

Day 54, Acts 15

by David Servant

The sermon discusses the Jerusalem council's decision in Acts 15 and how it relates to salvation by grace and the importance of conscience.

Description

David Servant preaches on the similarities between Acts 15 and Paul's letter to the Galatians, emphasizing the issue of circumcision and the Law of Moses faced by the early church. He addresses how false grace teachers twist the message to promote a strange gospel, highlighting the importance of understanding the ceremonial and ritualistic aspects of the Law of Moses. The sermon delves into the persuasive arguments presented at the Jerusalem council, focusing on Peter's defense of salvation by grace and James' recommendations for Gentile believers. It concludes with the reconciliation between Paul and Barnabas over Mark, showing how relationships can be restored and individuals can grow in service.

Transcript

unlike Jesus' 'easy yoke' (Matt. 11:30)." - "Peter maintained that we are saved by grace." - "It was out of consideration for Jews that James recommended to the council that they request believing Gentiles to 'abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood' (15:20)." applicationPoints: - "Believers should follow their conscience and not cause others to stumble." - "The law of Christ and the law of conscience were never called into question." - "Salvation is by grace, not by following the Mosaic Law." keywords: - "Acts 15" - "Galatians" - "Jerusalem council" - "Gentile believers" - "Circumcision" - "Law of Moses" - "Mosaic Law" - "Salvation by grace" - "Conscience" - "Law of Christ" ---

You should have felt right at home reading Acts 15 today, having just read Paul's letter to the Galatians. Both focus on the same problem and both reveal the same remedy. It stands to reason that Paul wrote his Galatian letter before the Jerusalem council of Acts 15, otherwise he would have surely mentioned it in his letter.

Sadly, what we read today is often twisted by false grace teachers to promote their strange gospel. Notice, however, that the issue was not whether Gentiles should obey the law of Christ. Rather, the issue was circumcision and the Law of Moses (15:1, 5), and more specifically, the ceremonial and ritualistic aspects of the Law of Moses, since the Gentile believers would have been keeping the moral aspects of the Mosaic Law by virtue of the fact that they were following Christ's commandments. Thus, their deficiencies

in the eyes of the false teachers were only regarding circumcision and rituals, which allegedly disqualified them from being saved (15:1).

Luke highlighted the most persuasive arguments presented at the gathering of the Jerusalem elders and apostles. Peter recounted how God dramatically poured out His Spirit on the first Gentiles who believed the gospel, and without requiring their circumcision. Echoing Paul's words that we read yesterday (Gal. 6:13), Peter also questioned why his theological opponents would expect Gentile believers to keep laws that none of them had ever kept. The Mosaic Law was an impossible yoke---unlike Jesus' "easy yoke" (Matt. 11:30). Peter maintained that we are saved by grace.

It was out of consideration for Jews that James recommended to the council that they request believing Gentiles to "abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood" (15:20). Notice that the basis for his recommendation was not "because God requires these things of them to be saved," but because "Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath" (15:21). That is, if the Gentile believers ate what was sacrificed to idols, or meat from animals that had been strangled rather than butchered so that the blood was drained---practices that were particularly abhorrent to scrupulous Jews---it could well be a stumbling block to their salvation. Additionally, those practices could also offend believing Jews within the church who did not yet fully understand their freedom from the Mosaic Law.

Paul would later address these same issues in two of his letters, stating that it was not a sin to eat meat sacrificed to idols, but that one should abstain from doing so if it would cause a brother to stumble (Rom. 14:1-23, Cor. 10:19-33).

What about the council's recommendation that believing Gentiles abstain from "fornication"? Would not fornication be forbidden in the law of Christ? So why was it emphasized here?

Because the other three recommendations focused on eating offenses, it is likely that "fornication" here is a reference to eating meat that was purchased at a pagan temple where sex with a temple prostitute was a regular religious practice. Believing Gentiles who maintained any connection with their former pagan practices---even if it was nothing more than purchasing meat from a pagan temple which had been strangled, sacrificed to idols, or connected to some sexual perversion---may well have discredited their testimonies in the eyes of observing, unbelieving Jews.

Four respected representatives delivered the council's decision to the Antioch believers, and it is no wonder they rejoiced when they heard it, having faced the prospect of lining up to be circumcised without anesthesia, not to mention the prospect of having to keep the entire Law of Moses! But don't make the error of thinking that the sum total of everything God expected of them was found in those four recommendations. The law of Christ and the law of conscience were never called into question.

Paul and Barnabas' disagreement and split over Mark finds a happier ending many years later, when Paul wrote to Timothy, "Pick up Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for service" (2 Tim. 4:11). Paul softened, or Mark improved! Or both!

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