

Acts Lesson 15

If each of us were to look back on our lives, we almost certainly can think of key or landmark moments. Things such as the birth of a sibling, a first boyfriend/girlfriend, getting a driver's license, a high school/college graduation, getting married, a first job, or having a child – just to name a few examples. There also those things that isn't so pleasant – a parent passing, parents getting a divorce, a brother/sister dying, a marriage dissolving, losing a job, or a child dying. In either case, when we reflect on any of these events, we conclude that as a result of this landmark moment, life is never going to be the same again.

It is my opinion the events in chapter 15 of Acts is a landmark moment in the life of the church. We're still early in the church's history – maybe only 20 years since Pentecost. That may seem like a long time to us, but we need to remember that the spreading out of the church lacked any technology – expansion of the church was by foot and by word of mouth. We've seen the church body begin with converted Jews but then over the most recent 10 years or so, the church is growing through the addition of the Gentiles as well.

Because I'm a visual person, I'm going to try to demonstrate the significance of what is going on in this chapter up on the screen. Beginning with the Jews as the first component of the church body, their history and focus was rooted deeply in following the Mosaic Law. In order to get to God, they must obey the law and bring sacrifices to Him to cover their sin. Therefore, their focus is in this direction.

Next, we have the Gentiles – their focus is either on idol worship, which can take on almost an endless number of forms, or they didn't really believe in anything other than satisfying their fleshly desires.

So you have the Jews going in one direction and the Gentiles going in a completely different direction – I've noted this by the direction of the arrows in each circle, and they are now, *somehow*, supposed to come together and function as a united group. We also can't lose sight of the fact of the enmity, or animosity, that Jews and Gentiles had for each other leading up to this point in history. The Gentiles were “unclean”, so the Jews avoided them at all costs. Needless to say, the Gentiles took this assessment a little personally, so here you have God ordaining a new church body that is going to change the world with these two *very* different and adversarial groups. Only God could cook up such a formula.

So what is the recipe for this formula of bringing them together? Or should I ask, “Who” is the formula? Jesus. There is a serious reconciliation that needs to be effected given the two factions, and God knows this. So what does God do when He wants to get something done? Come to man for advice? Form a committee? No, He starts with Himself in the person of His only begotten Son.

What do we do when we have a big challenge before us? Go to a friend, family member, or pastor? Research the Internet? Read a book? Seek Oprah or Dr. Phil? We need to take a step back and consider the truth that **God** allowed or permitted the challenge before us. I know a lot of people have a hard time with the concept that God brings difficulties into our lives, but that's just bad doctrine. All you have to do is look at the cross and then consider if God were willing to send His Son to such a horrendous and horrible death to effect something good, why wouldn't He purpose some

discomfort in our lives? The toehold we need to remember when considering that God could be behind our challenges is that everything He introduces into our lives is rooted with a loving purpose to turn us towards Him and to shape us into the image of Jesus. In His wonderful heart and desire for what is best for us, He's willing to introduce a little short-term pain for some major eternal gain.

Whether or not the challenge we're facing is from God or not, why would we not go to Him first every time? First, He already knew this was going to happen before we did, so He's not surprised by what's going on. Secondly, He allowed it to happen. Thirdly, He's **more** than big enough and willing and able to guide us through to the other side. My point is God is willing to take the lead – He should – it's **His** plan. The question is whether or not we're willing to submit to Him and trust Him to lead us. Thankfully, we're going to see these early church leaders did just that.

So getting back to the diagram, I have Jesus in the middle along with the word “grace”. His plan is to reconcile these two factions of the church and bring unity to it which is absolutely critical for the church to proceed and grow. Ephesians 2:14-16 speaks to Jesus' role in the reconciling of the Jews and the Gentiles, “For He Himself is our peace, who has made both [Jew & Gentile] one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, *that is*, the law of commandments *contained* in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man *from* the two, *thus* making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity.”

Therefore, we see the respective belief direction arrows of the Jews and Gentiles that were once pointed in different directions, are now both pointing to Jesus – demonstrating **He** is the point of reconciliation and unity.

How many marriages and relationships could have been, can be, or will be saved if they will just submit to the truth that God is a god of reconciliation, restoration, and redemption, and He accomplishes this through His Son Jesus when we follow His lead? He's doing it here in the early church, and He doesn't change. That means He can do the same for us today.

The other word in the middle circle below Jesus is "grace". Behind me is a picture of a motorcycle and a sidecar. Above the motorcycle are the words, "The Gospel" and above the sidecar is the word "Grace". This is an admittedly crude representation of my point that the key message of the early church – and it still needs to be for today's church is - the central message of the Gospel that Jesus was the only begotten of the Father and co-member of the triune Godhead, became human and was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, willingly died on a cross as a sacrifice for our sins, and was resurrected. For those who come to belief in this statement of truth, their sins are forgiven, they will be saved and live with God in peace for eternity. That's the motorcycle – that's the power of the message.

What the early church is grappling with is the sidecar of grace. Again, please forgive any offense to reduce the importance of grace by representing it as a sidecar, but it is the most basic example my pea-brain could come up with. The basis of my choosing this image as a representative of grace is that those who ride in the sidecar don't need to do anything but enjoy and appreciate the power and direction of the "Gospel Motorcycle". They just need to trust that the power of the motorcycle is enough to get them where they need to go. Notably, though, the Gospel and grace are inseparable – they go together.

For the Jew, this concept of grace was an earthquake in their belief system. Following the Law and bringing sacrifices to God – acts of works –

efforts on their part to get to God – were now being replaced by God doing all the work – obedience wasn’t the issue – it was now about faith and belief in God and the sacrifice for their sins from God. We see in the first few verses Jewish believers unable to deal with this revolutionary change and trying to “add” to the Gospel message and disconnect the grace sidecar by telling people they still needed to be circumcised to be saved.

For the Gentiles, they didn’t have all the works-based obedience to the Law history to deal with, but they no less were being confronted with the reality of their sin nature, the resulting disconnection with God, and, therefore, the need for a Savior to get reconnected to God. The Jews at least understood the general concept of sin and its consequences with their animal sacrifices. Living ignorant of the concept of God, sin, and the need for forgiveness is something I can relate to. I must confess that until I became a Christian, I never used the word forgiveness - much less dwelled on the need for it. When the truth of our sinful nature hits home, it’s a heavy hit – the enemy heaps all the guilt and shame of the reality of sin on us that he can. That’s why the concept of grace is so critical. God knew our need for a Savior before we did and, once again, He took action to create a mechanism for us to unload the burden of sin and receive forgiveness. Just as the Jews were finding out, the Gentiles were discovering this mechanism of forgiveness – this gift of grace – unmerited favor - was 100% due to God taking action. There was nothing they had to do – but believe. The necessity of the Gospel message and grace as its partner is the foundation to which we now can begin going through today’s lesson.

Ok – so here in Chapter 15, the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas has drawn to a close and, as I just mentioned, there are some Pharisee-type Jewish converts not only unwilling to give up part of the

Mosaic system, but they're trying to put their legalistic trips on others. It's as if they're seeking to make Christianity a subset of Judaism as opposed to recognizing Christianity is totally new. Paul and Barnabas step in to resist, and, as the NIV version offers, enter into a sharp dispute and debate. This is an understatement. The Greek translation for dispute includes descriptive terms like *insurrection* and *standing uproar*. This was nothing short of a theological donnybrook, and, thank God wise and courageous men such as Paul and Barnabas recognized the evil intentions of these dudes and fought them. We need more and more wisdom and courage in the church today as it is under more assault than ever by the enemy to water down or demonize the goodness of the Gospel message. The issue wasn't so much that of circumcision – it was this - must anything other than belief in Jesus be a requirement to be saved?

The product of this attack on the Gospel prompted Paul, Barnabas, and some of the men that were proposing circumcision be added to the Gospel to go to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles and elders. So when arriving in Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas give an accounting of the grace of God that they witnessed and all the Gentiles who came to faith during their first missionary journey. Then the Pharasaical Jewish converts proclaimed, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.”

J. Vernon McGee rightly states, “whenever you add something to the Gospel, you no longer have a gospel, but you have a religion.” The only approach you can make to Jesus is by faith. If you attempt to add anything to it, you are taking the position His sacrifice on the cross wasn't sufficient to get to God. He said on the cross, “It is finished” and what He meant was *His* work on the cross for people to be forgiven and have access to the Father was finished – *there was nothing more required*. Anyone proposing such a

thing might as well just slap Jesus in the face – that's the way I would feel if I were Jesus knowing all I did to make something possible was now being minimized as insufficient. Anyone telling you anything other than the simple message of the Gospel and grace, they are messengers of Satan.

So beginning in verse 6 we learn of “The Jerusalem Council”. This is a group of men consisting of the apostles and elders. They are meeting to consider this proposition regarding circumcision. After much dispute, Peter becomes the first one to speak, and I'm going to highlight the key points in his statement as outlined in verses 7-9.

- He acknowledges that God chose him to preach the gospel to the Gentiles
- He acknowledges that only God knows the heart of a person – including the Gentiles - and by giving them the Holy Spirit, they were accounted as believers
- He acknowledges that God doesn't discriminate between Jew and Gentile, and it is God that purifies the heart by faith.

These are remarkable statements from Peter because this is clear evidence that the once prideful man has become a submitted follower of Christ. Look at these statements – Who is getting all the credit for what is going on? God. But he doesn't stop here – what he says next in verse 10 is a stunning confession of the truth of the history of the Jews. “Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear.”

This is incredible. The Jewish people are steeped in their pride of tradition and what God did for them through Moses. They remembered all the good things that happened, but they conveniently left out all the evil they committed – especially against the prophets. Yes, God did amazing things

for them, but they demonstrated constantly they could not bear the weight of the Law. Peter's statement was a revelation that the Law was not a path to God – it was a tool for them to recognize they couldn't perfectly obey the perfect Law. Peter appropriately relates the image of trying to live under the Law as a yoke that no one is able to bear. This is a **HUGE** confession.

He then hammers home the conclusion to the confession in verse 11, “No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.” Here you have the unifying statement – Jew and Gentile are brought together by the grace of the Lord Jesus. Peter gets it – it's just about belief in Jesus and by that belief, we receive the grace of salvation. Nothing more. That's the same message today, brothers and sisters. It's so simple, yet so powerful. Its simplicity makes it easier for hardhearted and hardheaded knuckleheads like me to even get it.

The impact of Peter's statement leaves the place silent – you can feel God saying at this very moment, “Be still and know that I am God.” Then Paul and Barnabas give an accounting of the miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles during their journey. The evidence of the truth is being poured out – first through Peter's statement and then via Paul and Barnabas' exploits.

Now we have a new name in the leadership speaking up – James. This is not the brother of John – we learned in Chapter 12 he was martyred. Church tradition and most Bible scholars claim this James is the half-brother of Jesus as well as the author of the Epistle of James. It appears by this statement that he has assumed a significant leadership position. He commands the people to “listen to me.” He goes on to confirm Peter's confession – but he says it in a unique way - that God was choosing a people for his name **from** the Gentiles. Not all Gentiles will be part of the Kingdom

of God – all are invited, but not all will accept. Since we don't know who will and won't accept the gift of salvation, we are charged to preach the Gospel to everyone. God will take it from there.

James goes on to quote Amos 9:11-12. He's speaking here of a restoration of the Davidic covenant – that David's house will be raised again. There are segments of the church today that believe the Jews no longer have a place in the Kingdom of God – they blew it when they rejected Jesus as the Messiah. This prophecy in Amos is yet unfulfilled, so the idea that God is done with the Jews doesn't hold up. During the Tribulation period, which will commence after the Rapture, there will be a 7-year period where God will once again deal with the Jews. 144,000 will believe, and they will absolutely be a part of the Kingdom of God into the Millennium and beyond. God made the covenant, so He is the only one that can break it – and there is nowhere in Scripture that says He did this – anyone claiming to remove the Jews from the Kingdom of God isn't reading their Bible.

James, again making a statement of leadership – if not the leader of the church – states beginning in verse 19, "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood."

The first half of his statement confirms the nature of the Gospel message – keep it simple. However, the second half of his message kind of sounds like a contradiction to what he said in the first half of his statement. These sound like works – obedience to some law. What's going on here?

James' statement is addressing the two factions – Jews and Gentiles. Both factions have their own preconceived sense of worship as well as rights

and wrongs. The wisdom of the Holy Spirit never loses sight of the core message of the Gospel, but in this solution by James, it is acknowledging, *as a courtesy*, certain things that should be avoided – for the purpose of not stumbling people who are truly seeking God. For the Jew, they were sensitive to the issues of eating food polluted by idols and eating the meat of strangled animals and blood.

The other restriction was a moral issue – fornication. Adultery was so common at this time in history and in this area, the conscience had been dulled. Adultery is a violation of the marriage covenant, and the beginning of the church was the beginning of the establishment of the bride of Christ – the church. Adultery is not just a physical betrayal but it is a spiritual betrayal. In other words, this restriction isn't an addition to the Gospel – it is just good common sense.

The crux of these items James mentions is the issue of stumbling. Stumbling is doing anything that hinders a person seeking the true character and person of God. For example, say a Jew is considering coming to Christ but has long held the tradition of only eating kosher food. If we're part of the process of bringing along this Jewish person to Jesus, but we tell them they don't have to eat kosher to have a relationship with God, this may take their focus off of Jesus and start making them feel strange for not adhering to what has been ingrained in their hearts and minds for their entire lives. In other words, what's the main goal? Bring them to Jesus as simply as possible. Let **Him** deal with the other stuff once they confess Him as their Savior.

It's easy for us to want to deliver a broader message of freedom and liberty in Christ, but we need to keep in mind the backgrounds of the people we're ministering to and tailor the message to their specific needs. That's

why it's so much better to keep the message of the Gospel simple – we can stumble people, without even knowing we're doing it, if we make it complicated or freaky. I can recall speaking to a neighbor about Jesus, and he was clearly getting interested. Then, one day, I brought in the Rapture and the Tribulation, and I lost him – he either freaked out or thought I was a nut. If I had just kept the discussion on Jesus, who knows how differently things would have went. James had it right when he said to not make it too difficult for the Gentiles.

So the council decides to send some of their men along with Paul and Barnabas to the church in Antioch. It is interesting that one of the names of the men is Judas. I see this as God restoring the name of Judas. Also, Judas was called Barsabas which literally means “son of the Sabbath”. The son of the Sabbath was sent to the Gentile believers to tell them they were free to rest in the finished work of Christ. Also joining them was Silas.

With these men, they carried a letter that was to be read to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. The letter lays out what James announced verbally relative to the issue of the core component in the Gospel message - grace. Using the verses beginning with 25 and going through to the end of the chapter, Jon Courson presents six ways we can see the hand of God guiding His people.

The first way is He guides us through church unanimity. Verse 25 begins with the words, “So we all agreed”. When the church is unified – especially in the area of doctrine - there is a strength and stability to the fellowship – it provides answers as well as wards off those seeking to introduce bad doctrine.

Secondly, God guides through gifted men and women in the body. Verses 25b-27 state, “and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas

and Paul—²⁶ men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing.” If you’re questioning what God is doing in your life, go to your pastor or elders and seek their wisdom and discernment. That’s part of what they’re there for.

Thirdly, God guides through the gifts of the Spirit. Verses 28 and 29 begin with the proper initial credit – “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit”. The wisdom in James’ statement is clearly from the Holy Spirit and His working through the leaders. We need to constantly seek the Holy Spirit for His giftings to help us maximize our service for the Kingdom of God.

Fourth – God guides through desires we may have personally. To support this point, Jon Courson references verse 34 which states Silas choosing not to return to the church in Jerusalem – because it seemed good that he stay in Antioch. What was weird, there is no verse 34 in the NIV. It goes from 33 to 35. Seems like a strange verse to leave out. In any event, God will put things on our heart as a source of enjoyment. I am so thankful to Carol for allowing me to stand up here and teach because I absolutely love it – preparing these lectures and offering them to you is one of the great blessings in my life. Sometimes people think when they become a Christian, God is going to send them to some strange place that they have no interest in going to. That’s not how God works – He wants us to enjoy serving Him, and He’s going to put us in places He knows fit with what our likes and dislikes are. This isn’t to say God may indeed send you someplace to serve Him, but He won’t do it until He’s developed in you a love and desire for the area to serve Him.

Fifth – God guides through concerns we feel internally. In verses 35-36, Paul and Barnabas are teaching and preaching in Antioch, and Paul tells Barnabas he wants to go check on the churches they started during their first

journey. God will put on our hearts certain people we need to pray for or minister to. Sometimes I'll be driving along and out of nowhere someone will pop into my mind, and I feel compelled to either call them and ask how they're doing or just to pray for them. We need to honor those promptings by obeying through taking action. Prayer is always a good start, but a phone call, e-mail, or letter is a more personal display of concern.

Finally, God guides through interpersonal difficulty. The friction between Paul and Barnabas regarding John Mark is what is referenced here as the basis for this point. Clearly, this is not a comfortable option – getting into heated disagreements with a brother or sister is a real bummer. We want unity and peace, but sometimes that just isn't the way things play out. This disagreement between Paul and Barnabas leads to the split of the spiritual dynamic duo. Paul will go off with Silas, and Barnabas will stick with his cousin, John Mark. Notably, towards the end of Paul's life, he specifically asked for John Mark to be sent to him – demonstrating that even friction within the church family can be healed.

As I reviewed this chapter to come up with a conclusion, the word that popped up was “unity”. The chapter begins with a segment of the body seeking to introduce division – the opposite of unity – with the circumcision issue. Anything that seeks to break up the unity of the church must be seen as a purposeful attack from the enemy. Why?

I love watching the Planet Earth and National Geographic specials about the world and nature. I'm especially fascinated with those episodes that focus on the predators' (lions, tigers, and bears – oh my!) tactics as they seek prey from some type of herd. In every case, the narrator comments that as long as the herd sticks together, the predators are restricted from their ability to gain an advantage. It's only when one of the herd gets separated

from the rest that it becomes vulnerable to the predator. Sometimes, this happens due to the fact the wanderer is too young or too weak to keep up with the herd. However, the predators will sometimes use sophisticated strategies to split up the unity of the herd to make one or more of the members of the herd vulnerable to attack and possibly become an oversized lunchable.

The spiritual parallel is very real – Satan is constantly seeking to cause disruption in the unity of the body of Christ. We **must** view him as a predator – remember his response to God in the book of Job when God asked him where he had come from? Satan responded, “From roaming throughout the earth, going back and forth on it.” You can visualize this beast pacing back and forth looking for something to destroy. That is Satan, folks, and his prey is each of us.

We saw in today’s reading that Paul, along with Barnabas, recognized the sinister motivation of these men pushing the circumcision issue on the people. Paul saw it for what it was and went on the attack to defend the unity of the Gospel and grace. Paul would go on in his epistles several times regarding the importance of unity. In Ephesians 4:3, he exhorts us to, “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” The Greek word for “every” is further described as “labor” and “do diligently”. The point is to be constantly on guard to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. If we don’t remain on constant guard, Satan will bring in divisive forces and start splitting up the church and destroying the peace. Sadly, he has been effective – topics such as sex outside of marriage and gay marriage are now weaving their way into the church as being commonly accepted. Just these two topics alone have caused church splits and people walking away from the body.

The key word in this verse, other than unity, is peace. We saw in today's reading that, by drawing on the Holy Spirit's wisdom, a solution was determined to ward off this attack that not only kept the purity of the Gospel and grace intact but also offered concessions to bring peace to all parties. Nowadays, the church's idea of keeping the peace is often to just roll over on its moral foundations and allow Scripturally defined sin to become acceptable behavior in fear of its reputation being soiled or, even worse, as a method to boast about and boost church growth. We need to rediscover what it means to keep the unity of peace in the church without sacrificing its core values.

Paul offers an outline of how to do this in Colossians 3:12-14. He begins with the reminder that we are God's chosen people and holy. If we're to consider how we respond to attacks on the church, we need to remember who we are. That helps us establish the foundation for which we defend ourselves. He goes on to tell us that virtues such as compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, and forgiveness are the recipe ingredients to maintaining peace in the body of Christ. Finally, he reminds us that the greatest of all these virtues is love – it is love that binds all these virtues together and brings perfect unity.

Paul told us in the 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians that love never fails. Love is what God is. Love is what sent Jesus to the cross. Love is the grace of God and the gift of salvation. Love overrides everything – if we love as God loves, we let go of our personal agendas and think of caring for others over our own cares. Love is what holds us together. It doesn't mean we have to agree with each other on everything, but we need to agree on one thing. Or should I say the One. We saw in this chapter how two very different factions became a united church – capable of warding off the attacks of the

enemy. How did they do it? They turned to Jesus and He made them one. May He do the same for us until He calls us home. Let's pray.