

2/11/24 - Acts 15:1-35 - "The Idol of Works-based Salvation"

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[0 : 00] We're reading Acts chapter 15 verses 1 through 35, beginning in verse 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.

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.

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.

When 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. 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. The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. And 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 and the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.

[1 : 24] And God who knows the heart bore witness to them by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us. And he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.

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?

But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus just as they will. 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.

After they finished speaking, James replied, Brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name.

And with this, the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, 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, that the remnant of mankind may see the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old.

[2 : 39] Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, 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.

For from ancient times, ancient generations, Moses has had, for he has read every Sabbath in the synagogues. 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, with the following letter. The brothers, both the apostles and elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles, in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings.

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 instruction, 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. Men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth.

[4 : 01] For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements, that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, from blood and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality.

If you keep yourself from these, you will do well. Farewell. So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them. But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord with many others also.

This is the word of the Lord. Amen. Thanks be to God. It's awesome to be gathered in a full congregation.

[5 : 10] We might need to get some more seats in here. Praise God for the work that He does through the word and through the power of the Holy Spirit. We are in Acts 15, and we've made it to a critical point in our Acts series.

And surveying this book, as well as surveying church history, it's difficult to see past all the various tensions that have been raised throughout history.

The internal strife, the internal warfare that goes on within an assembly of believers. And we often think of fights in the church having to do with the location of the piano or if you have an organ or not. We have the pipes, but they don't work, so we kind of meet halfway with those folks. We can find disagreements and fights over church worship service times, maybe the order of worship, maybe the style of music, maybe even homeschooling or public schooling, which is a big one in our day-to-day.

These are all simply bad fights. Those are all bad fights. Acts 15 helps us to see a good fight. And what we see in Acts 15 is a good fight.

[6 : 36] Because a good fight is defined by one where the gospel is at stake. Amen? I know you guys are kind of scared to say amen after last week, but you can be confident.

I'll trigger the amens today for Les. He's sick today. But a good fight is one where the gospel is at stake.

It's important for us to see. Carmen's going to break the ice. But with all these fights, we have to wonder, why?

Why do we fight? Why do we argue? That's a really good question. Is there a common denominator in all of these fights?

What's the reason? Why do people create such a big deal about things that are significant and argue and leave churches over a piano location?

[7 : 47] Why? Well, I believe the answer is that we tend to create idols. This is the transcendent root of so many quarrels throughout history.

It is the common denominator. We create idols. And while we may not identify with worshiping and creating idols like carved images and things of that nature, idols are not simply limited to graven images.

But any person, any possession, any purpose, any pursuit that takes priority over God. that takes priority or precedence over God.

Where God is kind of pushed to the side and we usher in something more important than Him. It's usually subjective. Well, Acts 15 is an important moment in church history.

We enter into the very first fight, official fight in Jerusalem. a fight that exposed idolatry of tradition and legalism.

[9 : 02] And the trickiest part of it all is that all the parties that are involved in this fight in Acts 15, this is tricky, they are all trying to glorify God in this fight.

And that's what makes this fight tricky. Imagine that. Everyone thinking, how to follow God the right way. And everyone's torn up about that.

Well, we enter the ring today. And I invite you to experience the tension as it grows and resolves in this early church. And I want us to see that this passage defines that the gospel is at stake when our works save us.

The gospel is at stake when our works save us. We will see that unfold in this passage in three different sections. And I invite you to take note of the sermon title.

A little bland for the series of the past few weeks, but it's titled The Idol of Works-Based Salvation. And I'd like to pray as we go into this.

[10:19] So please join me in prayer. Father, thank You for Your Word that You've given to us. A guide, a measuring stick of what is true and what is false, how to follow You well, and how to tell if we're doing it poorly.

And Father, I pray that You give us grace through Your Holy Spirit to open our hearts, open our minds to Your Word and to Your truth. Help us to understand it. Help us to grapple with it. Help us to be challenged by it. Help me to speak clearly today in an effort that You may be glorified through Your Word. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. Amen. And so the first section that we see today is the idolatry of works. And Paul is on his trip back from his first missionary journey.

So he's finished his little route. He's gone out and then came back. And we enter into like the end, the tail end of that report.

[11:34] And Luke, the narrator, the author of the book of Acts, he gives a little bit of commentary of what's going on. Tensions rising.

And he writes in verse 1 of Acts 15, 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. Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved. 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. In these first three verses, we see that tension begin to build. Tension began to rise as these men were teaching that you are saved through the works of circumcision.

And this obviously contradicts everything that God had been doing on this missionary journey throughout the region and throughout the ends of the earth. And now, circumcision, we don't want to get too graphic.

[12:57] It's to circumcise. It means to cut around. You can, you know, if you understand that, great. If not, good. But it's circumcision. And this was a religious rite.

It was required of all Abraham's descendants. It was a sign. Circumcision was a sign of the covenant that God made with His people.

This stems back to Genesis 17 and was even reiterated in Leviticus, in the Mosaic Law in Leviticus 12. And this act of works became a means of salvation.

That which was intended to be a sign became a means of salvation. And dare I say, this work became an idolatry. An idol.

Maybe if I want to speak English, it became an idol. And maybe for some of us, we might minimize the disputes in our day. You just kind of, when people are arguing about the location of the piano, you're just like, okay, I'm going this way.

[14:08] Let me know how it turns out for you. Or maybe just be reclusive from any sort of conflict at all in our day. And we just let the good vibes win.

You do you. I do me. We're all good. Good vibes. But that's not good. Salvation through works is not a small issue, church.

Salvation through works is not a small issue. You can fill in the blank in our day with even denominations that believe that speaking in tongues is evidence of salvation.

That that is a works-based faith which is false. We still get this wrong today. Don't think that it's a circumcision problem. It's an idolatry problem that rests within our hearts.

And minimizes faith. There is no small dissension and debate in here in verse 2. This was a big issue.

[15:08] And I encourage you to look at this as a big issue in our day-to-day and highly Catholic area that Youngstown is around here. And in verse 3 through 5, the parties make their way to settle this dispute.

They get a third party involved. I don't think this is necessarily warranting for like a church government where you got to have a hierarchy overseeing the churches. I think simply they were looking to settle a dispute and got a third party as we all probably have once had in our lives where we can't work something out.

We can't find the common denominator. And so we get a third party involved. And so yeah, they go to Jerusalem. They're on the road. And on the road back, Paul and Barnabas, they're testifying of

salvation to the Gentiles.

They don't stop piping about it. They can't say enough about it of what God is doing, salvifically speaking. And they reach Jerusalem and still this issue of works is circulating in verse 5 of chapter 15.

Again, even back in Jerusalem, Pharisees rose up and said, it is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.

[16:33] Church, as we see the tension rise, we need to also realize that as the Gospel grows, dissension will also grow.

There's no way around it. The Gospel faces the pride in our hearts and tells us to get out of the way and to humbly submit to it.

The Gospel calls us to it. And in fact, all the haters, all the trolls that seem to come out of the woodwork sort of uniquely confirm Gospel truth.

It's like, go ahead and hate. Hate more on it. Because we never press against, the world never presses against things that aren't true, that don't matter. And so if the world is pressing against the Gospel, that should indicate that there's something true about it.

And so as the Gospel grows, dissension will grow as well. In other words, opposition sets truth apart.

[17:45] And that's how we can view the world. The Gospel creates dissension because it is in fact true. It is true. And we can certainly understand that the church must fight when works become intermingled with salvation as a means of salvation.

The church must fight. And I want you to understand that. Let's see this tension continue to rise in this second section of the idolatry of distinctions. So we see that the idolatry that's on the forefront has to do with works.

Let's take that a little bit deeper. What does circumcision have to do with it? This was how Jews were distinct from Gentiles.

Maybe that might be the heart of the matter. And so Luke continues in verse 6, the apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. Works-based salvation.

And 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.

[19:10] And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them by giving them the Holy Spirit just as He did to us.

And He made no distinction between us and them having cleansed their hearts by faith. Peter becomes the first one to make a public remark in this assembly.

Lord only knows how much time had passed in this much debate as verse 7 says. but He was a first-hand eyewitness to the testimony of God's salvation to the Gentile people.

This completely revolutionized His conviction over His history of what He was raised in, how He thought and how He viewed the law of Moses and how works played into it because He's seeing before His very eyes a Gentile household of Cornelius back in Acts 11.

They were converted. It was like the Gentile Pentecost. The first Pentecost was to the Jewish nation in Jerusalem in Acts 2. And then in Acts 11, it was the Gentile Pentecost.

[20:33] And all of a sudden, the Gospel was being spread in other unknown languages to Peter. And he's standing back in Cornelius' house saying, well, this changes things.

Right? The resistance here is baffling from the Jewish people. And so Peter concludes.

He says, now, I'm an eyewitness. This really happened. They were really speaking in other languages. I'm not making this up. Even God approached me, Peter says, on a rooftop about eating food.

I'm sitting here scared about defiling myself in Acts 11. If you remember that part, this was revolutionizing Peter's conviction. And he concludes, to this assembly, now, therefore, this is pretty harsh, 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.

But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus just as they will.

[21:56] This is a mic drop. The resistance towards the grace of God tests God.

This is the testimony of the wilderness shenanigans in Exodus. There was very sharp judgment to those who were testing God in the wilderness and they would not reach the promised land.

There was great judgment to Ananias and Sapphira in the book of Acts who tested God. Not only that, it places a yoke of burden upon the Gentiles.

One that the Jews themselves are unable to carry. They have certainly become completely blind to the problem that lies within their hearts.

You see, what's the big deal? idolizing works makes faith in Christ insufficient for salvation. I know that that's just a sentence I may have passed you by, but it is critical.

[23 : 06] Listen, idolizing works makes faith in Christ insufficient for salvation. And what does it do to grace? Voids it.

there is no grace to those who can achieve on their own. Do you understand why this is a worthy fight for the church?

Through the blood of Jesus Christ alone, God has removed man-made barriers that obstructed the way to God.

The yoke that He has removed of mankind on the account of their faith. It is all through faith. And look at this mic drop, the response of this assembly.

Look in verse 12. And all the assembly fell silent. Praise God. They listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

[24 : 14] and we talk about our theology of signs and wonders and how we can look at those appropriately. Well, in this early foundation of laying the foundation of the church in the early first century, it was critical to validate and to authoritatively establish that this is God's Word and God's way.

This is how God has done it through even Moses' leadership in the wilderness through miracles, through signs and wonders. And He continues to do it here in the foundation of the early church. It reinforces authority. You can't debate signs and wonders. This is how God did it in redemptive history. And so, as the chatter began to die down, praise God, and I'm sure a lot of people were excited about that, guys arguing over something that seems pretty clear.

James jumps into the action. And where Peter was resting heavily upon experience, like, this is what I saw take place.

James, then, sort of takes a different approach and a different perspective. perspective. And he says, listen to your prophets, nation of Israel.

[25 : 47] Listen to Amos of what was written down. Why are you questioning this? James stands up, he says, brothers, listen to me. Simeon, relating to Peter, has related how God first visited the Gentiles to take from them a people for His name.

And with this, the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written. Who wrote it? God wrote it. Just as God planned, as it is written from the prophet Amos.

Amos 9, 11-12. He says, after this, I will return, Amos says, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen.

I will rebuild its ruins and I will restore it that 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 known from of old.

In other words, God's purpose from the beginning was to include Gentiles into the people of God. And all God is doing here is overhauling Israel.

[27 : 09] The Gentiles are no longer outcasts. They're no longer second class citizens. They're no longer at the bottom bunks of the Titanic with all the peasants down there.

No. They're sitting at the table with Leonardo DiCaprio with all those people with their watches and jewelry and the distinctions that they are the chosen people.

No. Gentiles are at the table. And what James emphasizes as he continues is so critical and it both reinforces and rebukes the people and the problem of idolatry not only just for the Gentiles but for the Jews as well he hits the problem.

He says in verse 19 therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God.

What's that called? Repentance. Those Gentiles who repent. But we should write to them these Gentile Christians to abstain to abstain from the things polluted by idols and from sexual immorality and from what has been strangled and from blood.

[28 : 36] For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him for he has read every Sabbath in the synagogues.

In other words the Gentiles this is an instruction for the Gentiles and this is a reminder for what's read in the synagogues to the Jews.

This is a direction to reinforce for the Gentiles and this is a rebuke to the Jews who are blind to what is going on regarding the moral law of Moses that is transcendent and still applicable even to this very day in history in Steel Valley Church.

You are all found guilty of idolatry and this is huge. What is happening and unfolding in this early church is what Paul expounds upon in some of his epistles that he kind of elaborates as the church. They write this little letter it's kind of just like a little memo. Anybody in a workplace you love those memos that go around don't you all? And so it's like another memo from the manager.

[29 : 52] And so they get this memo from the apostles from Jerusalem. And what he expounds upon in his epistles is simply that aspect of grafting in.

Does anybody know about the agricultural illustration of what's involved with grafting in with plants? It's a fascinating process.

I've never done it but I've watched enough YouTube videos to make sure I know at least what I'm talking about a little bit. I would love to try it. But look at this nation. They have been severed this nation down to a stump right?

This nation of Israel has been severed similar to a plant that needs to be grafted. Severed completely. What's next? You bring in another species and I don't know you tape it up and everything and somehow God does something cool and it becomes a new species.

You can't explain it but it happens. And what's the fruit that's produced? It's completely new. It has a new identity. The original plant has a new identity, a new nature, new colors, new way of life.

[31 : 09] Grafting. This passage is all about God's plan of grafting in a new species into the people of God.

This is so huge and dare I say a true Israel. You see faith in Jesus Christ grafts together a new species with new identities, new desires.

We can't explain it but those who have experienced God's grace can attest to it that He does something miraculous within our being that we know we are not the same as we once were.

This is true Israel distinction that God alone defines that circumcision does not define anymore. Not defined by man.

I've got to ask you a question of what distinctions are you living by that determine salvation? What distinctions are you living by that determine salvation?

[32 : 14] You might simply ask yourself the question to identify how you're doing with that because what distinctions do you place on others to be Christians?

What's a Christian in your minds? Right? The things that make you say, oh, how could that person be a Christian?

Look at them. Them? I know the world was very, very skeptical of the famous celebrity tattoo artist from California, Kat Von D. As she was baptized, she was once in Satanism and witchcraft and all sorts of stuff.

And to see her be baptized, clothed in white, tattoos all over her body, holes all over her face, baptized, and grafted in to the family of God.

Praise God for His grace. This is what God is doing in Acts 15, and people have a problem with it.

[33 : 25] Not them. Right? I mean, there's some churches even today that exist where I walk in and I'm like, ooh, I dress down. My car has a little bit of rust on it.

I guess I should have rented a Tesla to come to this event. Right? It's like, church, don't burden yourself with the distinctions that God never defines, and don't burden others with distinctions that God never defines.

minds. This is revolutionizing in Acts 15, these people in Acts 15, and it should continue to revolutionize our perspective of what it means to be a Christian today.

The gospel crushes the old. It rebuilds the new. Amen? And so, in the last section, you see the gospel call to abandon idolatry.

And in verse 22, they've agreed somewhat on a letter to be sent to all the Gentile Christians. And in verse 22, all the way to the end, we see a gospel call to abandon idolatry.

[34 : 46] And the resolve of this council was a critical point in church history. We like to read and learn, some of us might, maybe I'm just characterizing what I like, but, you know, reading about the great schism, you know, back between the Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox and things of

that, the Protestant Reformation, all of these things, you look at these really big fights that define splits in history.

Well, it's really critical to see this resolve in history, because this whole debate, this resolves a critical point in history that proclaimed that works for the first time in redemptive history, works are a consequence of faith, not a means for it.

This is huge. This is the first debate, and we saw that split in the great schism, we saw the Protestant Reformation splitting on the same concepts.

Works are a consequence of faith, not a means for it. faith. This is the precise emphasis of James' letter. James is emphasizing as he stands up in this assembly, and you see some similarities between his book, because what does he say in the book of James?

Faith without works is dead. He's not saying to go and start this denomination that says, oh, well, because James, this one verse taken out of all complete context is saying that we need works.

[36 : 20] to have faith. We're missing the point entirely, church. Faith without works is dead, because works are a consequence of faith. If you have no works, you have no faith.

It's a logical progression, and we cannot get it wrong and backwards. In other words, works don't save. Works validate faith.

And so, their concern is to validate the faith of Gentiles. how to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, like Colossians says. In verse 23 all the way to 29, the first apostolically authoritative letter is distributed as sort of like a memo, as a short letter.

Kind of like the book of Jude or something like that. It's distributed throughout the region. And this literary work, this writing down in letters to the church, would be the means of the foundational laying and establishment of the first century church.

The very letters that we have canonized and bound before us today are a fruit of this letter first being sent and directing and guiding. And what was the thrust of this letter in verse 29?

[37 : 35] Abandon idolatry. To turn, to abstain from idolatry. In verse 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. That's what he says. I mean, if you want to do it well, how to live the Christian life, this is how you do it well.

These hit the two vital areas of our lives. Food, and entertainment. Super Bowl is coming up. And I'm going to be hard this year. I'm not going to be hard yet.

Because then I'd be adding the scripture here. But food, food and fun, we'll just call it, abstain from idolatrous influences.

In the Corinthian church, this was an issue who thought it was harmless because they viewed the grace of God so highly that they thought it was harmless to eat meat offered to sacrifice and sacrifice to pagan idols because they knew that their God was nothing and they're hungry, so whatever, it's food, so we're just going to eat it.

[38 : 56] Well, no, you still shouldn't do that. And that was a big problem in the Corinthian church. But man, abstaining from sexual immorality, this is a broad term referring to prohibited sexual relationships.

relationships. This is a term that's defined by the Bible. That's according to many different expressions, and I think it's important to clarify terms that sexual immorality has many different departments that the culture doesn't want to deal with today relating to incest, sexual relationships between family members, or idolatry, the violation of marriage vows, or prostitution, sex trade for money and goods, or fornication, which is sexual activity outside of marriage, or rape, sexual violation towards another, or even, may I say, homosexuality, sexual relations between the same sex.

If you need verses to back that up, this isn't a talk about sexual immorality. You can look on our notes website, on our website to get the list of verses.

This is defined as by God in Scripture regarding these two departments of life, food and fun.

Those food prohibitions sort of may seem irrelevant to our culture today, but the principle behind them is still valid. The principle behind them is still valid.

[40 : 28] And moreover, idolatry in a Christian life calls into question anyone's profession of faith. faith. It's really hard to be a gay Christian, isn't it, according to the Bible.

