

Acts 15:1-35

So far Acts threats internal & external to Church. Last Week Paul stoned, left for dead (external)
This Week We'll see a Threat from Within the Church

Read 15:1-5

Paul & Barnabas Present a Theological Issue w/ Legalism

Vs.1 *"Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren that they must be circumcised according to the custom of Moses in order to be saved".*

Today, Legalism Rears Its Ugly Head in Several Ways.

1. Unsaved World Promotes Legalism Through Prioritization of Self Deeds.

- Every other world view is predicated upon what I must do to elevate myself to God.
- Every other world view is a balance sheet attempting to have more good works than bad.

2. Some Churches Promote Legalism Through Requirements in Addition to Faith in Jesus

- Some churches require tongues, or baptism, or church membership.
- We often refer to this as "Cross +"

3. Some Christians Promote Legalism by Trying to Earn God's Favor

- Our salvation in Christ has already earned us as much favor as we can ever have in God
- We obey God's commands because we love Him, not because we are trying to earn His love
- This may also appear as being more holy and pious than others.

These Jewish Believers Were Promoting Legalism In a Cross + Type of Way.

- **Vs. 24** James reveals they were fellow believers who accepted Christ, but Jesus wasn't enough.
- **Vs. 5** implies they not only required circumcision but likely adherence to the whole Law

It Is not Uncommon for Multiple Requirements to Get Added to the Gospel - Rarely Just One Thing

Illustration: Apostolic Church which had many practices aimed at greater holiness.

They thought "conservative". I thought they were liberal. Wardrobe modest, but handling of Word very liberal.

These Must Have Been Very Great Presentations For 2 Reasons

1. Vs. 2a *"Paul & Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them...."*

- **Gal. 1:6-7**, Paul had to address that some had snuck into the church & taught a false gospel
- **Gal. 2:4-5** Paul reveals it was a completely foreign gospel resulting in bondage, not freedom

2. Vs. 2b *"the brethren determined that Paul & Barnabas should go back to headquarters & get a final ruling."*

Principle I: Legalism Distorts the Gospel & Makes It a Threat to the Church

II. Read 15: 6-11

Peter Considers a Social Observation - God Does Not Distinguish Jew/Gentile

- Vs. 6 *"the apostles and elders came together to look into this matter."*
- Vs. 7 *"After there had been much debate Peter stood up and began to speak."*

Peter Makes 4 Points About the True Nature of the Gospel

1. **Vs. 7** God Made a Decision to Include Salvation for Gentiles
 - **Acts 10:28, 11: 7, 11:9, 11:12**
 - God initiated the meeting w/ Cornelius and God initiated Salvation for Gentiles.
 - This was not a moment or an idea that originated with men.
 - in fact, quite the opposite.
2. **Vs. 8-9** God Saves Jews & Gentiles Identically
 - Peter reveals that God knew their hearts, God gave them the Holy Spirit, & God cleansed their hearts by faith
 - **Acts 10: 34, 10:44-47, 11:15,**
 - God's salvation of the Gentiles looked identical to that of Jews
 - The evidence was irrefutable.
 - It was a matter of heart, not heritage or genealogy.
3. **Vs. 10** God Did Not Burden the Gentiles w/ A Yoke That Even the Jews Could not Bear
 - (Do you remember who else Peter challenged about putting God to the test) Ananias.Saphira
 - **Matthew 23:1-4** The scribes & pharisees were unwilling to keep the law perfectly, why would the same be required of a Gentile who's already saved in Christ Jesus?
 - The Law has no ability to save
 - **Romans 7:4-7** The Law only reveals sin and our need for a savior.
 - Believers are released from the Law, and united with Christ.
4. **Vs. 11** God Saved Jews & Gentiles Through Grace Alone
 - **Romans 3:23-24** Being justified is a gift by grace, not something earned by a task.
 - **Ephesians 2:8-9** *"For it is by grace that you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is a gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast."*

Principle II: Legalism Adds to a Gospel Which Is Simply Faith in Christ Alone & Nothing More.

III. Read 15: 12-29

James Summarizes The True Gospel In a Practical / Mechanical Way

(As a result of the true Gospel being devoid of legalism, this should not be a license to sin)

Vs. 13-19 James agrees with everything Peter, Paul & Barnabas have said.

- James goes on to reveal how the scripture supports exactly what they have seen.
- God has clearly called gentiles to salvation
- This is confirmed by what the prophets said and what we have witnessed

James Acknowledges that There Will Be Inevitable Tension Between Jew & Gentile Believers

Tension for the Jew

Vs. 19 *“....do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles.”*

- Do not require more than faith in Jesus for salvation
- Do not burden gentile believers with matters of the Law which have no ability to save.
- Recognize that they have not grown up for generations with the oracles of God

Tension for the Gentiles

Vs. 20 *“...we will write to Gentiles that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood.”*

- Jewish believers struggled with the culture of the Greeks & Romans
- Though a believer is neither saved nor condemned by what he eats, it was difficult for Jews to watch Gentiles exercise freedom and liberty.

James' Answer for Dealing with the Tension Is to Establish Some Rules - NOT LEGALISM

Rule #1 Abstain from things contaminated by idols

- Likely food sacrificed to idols

Rule #2 Abstain from Sexual Immorality

- Greeks & Romans were a heavily sexualized society
- 5 different kinds of marriages and one man may have had many wives
- This could also be referencing the Greek temple prostitutes

Rule #3 Abstain From Food that was Strangled or Still Had the Blood In It

- God said that life is in the blood
- Today, our life in Christ Jesus is in his innocent blood shed for us.
- For the Jew, they had been commanded by God to abstain from food with blood in it.

Salvation Doesn't Require Anything Except Faith in Jesus

Salvation Does Require Sensitivity to Others

- James was not saying that a Jew was holier for abstaining from these things
- James was not saying that a Gentile was saved by abstaining from these things
- Circumcision doesn't save, meat sacrificed to idols doesn't condemn.

But, Sensitivity Should be Exercised Out of Respect for the Various Backgrounds Within the Body

- Paul addresses this in I Cor. (Christian Liberties)

Principle III: Gospel's Lack of Legalism Does not Give Us a License to Sin

IV. Read 15:30-35

The Conclusion by the Elders in Jerusalem Is Sent Back to the Churches

Vs. 1-2 Jews had gone to Antioch & taught that all believers must be circumcised
The believers at Antioch sent Paul & Barnabas back to Jerusalem for answers

Vs. 30-31 When Paul & Barnabas & Judas & Silas returned with the letter and the conclusions of the Council @ Jerusalem were shared, the believers in Antioch rejoiced.

Luke Tells Us:

"They rejoiced because they were encouraged "

"They were strengthened as a result of this message brought to them."

Luke Begins by Sharing That the Gospel Message Being Taught by Some of the Jewish Believers Was Adding Undue Burden. It was creating layers of additional hoops to jump through. It was a debilitating Gospel that would have been impossible to keep.

Jesus came to fulfill the Law in Himself

Men could not possibly keep the law themselves.

The Gospel frees the believer from Legalism.

Yet at the same time, the Gospel does not give us a license not sin.

Principle IV: Simplicity of the Gospel Frees Us From Legalism & Leads to Joy, Encouragement & Strength

Illustration: "Nothing ever sits higher than the Bible"

This is an excellent theological truth pointing to the importance of the Word

It's a terrible practical requirement that leads to frustration trying to obey.

If we search out hearts deep enough, there might be some practices that we're secretly clinging to in attempts to elevate ourselves to God. We might not recognize that's what we're doing, but the Holy Spirit might convict us.

On the flip side, there could be liberties which we recklessly and carelessly throw caution to the wind. Maybe we show an insensitivity to a fellow believer.

A Gospel devoid of legalism requires a balanced understanding that we are not saved by obeying rules and accomplishing tasks. Yet at the same time, we are to observe guidelines and operate in sensitivity to those who might struggle with long-held traditions.