

PP Acts: To the End of the Earth

Part 39 Acts 15:1-21 *Grace conquers Legalism*

10/23-24/2021

This past spring we planted a garden for the first time, and it was an economic disaster
I even bought a tub from Tractor Supply for my rhubarb, using Palmer Nursery's Super Soil and
I got one stalk of ripened rhubarb, and a constant battle with weeds
Weeds are a constant, ever-present nuisance in gardening
There is a pernicious weed that has always grown in the church called legalism
It was growing in the young church of the 1st century, and it went by this formula: **PP Jesus + works righteousness = salvation**
You see works-righteousness in every religion *but* gospel-Christianity
In Catholicism, it is grace plus merit, Christ plus me, faith plus works that will save you
In Buddhism, you will reach nirvana by ceasing all desire through living the noble 8-fold path
In Hinduism, you escape the cycle of reincarnation by mastering the 4 Yogas
In Islam, you reach heaven by living according to the Koran to the best of your ability
This weed of legalism, of works-righteousness sprang up in the 1st century church, and threw them into a crisis so severe they had to form a council to discern through it
And what we will see today is the *disagreement* that sprang up, the *debate* that followed, the *doctrine* that addressed it, and the *decision* they came to

PP 1-The Disagreement (1-5)

The first believers were Jews, and they had grown up in Judaism with its traditions
They believed that Jesus was the Messiah, Who died for their sins, but they also believed that no one could be saved, unless they were a Jew
At first, this wasn't a serious dilemma, because almost everyone in the church was a Jew
But when more Gentiles than Jews were getting saved, an undercurrent of division developed
A persistent group of Jewish believers insisted that if a Gentile was to be saved, he must become a Jew, and for that to happen, he must identify as a Jew through circumcision
"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.'" Acts 15:1
Luke repeated this in **15:5**, there adding this group came from the party of the Pharisees: ***"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.'"*** Acts 15:5
This group, in **Acts 11:2**, was called the ***'circumcision party'***, who would grow and be called the the Judaizers, the fiercest opponents of the Apostle Paul, following him from city to city stirring up opposition against him
Paul would strongly warn of them to the church at Philippi, **PP** ***"Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh."*** Phil 3:2
You see for Paul, **PP Jesus + anything ≠ salvation**, *it is heresy!*
They taught that faith in Christ, plus keeping the Law of Moses was the means of salvation
The core of the disagreement was this question: *Is Christianity a religion of works or of grace?*
Can a person earn God's favor by keeping the Law of God?
And it launched a debate in the early church

PP 2-The Debate (6-10)

“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.” 15:2

They went to Jerusalem, the church gathered, ***‘and they declared all that God had done with them.’ (15:4)***

But the weed of legalism always grow near the garden of grace, so in the same meeting, ***“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.’” 15:5***

This is a different group than the those in group one, who were clearly not believers

Herre, in verse 5, the scripture clearly states were ***‘believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees’***

These were Chrsitians whose theology was mixed up with legalistic works righteousness

This was a critical moment for Christianity and let me allow this quote to explain it:

PP ***“To add anything to Christ as being necessary to salvation, circumcision or any human work of any kind, is to deny that Christ is the complete Savior...That is fatal. A bridge to heaven that is built of [99%] of Christ and even only 1% of anything human breaks down at the joint and ceases to be a bridge. Even if Christ be thought of as carrying us 999 miles of the way, and something merely human be required for the last mile, this would leave us hanging in the air with heaven being still far away.” R. C. H. Lenski***

Recognizing the importance of this dispute, the ***‘apostles and elders’*** held a separate meeting and there was ***‘much debate’***

While in Antioch, Paul and Barnabas ***‘had no small dissension and debate’***, and here in Jerusalem, the leadership had ***‘much debate’***

PP ***‘dissension’ in 15:2 was an uproar, ‘debate’ in 15:2, 7 meant thorough questioning***

We don’t know how many hours this debate went on, but Luke tells us Peter stood to speak and brings the gospel to bear in a speech filled with right doctrine

PP 3-The Doctrine (7b-11)

PP i. God’s giving of salvation proved His grace to the Gentiles

“God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.” 15:7

Peter basically said, saving Gentiles was God’s idea, will you dispute with Him?

PP ii. God’s giving of the Holy Spirit proved His grace to the Gentiles

‘And God, Who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit’ 8

The Gentiles were given the Spirit of God as well as the Jews...there was no difference

PP iii. God’s forgiveness of their sins proved His grace to the Gentiles

PP The fundamental nature of grace, whether we give it to one who offended us, or more perfectly God gives it to those who offend Him, it to *lovingly, willingly drop the charge against the offender*

Grace is more than unmerited favor, it is the power of God to forgive, to remove sin from us and

absolve our moral debt to Him

But Peter is not yet done...**PP iv.** *Jesus + [anything]= Salvation never worked for us Jews, so why are you applying it to the Gentiles?*

“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?” 15:10

There was a group in their midst who said, *Yes, Gentiles can be saved, we see that now, but now they must be circumcised and live according to the Law of Moses*

PP “Religion says, ‘I obey - therefore I’m accepted.’ The Gospel says, ‘I’m accepted - therefore I obey.’” Tim Keller

And now the point his whole speech was moving toward: **PP v.** *Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus alone*

God did all the work in saving us by sending Jesus to die in our place for forgiveness of sins

Even believing that truth is an expression of God’s gift of grace, for **PP** **“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” Ephesians 2:8-9**

The ‘**gift of God**’ is grammatically ‘**faith**’

Peter finishes and in essence dropped the mic, for ‘**all the assembly fell silent**’ 12

Grace is beautiful, but it is damning to the legalist

Grace means complete dependency on God and complete personal helplessness

Grace means we are guilty, grace means we deserve judgment

Grace means we failed, we couldn’t do, it requires us to acknowledge that we ought to have a bumper sticker *My child is a dishonor student*, a parking spot sign for the *Worst employee of the month*, a pink eviction notice, a visit from HR asking for our office keys and clear our desk

Friends, grace allows me to freely say, I am a flawed man, I drop the pastoral ball, I lack leadership in my home

Grace allows us to let go of this need to be right, to stop beating ourselves up for our mistakes

Grace has already judged us as guilty, and then it wipes our record clean with a divine pardon

And the message of that guilt and pardon is the good news of the gospel

When you believingly declare it, you are pulling the weeds of legalism and works-righteousness out of the soil of a person’s heart by its roots!

PP 4-The Decision (1-21)

James, the half-brother of Jesus, the leader of the church of Jerusalem, stood and led them to a final decision

“we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God” 15:19

They should not ‘**trouble**’ Gentiles, inferring not to require them to be circumcised to be saved

But then, James wisely shows us how to maintain fellowship between Jews and Gentiles: **“but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols...” 15:20a**

All over the Roman Empire, a worshiper would bring animal to be offered at a pagan temple

Only a small part of the animal was offered, the rest divided between the priest and worshiper

The worshiper would hold a feast and invite even Christians to celebrate their god with them,

while the priests would sell most of their share to the local butcher for a profit, who

would in turn sell it at the local marketplace

Eating this meat did not spiritually pollute anyone, but it was forbidden under the Law of Moses, as was ***'sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood'*** 20b

James said, *Gentiles, you are saved by grace, through faith, in Christ alone, and there is nothing more you need in order to be saved*

Paul learned from James and later instructed the church at Corinth along the lines of freedom

PP ***"But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble."*** 1 Corinthians 8:9-13

Your conscience may allow you to pagan sacrificed meat, but another believer's conscience may interpret that as permission to not only do likewise, but worse, begin to believe that idolatry itself is not really an offense to God

Next week we will look at how our freedoms in Christ have boundaries so as not to harm our unity and fellowship

I conclude with this thought: The weeds of legalism always grow in the garden of grace, and we must learn to pull them up by the truths of the gospel

PP *Salvation is by grace, through faith, in Christ alone, apart from any work whatsoever!*

Pray