

September 15, 2024

As You Are Going: God's Grace or Good Works?

Acts 15:6-35

Vernon Advent Christian Church

Intro...

Last week, as we have continued our way through the Book of Acts, we read that Paul and Barnabas had returned from their first missionary journey and had told all that God had done among the Gentiles and that many had come to faith. As has previously been the case, those who belonged to the party of the pharisees made the argument that the Gentiles had to follow the Law of Moses, specifically circumcision, in order to be saved. And this issue became the most hotly contested theological issue of the early church. This is where the rubber meets the road so to speak. And the question was essentially this: "What is the nature of the gospel?" Is salvation based on grace alone through faith alone in the work of Jesus Christ alone or must the works of the law also be performed in order for a person to be saved?

As we've mentioned before, this debate began as soon as the church went beyond Jerusalem in Acts 8. And there it was only partially answered when Philip began to preach to the Samaritans followed by Peter & John coming and the Samaritans receiving the Holy Spirit. The wall of division that had separated them from the Jews was knocked down by the gospel, but the Samaritans were a mixture of Jewish and Gentile blood and they already followed many of the Jewish practices.

The next time this issue came to a head was in Acts 10 when Peter was preaching the gospel to Cornelius and those with him. These Gentiles believed and received the Holy Spirit as well. When Peter returned to Jerusalem and the issue was discussed it was conceded that God had granted to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life. This was a huge step, but the issue of Gentile conversions had not yet been totally resolved because Cornelius was a devout Gentile, a proselyte who, again, was already following some Jewish practices. The question became, "What about Gentiles who were not proselytes to Judaism and didn't follow any Jewish laws?"

That is a question that became critical following the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas. This debate was to be settled in Jerusalem, so Paul and Barnabas travel there to have this matter discussed among the Apostles and the leadership of the church. This meeting of the minds became known as the Jerusalem Council and by the end of it, the debate would be settled, at least as far as the church was concerned. This is where we pick up the story as continue on in our study of Acts. If you're able, please stand with me as I read the Word of God this morning beginning in vs. 6 of ch. 15, and as I read through vs. 35.

[Read Passage]

This issue was serious enough to not simply leave it alone or to leave it up to the conscience of each individual believer. This was a matter of salvation and need to be decided so that the message of the Gospel could continue to be preached among the Gentiles without any hinderance. It's important for us to know that these men did not come up with this important doctrine of the church on their own, but, as we'll see later, this was God's plan all along and they were coming into agreement with God and what he had already been doing and what he was going to continue to do in the church.

The word for debate here in vs. 6 is not arguing, but the searching out of a question or controversy. This is a "who's who" of the early church. I mean think about it, 10 of the original

12 disciples were there. (Judas Iscariot was dead after his betrayal and James the brother of John was martyred in Ch. 12) James the brother of Jesus, known as James the Just, and also the author of the Book of James, had become the leader of the Jerusalem Church was there. And Paul and Barnabas were obviously there at the center of the discussion.

And in the middle of this discussion, Peter takes the floor and speaks in vs. 7-11. And he speaks about his experience when God had him preach the gospel to the Gentiles at the home of Cornelius, which I mentioned earlier, and that the Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit just as they themselves did on the day of Pentecost.

And from there, Peter makes a few observations. First, he concluded that God did not make a distinction though the Gentiles did not follow the Mosaic law in any way. And this came straight from his vision of the clean and unclean animals, from which God taught him this principle, "God has shown to me that I should not call any man common or unclean." (Acts 10:28) Those of the sect of the Pharisees who believed thought that the Gentiles were inherently "common" or "unclean," in the sense of being unholy, and had to be made holy and clean by submitting to the Law of Moses. But Peter showed how the heart is made clean in vs. 9, by faith not by keeping of the law. If they were cleansed by faith, then there was no need to be cleansed by submitting to ceremonies found in the Law of Moses.

Secondly, Peter says they should not put a burden, or a yoke, upon the Gentiles that their neither fathers, nor they themselves, could bear. His point is those of the sect of the Pharisees who believed made a critical mistake. They looked at Israel's history under the law with eyes of nostalgia, not truth. If they had carefully and truthfully considered Israel's history of failure under the law, they would not have been so quick to also put Gentiles under the law. Paul made the same argument in Galatians 3:2-3. If the law does not save us, why would we return to it as the principle by which we live? In light of the finished work of Jesus, it offends God to go back to the law. This is why Peter asked, "why are you putting God to the test?"

Peter's third point is that salvation was through the grace of the Lord Jesus both for the Jews and the Gentiles alike. The phrase, "we are saved" shows that salvation was God's action upon man through the grace of the Lord Jesus. This statement is pointing out the condition upon which they as Jews were saved, and not just commenting on how the Gentiles were saved. Salvation is not something they, the Jews, had accomplished for themselves. The Jews were also saved through the same grace of the Lord Jesus and not through the keeping of the law.

After Peter speaks, everyone there fell silent in vs. 12 whether through contemplation or shock, we're not told, but then Paul and Barnabas begin to speak. In this summary statement, we're not told exactly what they said but we assume they were making their case by giving more detail about what had happened on their missionary journey. The wording here indicates that it may have taken awhile for them to finish telling all that had God had done. Their firsthand testimony was the evidence that this was the hand of God and that they were his messengers. The indication is that those who were demanding that the Gentiles also keep the law of Moses and their traditions did not have any such miracles in their ministry to point to.

After Barnabas and Paul finished speaking, and after hearing all sides of the debate, James, as the key leader in the Jerusalem church, gave his verdict in vs. 13-21. He first calls attention to Peter's speech concerning God's work in the case of Cornelius. He then specifically points out the prophecy of Amos 9:11-12 which declares God's promise of a future restoration of Israel which also included hope for the Gentiles. James uses Amos as an example of the Old Testament prophecies which agree with what Peter had just related to them.

His point is that the Old Testament prophecies did not make additional demands on the Gentiles in order for them to come to faith. And since Peter had shown that the Gentiles have been saved by grace alone then there is no reason to require the Gentiles to additionally become Jewish and follow the Law of Moses in order for them to be saved.

Based on these arguments, James then gives his personal judgement and advice. First, the Gentiles should not be troubled by having the Law of Moses imposed on them. Second, the Gentiles should be careful and not let their freedom unnecessarily offend the Jews faithful to Moses who were scattered around the world. They were to do this by abstaining from things polluted by idols and abstaining from sexual immorality both of which would have come from their former pagan lifestyles and were both sin and an offense to the Jews. They were also to abstain from meat from animals that had been strangled and from eating blood. These last two were related to one another as animals that were strangled would still have had the blood in them which was specifically condemned in Lev. 17 and, although not a sin, would have been a great offense to their Jewish brothers and sisters.

It's important to realize these were not new rules for the Gentiles to follow in order to earn God's favor, as that would have just went back to more rule following. But James' advice was given to keep the harmony between Gentile and Jewish believers and also helped the Gentile believers have credibility with Jewish non-believers so as to gain a hearing. He points out in vs. 21 that there were Jews who adhered to Moses throughout the known world and those who wanted to follow Moses could do so by going to one of these Synagogues. James' conclusion is that the Gentile believers were to show respect towards both Jewish believers and unbelievers in order to have a platform to share the Gospel, but they were not required to follow Mosaic law in regards to salvation.

After carefully examining the issues involved James' judgement seemed good to the apostles, the elders and the whole church, so they choose men to go back to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas to bring a letter with them telling them of their decision in vs 22-29. Judas Barsabbas and Silas are chosen. Silas, also known as Silvanus, will become an important figure in the early church as he is the same Silas that will accompany Paul on his second missionary journey.

Notice that this letter is not only addressed to the church in Antioch but also to the believers in the areas where Paul and Barnabas had been on their journey. The implication here is that this would now apply to every new Gentile convert going forward, including you and I. And the letter is then a re-stating of what happened during the council and their decision.

And next see the results in vs. 30-35 and, as you can imagine, the congregation in Antioch rejoiced at the encouragement of the letter. Their salvation would no longer be questioned. They would not have to keep the Mosaic law to be saved or accepted, and the restrictions given were not law, but requests made to encourage harmony in the church among Jews and Gentiles. We're told that Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch to continue preaching and teaching and harmony had been restored in the church.

Why is this important for us today? Well, we might not think of it in terms of keeping the Law of Moses but there is, and has always been, a popular notion that God accepts good people and rejects bad people. And most people operate under this idea that God accepts or rejects people based on some level of goodness and/or religious performance. This was, ultimately, the issue at hand in our passage today and the church made a stand on the truth of what God had done. You see, the problem with this idea is that being good is not enough to save a person. Why? Because no one can be good enough, for good enough would mean perfection. And no

matter how good a person is, no one has perfectly kept the whole law. And therefore, we all stand condemned and face God's judgement. So in order to be saved from God's wrath, we need something, or someone, else to save us. Paul makes this clear when he writes to the Ephesians in the passage we heard earlier during the call to worship, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast." (Eph. 2:8-9)

Just prior to these verses, in vs. 7, it says that God has given incredible blessings to those who are in Christ "in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus." In other words, God has chosen to save sinners, not based on their goodness but on His kindness. He does this to demonstrate His grace. By definition, grace is God's undeserved and unmerited favor given as a free gift based on the kind intentions of God to us who have no rightful claim to it.

And Paul says we are saved "through faith." In order to be saved, there is a necessary human response to God's grace. The response is not trying to be "good enough" to be saved, but simply trusting, or having faith in, God to save on the basis of Christ's goodness. We must understand that faith is not a good work in itself that God rewards. Faith is simply casting our unworthy selves on the mercy of a kind and forgiving and gracious God.

"And this is not from yourselves." This refers to the whole plan and process of "salvation by grace through faith." Salvation-by-grace-through-faith is not from ourselves but is "a gift of God, not of works." Once again, the nature of grace is reiterated. This whole plan and process of salvation comes from God as a gift, not from ourselves as the result of works or good things that we have done so that we have nothing to boast about except about how good God is.

The passage does not end at verse 9. Verse 10 is necessary to complete Paul's thought. Someone might wonder what place good works have in the life of a Christian. We are not saved by doing good works, but we are saved for the purpose of doing good works: "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." Good works are a vital part of the Christian life because doing good is one of the reasons God saves us—He has things for us to do. In other words, he has a mission for us. But the order is important—good works are not the cause of salvation but the purpose of it. God saves us so that we can go into the world as his ambassadors, doing good works in His name, and this brings Him all the more glory.

It is crucial to ask ourselves, "What do I rely on for my salvation?" Are you relying upon simply being a good person, or do you recognize that you have nothing to contribute and simply cast yourself upon the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ?

At the conclusion of our text today, the Jews were free to follow their traditions and culture as they chose to do so, recognizing this, in and of itself, didn't save them, but that they were saved through the grace of Jesus in the same way as the Gentiles. And the Gentiles would not be required to become Jewish and follow the Law of Moses in order to be saved. They were only asked to be careful to refrain from certain practices that would be a serious offense to Jews. It was a matter of living in harmony with other believers and maintaining a proper witness to unbelievers.

These two principles are still true today. First and foremost, we are saved by God's grace alone and not our works. And we are to live in a way that demonstrates our love for other believers by not using our freedom to cause them to stumble and also our love for the unbeliever by living a life that reflects Jesus Christ in order to have opportunities to share the Gospel. If we are going to be a church on mission, we must keep things two things in mind. Let's pray.