

LIFE WITH FATHER
ACTS 15:1-1

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

When I was in high school, I participated in a play entitled "Life with Father." The play was written in 1939. It is a comedy about a lovable stock broker who tries to control his family, often unsuccessfully. But the role which he plays is that of a well meaning father who truly cares about his family and is involved with them.

In the opinion section of the *Las Vegas Review Journal* last Sunday there was an excellent article about the problem of fatherlessness in our culture. The author pointed out that well-meaning federal programs adopted in the 1960s penalized marriage and rewarded families who did not have a father around. The results have been devastating.

In 1965 only 8% of children were born outside of marriage in the US. Today 40% of all children in this country are born outside of marriage, nearly 30% of white children, 50% of Hispanic children, and 64% of black children. Author Tom Purcell says, **"The absence of fathers is why the worst crimes--- carjackings, armed robberies, and murders--- are mostly committed by males under 25, and why research shows children without dads are far more likely to drop out of school, abuse drugs or end up in prison."** (LVRJ, 9/7/2025)

At the same time there has been a significant part of academia which has tried to minimize the importance of fathers, and certainly we Christians need to support moms, and dads, who take on the parenting role alone. Professor David Lyle Jeffrey from Baylor University believes that it is not an accident that at the same time when this attitude toward fathers has developed that there has been a growing rejection of God, at least among the cultural elite. He says, **"...we see fathers as symbols of responsibility and authority--- much the same way that we see God. The rebellion against fatherhood is part of a general rebellion against authority and God, and a step toward narcissism: the desire to stay permanently young, self-absorbed, and carefree."** He also observes, **"Somewhere in all of this, the idea of the beauty of a father's strong, self-sacrificial love... was lost."**

The passage before us today deals with God the Father. It provides an accurate portrayal of the God who is really there. It is a picture of a Father who is strong and authoritative, but who is also loving and gracious and wanting the best for His children. Our passage deals with defending the work of our Heavenly Father, proclaiming the work of our Heavenly Father, and describing the way that we can be part of His family.

(OVERHEAD ON--- FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY) In our study of Acts we have been examining the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas. We have seen that the Holy Spirit had instructed the church at Antioch to send out these two men to preach

the gospel in areas outside of the regions of Israel. So they went first to Cyprus, where the Roman governor was one of the people who accepted their message. Then they went over to Asia Minor. Then the missionaries preached in a number of towns in the Roman province of Galatia.

Typically they began by preaching in the synagogues. Some Jews as well as some Gentiles who had attachments to the synagogue would believe. Then they would be forced out of the synagogue. Other Gentiles would respond positively. Then they would be run out of town. After about a year Paul and Barnabas retraced their steps and encouraged the Christians in these cities where they had established churches. Finally they returned to Antioch in Syria where they reported about their exploits and continued their ministry.

I.

Then new problems developed. (I. DEFENDING THE WORK OF OUR FATHER) In vv. 1 & 2 of #15 we are going to look at DEFENDING THE WORK OF OUR FATHER. The author Luke writes, **“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.’”** Obviously some of the Jewish Christians in Judea and Jerusalem were concerned about what was going on in Antioch and what had been happening on the missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas. We often refer to these supposed Jewish Christians as Judaizers, because they wanted to Judaize the Gentiles.

There were several concerns that these people may have had. First, there was probably a theological concern. These Jewish Christians looked at a passage like Genesis 12 v. 3 (GENESIS 12:3), which says, **“I will bless those who bless you [Abraham], and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed,”** and concluded that Israel was to remain as the instrument of blessing for the Gentiles. Jesus was truly the Messiah, but He was Israel’s Messiah, and Gentiles had to become Jews to be rightly related to their God.

They might also have looked at Isaiah #2 vv. 2 & 3. (ISAIAH 2:2) The prophet there says, **“It shall come to pass in the latter days/ that the mountain of the house of the Lord/ shall be established as the highest of the mountains,/ and shall be lifted up above the hills;/ and all the nations shall flow to it,/ (ISAIAH 2:3) and many peoples shall come, and say:/ ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,/ to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways/ and that we may walk in his paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth the law,/ and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.”**

Many Gentiles were coming to have faith in Jesus, Israel’s Messiah. So you can understand how Jewish Christians might have concluded that the last days were at hand and that Gentile Christians should come to worship in their temple. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Then also some of these Jewish Christians had probably come to faith since the time that the Gentile Cornelius had become a believer ten years earlier. So they were maybe not so familiar with that situation. Even if they were, they might have pointed out that this Roman centurion had already been a worshiper at the synagogue. Some of these new Christians had come to faith directly out of pagan backgrounds. They needed now to submit to the law of Moses, so these Jewish Christians might have argued.

Then also these Judaizers may have had practical concerns. The news was that lots of Gentiles were coming to faith in Jesus. Already many Samaritans had become Christians. In Antioch Gentiles were coming to have a dominant role. Now in Asia Minor there were more Gentiles that were becoming believers. Some of the Jerusalem Jews may have felt that their dominant position in the Jesus movement was being threatened.

A similar thing happens sometimes in local churches. A church gets an influx of new people. New people become part of the congregation. At first church regulars are happy about that. But after a while the old-timers may feel threatened. The newcomers have new ideas and new ways of doing things, and their views may begin to prevail. It takes maturity in these situations for the old-timers to focus on the cause of Christ and not to be selfishly concerned about their own position of power or lack thereof or how the church might be changing in ways that they had not imagined.

The Judaizers could also have had a practical concern about the morality of these new Christians. From Paul's letters we get the picture that these new believers in Asia Minor and later in Europe had lots of problems. Many of these Gentile Christians came from wild backgrounds, and their sinful lifestyles didn't always change overnight. Most of the Jewish Christians came from moral backgrounds. Judaism required the observance of high moral standards. The pagan religions out of which the Gentiles came didn't have this. So the Judaizers could have rightfully been concerned about the impact these people were going to have on the moral level of the church. Their way of dealing with it was to make them submit to the Law of Moses.

There is also a warning here for us, too. We need to be careful about being too judgmental about Christians who come out of wild backgrounds. Like these Judaizers, we face the temptation to put them under the law. We do need to promote Biblical standards, but the means of change in an individual is growing in grace, not gutting it out in one's own strength to live up to a moral code. Just as salvation is by grace through faith in Christ, so also is spiritual growth by grace through faith in Christ. Growth also requires time.

So some of these Jewish Christians had come to Antioch and were telling the Gentile Christians that they had to be circumcised in order to be right with God. Faith in Christ was not enough to make these Gentiles right with God. Later on we find out that the leaders of the Jerusalem church had not authorized them to teach this in Antioch. But these teachers may have given the impression that they were speaking with the full backing of leaders in Jerusalem.

Thus we read in v. 2, **“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.”** This was a fairly heated discussion. These Jewish Christians were clearly presenting a different gospel than the leaders of the Antioch church were. The Antioch leaders were forced to make a decision.

Should they accept the teaching of these outsiders? Should they simply acknowledge that this was another view of the Christian life? Perhaps they should accept the “big tent” view of Christianity. After all, Christians were still a small minority. Maybe they couldn’t afford to lose members by arguing over this. “Let’s just preserve the peace, and let individuals decide to believe what they want to believe.” Such is the strategy that the ecumenical movement within American Christianity tends to take today.

The Antioch church did not do that. Paul and Barnabas made a strong objection to this other line of thinking. They were convinced that this was a core issue of the faith. There was no room for compromise. There was no room for another viewpoint on this issue. The truth about the means of salvation is not an issue that can be compromised. Thus in the 1500s Martin Luther broke from the Church partly because the Church’s teaching did not match up with what the Bible said about salvation. He saw that salvation was by grace alone and by faith alone. He was willing to take a stand on this issue and even break from the church. We are his spiritual heirs today.

So clearly the Bible suggests that there are some theological issues that are worth fighting for. At the very least the means of salvation is such an issue. How does one become right with God? This must also involve the object of salvation. Who is Jesus Christ? The Bible says that He is both man and God. He died on the cross for our sins. He rose again from the dead. These fundamental truths are also worth fighting for. It would also seem that the written testimony that tells us about these truths is vital. We need to take a stand upon the trustworthiness of the Bible.

These fundamental issues were a key factor in the founding of this local church. People attending another local church in town discovered that the pastor did not really believe the Bible. So they broke away from that church, started meeting on their own, and started this church.

Unfortunately the authority and reliability of the Bible is doubted in too many Christian institutions today. A survey conducted by the American Bible Society in 2021 found that 55% of Americans believe that the Bible is without error, which sounds pretty good. But unfortunately not all of the professors who teach at Christian colleges and seminaries believe that.

The lesson for us is that we do need to fight about fundamental principles of the Christian faith--- like the authority and trustworthiness of the Bible and the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus. Some things are worth fighting for.

II.

In vv. 3 & 4 we come to the subject of PROCLAIMING THE WORK OF OUR FATHER. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. PROCLAIMING THE WORK OF OUR FATHER) The church at Antioch had decided that Paul and Barnabas and several other representatives needed to go to Jerusalem to straighten out this issue. So they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria to get there. (ANTIOCH TO JERUSALEM) Along the way Paul and Barnabas told churches in these areas about their missionary journey in Asia Minor. Verse 3 says that they **“brought great joy to all the brothers.”**

These Christians were obviously more receptive to the news about the work of God among the Gentiles than the Judaizers from Jerusalem. Some of these Christians were in fact Gentiles. Others were Hellenistic Jews who had taken a lead earlier in bringing the gospel to Gentiles. The Samaritans were not full blooded Jews themselves. They lacked a traditional Jewish background. So these people didn't have the same concern that the Christians from orthodox Jewish backgrounds in Jerusalem and Judea did. They were able to rejoice at these missionary reports. (PROJECTOR OFF)

According to v. 4, **“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.”** Notice the focus of attention that Paul and Barnabas have in this report. The two of them were talented and gifted, and they had a hand in what happened in Cyprus and Asia Minor, but they gave credit to their Heavenly Father for being the guide and power and protector behind all that took place. Their focus was upon the work of their Heavenly Father.

There are various ways in which we can proclaim the work of our Heavenly Father. We do it when we act as a witness to nonchristians. We do it when we get baptized. On the third Sunday of every month we provide an opportunity in this service for you to share about something that God has done in your life.

As with Paul and Barnabas we also get reports from missionaries with whom we are involved in supporting. On the second Sunday of the month our missions committee provides a brief update on one of our missionaries or missionary institutions. Rob also prepares a monthly update about all of our missionaries, which he is happy to pass along to any of you who would like a copy.

III.

In vv. 5-11 we come to the subject of DESCRIBING THE WAY OF SALVATION OF OUR FATHER. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. DESCRIBING THE WAY OF SALVATION...) When Paul and Barnabas reported the story of their missionary journey, not everyone was thrilled to hear about the conversion of so many Gentiles. According to v. 5, **“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 Pharisees were the legalists of that day. Paul himself had been a Pharisee. They were the guardians of the law of Moses and of Jewish traditions. These Pharisees had

accepted Jesus as their Messiah. But they also wanted to maintain the observance of the Old Testament law, and they wanted converted Gentiles to observe it also.

So there was a conflict. Unfortunately it is sometimes true that when we are involved in significant ministry for the Lord, we get the most flack from other Christians. That happened here, and the church leaders had to resolve the issue.

According to v. 6, **“The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter.”** My reading of this is that the whole church in v. 4 welcomed these missionaries. If they were proper Baptists they would have had a potluck. Then in v. 6 the church leaders met to talk about the issue. They agreed that circumcision was not required of Gentiles who were becoming followers of Jesus. Peter had understood that from the time of the conversion of Cornelius and his family. But the leaders also had to decide upon a strategy for dealing with the Jews in the church at Jerusalem who disagreed with them.

Luke notes again that there was much debate. But after opinions and viewpoints were aired, Peter stood up. This is the last appearance of this apostle in the Book of Acts. It is significant in that he gives support to the ministry of the Apostle Paul and backs up his message of the gospel that Paul has been preaching to the Gentiles.

Beginning in v. 7 the text says, **“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. 8 And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, 9 and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.’”**

The reference is to the incident recorded in Act #10 where God told Peter to preach the gospel in the home of the Roman centurion Cornelius. This is the third time that Luke has recorded this story in this book. The author obviously regarded the conversion of these Gentiles as a big deal. If you turn back to that tenth chapter you will find in vv. 44 & 45 this: **“While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. 45 And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles.”**

These Jewish Christians witnessed these Gentiles have the same experience that they did on the Day of Pentecost. They were shocked by that. Their belief at the time was also that Gentiles would have to become Jews to be right with God. But clearly this experience with the Holy Spirit indicated that God accepted them as they were. They hadn’t been circumcised. They hadn’t been baptized in water. They hadn’t walk down an aisle. They hadn’t made any kind of oral confession. They had simply believed in their hearts, and that was enough.

So back in v. 10 in our text Peter asks the question, **“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?”** Peter charges the Pharisaic Christians with putting God to the test by adding to the plan of salvation. They were presuming upon God’s patience and mercy by changing the gospel. To presume upon God is always a dangerous thing to do. Earlier in this book we saw Ananias and Sapphira put God to the test when they lied to the church leaders and to God about a gift that they were giving to the church. God struck them dead.

Furthermore Peter charges the Jewish Christians who are trying to push the Mosaic law on the Gentiles with the offense of placing a yoke upon the disciples. When a Gentile was attracted to Judaism and decided to follow the law of Moses, he was said to “take up the yoke of the kingdom of heaven.” Jews also spoke of taking up the “yoke of the commandments.”

The Book of Galatians was probably written just before this meeting in Jerusalem. In it Paul addressed some of the same issues that were arising here. Apparently some of these Judaizers from Jerusalem had shown up in the new churches in Asia Minor and were telling the Gentile Christians that they also needed to be circumcised and observe the Law of Moses. (PROJECTOR ON--- GALATIANS 5:1) In #5 v. 1 of Galatians Paul also uses the term “yoke.” He says, **“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”** He is referring to the desire on the part of these Judaizers to get the Gentile and Jewish Christians to submit to the law of Moses.

Peter in our passage says that their Jewish ancestors could not bear this yoke. Trying to live up to the high standards of the Old Testament law could not ultimately make an individual right with God. (PROJECTOR OFF) Thus in Galatians 1:21 Paul says that the law did not ultimately bring righteousness. In #3 v.2 he says that the law could not bring the Holy Spirit. In #3 v. 21 he says that the law could not provide eternal life. But then the Pharisees had added their own rules to the Hebrew Bible to make it even more difficult to live up to Jewish standards.

This is not to say that the Old Testament law was bad. God gave it, and it served a number of useful purposes. It provided standards of morality by which people could order their lives. It described how God could be worshiped. Perhaps most importantly (PROJECTOR ON--- GALATIANS 3:24), as Paul puts it in Galatians 3:24 **“...the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.”** The law was designed to show people their sinfulness and their need for a Savior. The law contained hints about One who would be the fulfillment of that law. (GALATIANS 4:4-5) Thus Paul says in #4 vv. 4 & 5 of Galatians, **“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.”** Jesus provides the way to life with Father. The necessary human response is faith in Him.

So after charging some of the Jewish Christians with putting an unfair yoke upon the Gentiles Peter says in v. 11 (PROJECTOR OFF) in our passage, **“But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.”** We might have expected Peter to say that the Gentiles are saved in the same way that we are. But instead he brings the issue back to his Jewish audience by saying that salvation comes to them in the same way that it comes to the Gentiles. It is by grace through faith. The problem is not with the Gentiles but with these Jews. If indeed they truly are part of God’s family, they need to understand that it is because of faith in Christ not because of their observance of the law.

Peter’s argument is that spiritual salvation involves grace, which is unmerited favor. It is a gift from God. As such it can only be received by faith. (PROJECTOR ON--- EPHESIANS 2:8-9) Ephesians #2 vv. 8 & 9 say, **“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.”**

The problem is that we humans often have the experience where we learn that we have to earn our acceptance from other people. Sometimes, unfortunately, we have worked to earn acceptance from our earthly fathers. Sometimes we never got it from them. And so we may be inclined to think that we can be accepted by God only if we earn it. The gospel, however, says that salvation comes by the grace of God through faith on our part in Jesus plus nothing. Some of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were saying that salvation comes from faith in Jesus plus circumcision plus observance of the Old Testament law. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The various religions of the world say a similar thing. Islam says that salvation comes by observing the five pillars of Islam: reciting the creed, daily prayers, almsgiving, fasting in Ramadan, and making a trip to Mecca. While the Mormons say that there is no literal hell, they believe that salvation comes from obedience to the gospel and the law. In one of their documents the Jehovah’s Witnesses say, **“All who by reason of faith in Jehovah God and in Christ Jesus, dedicate themselves to do God’s will and then faithfully to carry out their dedication will be rewarded with everlasting life.”**

We can agree with our Roman Catholic friends about who Christ is. We can appreciate their recognition of the authority of the Bible. But when it comes to the means of salvation they say that original sin is removed by baptism. Daily sin is removed by the celebration of the mass. Venial sin is removed in the right of extreme unction. Other sins are removed in purgatory.

At the Council of Trent the church declared, **“If anyone says, that by faith alone the impious is justified, in suchwise as to mean, that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to the obtaining the grace of justification, ...let him be anathema.”** (Session 6, Canon 9, Council of Trent, Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 2:112) How does that square with the declaration of Peter here and with the words of Paul in Ephesians 2:8 & 9?

Some branches of the Protestant Church of Christ denomination say that salvation is the result of faith in Christ plus baptism. The mistake that all of these religious groups make is that they make works at least part of the requirement for spiritual salvation. Peter says, **“But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus...”** If there is some ritual or some work that we must do to earn God’s favor, then grace is no longer grace. For grace by its very definition is unmerited favor. It cannot be earned. It can only be received by faith.

Some Baptists add the requirement that one has to walk down the aisle of a church to be saved. Many Christian groups try to add water baptism to the gospel. Christians should be baptized in water. But water baptism is not a requirement for salvation. Cornelius and his family were saved before they were baptized. The same mistake with baptism is what many of the Jews made with circumcision. (PROJECTOR ON--- GENESIS 17:11) In Genesis 17:11 God told Abraham, **“You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.”** Circumcision was intended to be a sign, just as baptism was intended to be a sign. But circumcision came to be used by the Jews as the reality. If one was circumcised, the thinking was that the individual was automatically accepted by God. Too often in Christendom a similar thing has happened. The ritual of baptism has been taken as the reality. If one is baptized, he or she is automatically a Christian. But it is not true. It is faith alone in Christ that saves. (PROJECTOR OFF)

If you are not sure whether you have ever exercised this faith in Christ, do it today. Simply put your trust in Jesus Christ for eternal life, believing that He died to pay the penalty for your sins. It is this faith in Christ that will cause you to have life with our Heavenly Father. When you are part of His family, your acceptance by God is total. The basis of your relationship with Him is grace not works. He may work in your life to change you. But there is no greater acceptance that you will get from Him than what you have the moment you place your faith in Christ.

Grace is the basis of life with Father. It should also be the basis of our relationship with our own children. It should characterize our behavior in the dealings that we have with other people. Isn’t it great that our Father in heaven is gracious toward us? Let’s work on being instruments of grace toward others.