help me lose weight if I eat too much and get fat. Expecting the mirror to do that for me is just foolish. So if we say we are saved by keeping God’s law rather than by trusting in Christ, who obeyed it perfectly in our place, we are putting the law above God and are really headed down the wrong path.

The fact is that none of us has ever kept the law fully, so if we are honest and see our shortcomings, we can easily just be frustrated and give up on trying to do the good things it teaches. If we are not so honest, we may deceive ourselves into thinking we’ve kept the law really well—at least a lot better than “those bad people” (whoever we decide they are). We can end up arrogant, full of baseless pride, and terribly lacking in self-awareness. That is not the salvation our God wants for us. When things like these happen, the law has only served to correctly condemn us. The problem is not the law. It is God’s true word. It is the way we misunderstand and misuse it. God, forgive us anytime we ever do this. Please use your good law to make us free to know, love, and become more like you.

The truth of the Good News of Christ is that our only hope is to be received by God’s grace and mercy. He has to clean us of our sin in order for us to be made acceptable before Him. As Peter says in v. 11, “. . . We are saved through the grace of our Lord Jesus. Those who aren’t Jews are saved in the same way.” Ephesians 2:8-9 puts it this way: “God’s grace has saved you because of your faith in Christ. Your salvation doesn’t come from anything you do. It is God’s gift. It is not based on anything you have done. No one can brag about earning it.”

Have you ever paid for a gift? Of course not. If you pay for it, it isn’t a gift. In the same way, the Bible’s God teaches that we are (a) not saved by works, (b) not

saved by faith and works, but (c) saved by a faith *that* works. If we sincerely receive the gift of Christ's death on the cross to pay the price of our sins, nothing needs to be added to that. He was the perfect sacrifice. And we are not good enough apart from Him to add to His work, anyway. So we accept the teachings made famous in the Protestant Reformation: salvation by faith alone, in Christ alone, through grace alone, in accordance with the teachings of God's word alone, to the glory of God alone (in Latin, *sola fide, solus Christus, sola gratia, sola Scriptura, soli Deo gloria*).

Of course, none of this means that as Christ-followers, we don't need to make any effort to learn anything, grow stronger in our faith, or become greater in any way. We will do many good works *as a result* of being joined with Christ in faith. But we will do them in His strength, at His guidance, and none of them will make us any more acceptable to Him to be His children than we were before we did them. Being a member of a church does not save us. Having a perfect attendance record in church activities cannot save us. Giving a very large offering, spending many hours doing volunteer work, many years in study of God's word, walking down the aisle of a church and saying certain words of a prayer when a preacher gives an invitation to follow Christ—none of these in itself has the power to save a person. They are all very good things, and God may lead you to do many or all of them at certain times. But we must not confuse them with faith itself or try to add them as requirements. Only trusting in God to lead you will take you into the kingdom of heaven.

And, again, this teaching about the centrality of grace is not only about the *entry point* to our life of faith. It also tells us how we must live it from *day to day*—by grace, through His mercy, depending on Him to keep us walking in the right path.

Going back to v. 11, there is something interesting happening in the wording in the NIRV we are using. This version can make it a little difficult to see. Other translations make it clearer. For example, the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) has it: “. . . We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they [the non-Jewish believers] will.” The New International Version (NIV) puts it this way: “We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”

We might expect Peter to say, “. . . They are saved, just as we are.” But he doesn't. He switches it around and says, “We are saved, just as they are.” He seems to be suggesting something similar to “There's something we could learn from these newcomers. They are showing what simple, true salvation is. It comes by grace, through faith. That's it and that's all. You don't need to add anything to it, and you must not.”

After these bold words from Peter, the missionaries speak. We read (v. 12), “Everyone became quiet as they listened to Barnabas and Paul.” Wow! Quiet! This is remarkable! If you have been around people who have deeply held beliefs about God and His word, you know how passionately they can argue for them. There may be some cultural things happening here, too. A coworker of mine who studied in Israel says he often heard heated debates with “the spit flying” when very expressive people got so excited about making their points. The fact that so many people with

such different and deep convictions could be quiet at the same time points out how profound Barnabas and Paul's message is here.

Then in v. 15a, James is speaking. (This is James, the brother of Jesus. It's not James, one of the 12 disciples of Jesus we read about in the gospels ["Peter, James, and John," appear often]. Remember, this James has been killed under King Herod's order, in Acts 12.) James affirms Peter's words about how God loved non-Jewish people and chose some of them to be His own, even in Old Testament days. He says, "The prophets' words agree with that." He gives an example from the Old Testament book of prophecy, Amos, in 9:11-12. Another clear example is Jeremiah 31:31-34.

"A new day is coming," announces the Lord. "I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel. I will also make it with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their people long ago. That was when I took them by the hand. I led them out of Egypt. But they broke my covenant. They did it even though I was like a husband to them," announces the Lord. "This is the covenant I will make with Israel after that time," announces the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds. I will write it on their hearts. I will be their God. And they will be my people. A man will not need to teach his neighbor anymore. And he will not need to teach his friend anymore. He will not say, 'Know the Lord.' Everyone will know me. From the least important of them to the most important, all of them will know me," announces the Lord. "I will forgive their evil ways. I will not remember their sins anymore."

God made the Old Testament covenant with His people, Israel. But when Jesus came, He announced that God was making a new covenant with His people, a fulfillment of the old one, which His people had not kept. The new covenant was with everyone in the world who would believe and enter the covenant by making the sincere promise to do so by faith. Covenants were established by shedding of blood, the Old Testament covenant by sacrifices of animals, and the New Testament covenant by Jesus' death on the cross. Soon before dying, He told His followers the words which we remember when we have the Lord's Supper ceremony here. In Matthew 26:27-28 we read: "Then he took the cup. He gave thanks and handed it to them. He said, 'All of you drink from it. This is my blood of the new covenant. It is poured out to forgive the sins of many.'" That's why we sing in an old hymn, "Jesus paid it all. All to him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain. He washed it white as snow."

With all this in view, the council in Jerusalem reaches its decision. In vv. 19-20, James says, "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood."

Again, this is James speaking. The Catholic Church has taught for many years that Peter was the first leader of Christ's Church after Jesus returned to heaven. He was the first Pope, in other words, in their understanding. Yet it doesn't seem as simple as an arrangement as that, with Peter in charge of things, reading this verse.

James seems to be in a position of quite a bit of authority, too, perhaps alongside Peter.

Back to this short list of directions which the council sends in a letter to the new non-Jewish Christians (repeated in v. 29). This may be easy to misunderstand. It could sound like a whole new list of commands that new believers have to follow. This just after the church leaders have told them that they don't have to keep all the laws of the Old Testament? Is this just placing a *lighter* burden on them, but still a burden, while telling them they are free in Christ?

No, that is not really the point at all. These are not commands about what you have to do to be saved. They are requests, or instructions, given to the new non-Jewish members of Christ's Church *for practical reasons*. In particular, these are things that will help non-Jewish Christians to get along with their Jewish-background brothers and sisters in Christ.

Remember that all or nearly all the first Christians were Jews, as Jesus was. So these people had lived their whole lives in a culture where avoiding eating the meat of animals which had been strangled was very, very important. It was the clear command of God—not apparently for all people in all situations for all time, but specifically for His chosen people, the nation of Israel. Part of God's purpose was to teach them to live by faith. The fact that God said it was reason enough. Another part of the many food-related restrictions apparently was to protect health, in an age when of course there were no refrigerators and avoiding disease was very difficult. Likewise, what people in Greek and Roman culture often thought was normal sexual behavior was shockingly immoral according to Jewish Old Testament teachings.

Now in the New Testament times, with non-Jews coming into the Christian Church alongside Jews, these people from dramatically different backgrounds would have to learn to get along and serve together in God's family of faith. As v. 21 says, "These laws of Moses have been preached in every city from the earliest times. They are read out loud in the synagogues every Sabbath day." It was a similar situation in the new Christian world, with Jewish believers in many churches, both inside and outside Israel. The Jerusalem council's directions are a word to the wise among new believers about how they can keep from offending the Jewish members of their new churches. They are something along the lines of "If you will just choose to avoid eating these certain foods and keep sex inside marriage (that is, a life-long relationship of love and commitment between one man and one woman), you will get along far better with the Jewish members of your church families."

The problem with the people insisting on obedience to the Old Testament Law as a condition for salvation does not go away with the letter sent from the Church leaders in Jerusalem. To see more about this, please read through the book of Galatians. It apparently was written in large part to deal with this problem.

To conclude today's message, let's receive the instructions of II Peter 3:16b-18. Peter writes, talking about Paul's writing (such as Galatians):

People who don't know better and aren't firm in the faith twist what he says. They twist the other Scriptures too. So they will be destroyed. Dear friends, you already know that. So be on your guard. Then you won't be led down the wrong path by the mistakes of people who don't obey the law. You won't fall from your safe position. Grow in the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Get to know him better. Give him glory both now and forever. Amen.

Let's pray.

Lord, thank you for reminding us again through today's message that we live by your grace. Our whole lives are gifts from you, and everything we need to go from day to day comes from your hand. Just as we have been saved by the grace of Christ's death on the cross for us, help us to live by grace each day. Help us trust not in our own abilities or efforts but your constant presence with us for the support, guidance, protection, encouragement, and all we need. In Christ's name we ask it. Amen.