

Acts Season 5 "DEEPER" Part 1 – Week 1

A Passion for Grace

First...a SERIES OVERVIEW...

*(The Church Then...)*As the “**better Way**” (they were known, you’ll remember, as **followers of The Way**) quickly spread throughout the regions of the civilized world it’s very foundations were vetted again and again. Had they just been concerned about spreading it fast and wide and not slowed down to dive deeper into God’s heart as expressed in God’s Word, the once **successful movement would have certainly found itself shipwrecked on the reefs of “ignorance”, “elitism” and even mis-applied “tolerance”**. **One thing was for sure, they only way they were going to avoid these reefs was to go DEEPER**. They had to look at what was under the surface of the water they were treading lest they risk deep gashes in the hull of their faith and even sinking the ship altogether.

*(The Church Today...)*In today’s church the same thing can often be seen. Churches can grow quickly, new Christians can be thrust into ever expanding roles of responsibility and if they are not careful, they can find themselves spread too thin. They can be characterized by treading water spiritually and experiencing fatigue and eventually increasing levels of frustration in every area of their life.

*(Ourselves...Our Society...)*And of course, society as a whole is characterized by living life so fast they often begin to wonder...“is this all there is?...REALLY?” Unfortunately, our lives are lived at such a cramped, fast pace that we most never go beyond experiencing life on the “surface”. 9/11/01 was a very grim reminder to all of that the American Dream was not only under attack by terrorists, but by the meaningless obsessions that tear us away from that which matters most, that which brings true depth and meaning to our lives.

Our relationships with others, with ourselves and with God tend to default to the shallow as we do our best to avoid “entanglements” that we instinctively and usually subconsciously, want to avoid. The last thing our pace needs are the weights of additional concerns and challenges. When this typical way of life is expressed in our relationship with God... with our faith, it is especially tragic.

PRAYER ---THEN SKIP TO ACTS...

---In SEASON 1 we saw an overall theme of “**Everything Changes**” which focused on the central message of the early church...”the Kingdom of God”.

---In SEASON 2 we saw an overall theme of “**Whatever it Takes**” which focused on the sheer determination of the early church in the face of opposition from both within and without

---In SEASON 3 we saw an overall theme of “**Everyone’s Invited**” which focused on the fact that this message of God’s reign, God’s Kingdom was, in fact, for everyone.

---In SEASON 4 we saw an overall theme of God’s “**Supernatural**” power. We were able to see that the early church lived and moved with a sense that God could and would do the supernatural on behalf of getting His message out to those He died save.

---AND now as we begin the first part of SEASON 5...we see that as this movement grows farther, faster...it’s forced to go “**DEEPER**” lest it drown as another shallow, light-weight fad.

Acts 15:1-35

¹ While Paul and Barnabas were at Antioch of Syria, some men from Judea arrived and began to teach the believers: "Unless you are circumcised as required by the law of Moses, you cannot be saved." ² Paul and Barnabas disagreed with them, arguing vehemently.

Finally, the church decided to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem, accompanied by some local believers, to talk to the apostles and elders about this question. ³ The church sent the delegates to Jerusalem, and they stopped along the way in Phoenicia and Samaria to visit the believers. They told them—much to everyone's joy—that the Gentiles, too, were being converted.

⁴ When they arrived in Jerusalem, Barnabas and Paul were welcomed by the whole church, including the apostles and elders. They reported everything God had done through them. ⁵ But then some of the believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and insisted, "The Gentile converts must be circumcised and required to follow the law of Moses."

⁶ So the apostles and elders met together to resolve this issue. ⁷ At the meeting, after a long discussion, Peter stood and addressed them as follows: "Brothers, you all know that God chose me from among you some time ago to preach to the Gentiles so that they could hear the Good News and believe. ⁸ God knows people's hearts, and he confirmed that he accepts Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. ⁹ He made no distinction between us and them, for he cleansed their hearts through faith. ¹⁰ So why are you now challenging God by burdening the Gentile believers with a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear? ¹¹ **We believe that we are all saved the same way, by the undeserved grace of the Lord Jesus.**"

¹² Everyone listened quietly as Barnabas and Paul told about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. ¹³ When they had finished, James stood and said, "Brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴ Peter has told you about the time God first visited the Gentiles to take from them a people for himself. ¹⁵ And this conversion of Gentiles is exactly what the prophets predicted. As it is written:

¹⁶ 'Afterward I will return
and restore the fallen house of David.

I will rebuild its ruins
and restore it,

¹⁷ so that the rest of humanity might seek the LORD,
including the Gentiles—
all those I have called to be mine.

The LORD has spoken—

¹⁸ he who made these things known so long ago.'

¹⁹ "And so my judgment is that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. ²⁰ Instead, we should write and tell them to abstain from eating food offered to idols, from sexual immorality, from eating the meat of strangled animals, and from consuming blood. ²¹ For these laws of Moses have been preached in Jewish synagogues in every city on every Sabbath for many generations."

²² Then the apostles and elders together with the whole church in Jerusalem chose delegates, and they sent them to Antioch of Syria with Paul and Barnabas to report on this decision. The men chosen were two of the church leaders—Judas (also called Barsabbas) and Silas.

²³ This is the letter they took with them:

"This letter is from the apostles and elders, your brothers in Jerusalem. It is written to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. Greetings!

²⁴ "We understand that some men from here have troubled you and upset you with their teaching, but we did not send them! ²⁵ So we decided, having come to complete agreement, to send you official representatives, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶ who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ We are sending Judas and Silas to confirm what we have decided concerning your question.

²⁸ "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay no greater burden on you than these few requirements: ²⁹ You must abstain from eating food offered to idols, from consuming blood or the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality. If you do this, you will do well. Farewell."

³⁰ The messengers went at once to Antioch, where they called a general meeting of the believers and delivered the letter. ³¹ **And there was great joy throughout the church that day as they read this encouraging message.**

³² Then Judas and Silas, both being prophets, spoke at length to the believers, encouraging and strengthening their faith. ³³ They stayed for a while, and then the believers sent them back to the church in Jerusalem with a blessing of peace. ³⁵ Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch. They and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord there.

---There was a LOT more at stake here than meets the eye. Like all scripture, a casual, narrative reading only reveals the proverbial tip of the iceberg compared to what is really going on here. The Council at Jerusalem may on the surface appear to be about petty issues. I mean today most people don't get that worked up over circumcision (though I imagine if performed on adult men there would be quite the uproar!) and there certainly is little concern over the celebration of various holidays. What we see here is nothing short of a battle for the very heart of the Gospel itself.

---Even though the new non-Jewish converts were "burdened" with new expectations...notice that even these had far more to do with sensitivity to the Jews they would now be sharing community with as opposed to salvation.

---This attack on the heart of the gospel would not end with the Jerusalem Conference. In fact, this is an issue that Paul is challenged to address again and again throughout his ministry. Perhaps the most fiercely worded among the answers to those challenges can be found in Galatians 5...

Galatians 5:6-12

⁶ For when we place our faith in Christ Jesus, there is no benefit in being circumcised or being uncircumcised. What is important is faith expressing itself in love.

⁷ You were running the race so well. Who has held you back from following the truth? ⁸ It certainly isn't God, for he is the one who called you to freedom. ⁹ This false teaching is like a little yeast that spreads through the whole batch of dough! ¹⁰ I am

trusting the Lord to keep you from believing false teachings. God will judge that person, whoever he is, who has been confusing you.

¹¹ Dear brothers and sisters, ^[a] if I were still preaching that you must be circumcised—as some say I do—why am I still being persecuted? If I were no longer preaching salvation through the cross of Christ, no one would be offended. ¹² I just wish that those troublemakers who want to mutilate you by circumcision would mutilate themselves.

DIVE DEEPER (Our thanks goes out to David Guzik of EnduringWord.com for this awesome free online commentary)

ACTS 15:1-35

A. The dispute between the men from Judea and Paul and Barnabas.

1. (1) The men **from Judea** state their case.

And certain *men* came down from Judea and taught the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

a. **Certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”** These Jewish Christians (often called “Judaizers”) taught that Gentiles may become Christians, but only after first becoming Jews, and submitting to all Jewish rituals, including circumcision.

i. It was very difficult for some Jewish Christians to accept that Gentiles could be brought into the church as “equal partners” without first coming through the law of Moses. “It was one thing to accept the occasional God-fearer into the church, someone already in sympathy with Jewish ways; it was quite another to welcome large numbers of Gentiles who had no regard for the law and no intention of keeping it.” (Williams)

b. These Christians were **from Judea**, and were not content to keep their beliefs to themselves, but felt compelled to persuade other Christians. They **taught the brethren**, coming all the way to Antioch to preach this message.

i. By their teaching, these **certain men from Judea** were passing a negative judgment on all of Paul and Barnabas’ missionary endeavors. On their recent missionary journey, they had founded churches among the Gentiles without bringing them under the Law of Moses. These **certain men from Judea** said Paul and Barnabas were all wrong!

ii. When in the city of Antioch in Pisidia, Paul preached this message: *And by Him [Jesus] everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses* (Acts 13:39). These **certain men . . . down from Judea** would have objected,

saying “Jesus saves us, but only after we have done all we can do to keep the Law of Moses.” But Paul taught a man could only be right with God on the basis of what Jesus had done!

c. **You cannot be saved:** This was not a side issue; it had to do with salvation itself. This was not a matter where there could be disagreement among believers, with some believing you must be under the law, and some believing it wasn't important. This was an issue that went to the core of Christianity, and it had to be resolved.

i. We can just imagine how Satan wanted to take advantage of this situation. First, he wanted the false doctrine of works righteousness to succeed. But even if it didn't, Satan wanted a costly, bitter doctrinal war to complete split and sour the church. This may be the greatest threat to the work of the gospel seen in the Book of Acts!

2. (2-4) Paul and Barnabas respond to the teaching of the men from Judea.

Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question. So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren. And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them.

a. **Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them:** Their first response was to persuade. We can imagine there was **no small dissension and dispute with them** indeed. These two who had seen God work so powerfully through the Gentiles would not abandon that work easily.

i. In this, Paul and Barnabas show the hearts of true shepherds: To confront and dispute with those who insist on promoting false doctrines in the church.

b. **They determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem:** When persuasion did not end the issue, Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem to have the matter settled by **the apostles and elders**. They couldn't just agree to disagree on this issue, because it was at the core of what meant to be a follower of Jesus.

i. Who are the **they who determined that Paul and Barnabas** should go to Jerusalem to determine this question? It seems to speak of the church collectively in Antioch, where this false doctrine was being promoted. This is indicated by the statement that they were **sent on their way by the church**.

c. **They caused great joy to all the brethren:** As Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem, they found plenty of other Christians who rejoiced at what God had done among the Gentiles. This is in contrast to the certain men from Judea.

3. (5) The men from Judea re-state their teaching.

But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command *them* to keep the law of Moses.”

a. **Some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up:** We see that many of these Judaizers were Christians who had been **Pharisees**. The **Pharisees** were renowned for their high regard for the law, and their scrupulous observance of the law.

i. If the Pharisees believed anything, they believed one could be justified before God by keeping the law. For a Pharisee to really be a Christian, it would take more than an acknowledgment that Jesus was Messiah; he would have to forsake his attempts to justify himself by the keeping of the law and accept the work of Jesus as the basis of his justification.

ii. In Lystra, Paul and Barnabas would not allow the pagans to merely “add” Jesus to their pantheon of Roman gods. They commanded that they had to turn from their vain gods to the true God (Acts 14:14-15). These Pharisees who had become Christians must do the same thing: Turn from their efforts to earn their way before God by keeping the law, and look to Jesus. You can’t just “add” Jesus and now say “Jesus helps me to justify myself through keeping the law.”

iii. Paul himself was a former Pharisee (Philippians 3:5) who became a Christian. But he knew that Jesus didn’t help him do what a Pharisee did, only better. He knew that Jesus *was* his salvation, not *the way* to his salvation. Paul wrote: *knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.* (Galatians 2:16)

b. **It is necessary or circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses:** These former Pharisees were teaching two things. First, Gentile converts must be *initiated* into Judaism through circumcision. Second, that Gentile converts must *live under the law of Moses* if they are to be saved, and embraced into the Christian community.

i. Basically, their teaching was: “Gentiles are free to come to Jesus. We welcome them and want them to come to Jesus. But they have to come through the Law of Moses in order to come to Jesus. Paul and Barnabas, among others, have been allowing Gentiles to come to Jesus without first coming through the Law of Moses.”

c. We can imagine how they would have even made a case from the Old Testament for this teaching. They might have said Israel has *always* been God's chosen people and that Gentiles must become part of Israel if they want to be part of God's people.

i. Passages **the Pharisees who believed** might quote in defense of their position are Exodus 12:48-49 and Isaiah 56:6. These passages might be quoted to say that the covenant the Gentiles were invited to join was a covenant of circumcision.

B. The Jerusalem council.

1. (6-11) In the midst of a great dispute, the apostle Peter speaks to the issue.

Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: "Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as *He did* to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they."

a. **Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter.** Here, we see the church coming together to decide the issue. They didn't just let the issue sit, nor leave it up to the conscience of each believer.

i. The question raised by the Jerusalem council was immense: Are Christians saved by faith alone, or by a *combination* of faith and obedience of the Law of Moses? Is the work of Jesus by itself enough to save the one who trusts in Jesus, or must we add our work to Jesus' work in order to be saved?

ii. With significant doctrinal issues today, perhaps this sort of public "trial" of doctrine would be beneficial.

b. **And when there had been much dispute:** This would have been amazing to see! Christians serious enough about the truth to **dispute** for it! In the midst of this, Peter, as one of the leading apostles, **rose up** to make his opinion known on the matter.

c. **Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago:** Peter begins with a history lesson, recounting the work God had already done. He then makes the point that **God** had fully received the Gentiles apart from their being circumcised (**God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us**). If God had **acknowledged** these Gentiles as full partners in His work, why shouldn't the church? If God received them, so should the church!

i. In saying, “**Made no distinction between us and them,**” Peter makes an important observation. It comes straight from his vision of the clean and unclean animals, from which God taught him this principle: *God has shown to me that I should not call any man common or unclean* (Acts 10:28). Those *of the sect of the Pharisees who believed* thought that the Gentiles were inherently “common” (in the sense of “unholy”) or “unclean,” and had to be made holy and clean by submitting to the Law of Moses.

d. **Purifying their hearts by faith.** Peter shows *how* the heart is purified: **by faith**, not by keeping of the law. If they were purified by faith, then there was no need to be purified by submitted to ceremonies found in the Law of Moses.

i. Christians are not only *saved* by faith; they are *purified* by faith also!

e. **Why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?** Peter wisely answers another objection. One might ask, “What is the *harm* in bringing Gentiles under the Law of Moses?” Peter was right on the mark when he observed that the law was **a yoke** which **neither our fathers nor we were able to bear**.

i. This is demonstrated by a brief look at Israel’s history. At the birth of the nation at Mount Sinai, they broke the law by worshipping the golden calf. At the end of Old Testament history, they are still breaking the law by breaking the Sabbath and marrying pagan women (Nehemiah 13). From beginning to end, Israel could not bear the **yoke** of the law.

ii. Those *of the sect of the Pharisees who believed* were making a critical mistake. They were looking at Israel’s history under the law with eyes of nostalgia, not truth. If they would have carefully and truthfully considered Israel’s failure under the law, they would not have been so quick to put Gentiles under the law also.

iii. Paul makes the same argument in the book of Galatians 3:2-3. If the law does not save us, why would we return to it as the principle by which we live? In light of the finished work of Jesus, it is offensive to God to go back to the law. This is why Peter asked, “**why do you test God?**”

f. **But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they.** Peter concludes with the observation that it is **through grace** that all are saved - both Jew and Gentile – and not by obedience to the law. If we are saved by grace, then we are not saved by grace *and* law-keeping.

i. Peter also insists there is only one way of salvation: **We [Jews] shall be saved in the same manner as they [Gentiles]**. Jewish Christians were not saved, even in part, by their law-keeping; they were saved the same way Gentiles were: **Through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ**.

2. (12) Paul and Barnabas tell of their work among the Gentiles, supporting Peter's claim that God is doing a work among them.

Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles.

a. **Then all the multitude kept silent and listened:** This shows that even though *there had been much dispute*, these men were all of an honorable heart. They were willing to listen, and to be persuaded if wrong.

b. **Declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles:** Barnabas and Paul confirm Peter's previous point. Essentially, they are saying "God has accepted the Gentiles, should not we as well?"

3. (13-21) James, the brother of Jesus, speaks to the issue, supporting what Peter and Paul had said.

And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, "Men *and* brethren, listen to me: Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of 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 will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up; so that the rest of mankind may seek the LORD, even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the LORD who does all these things.' Known to God from eternity are all His works. Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, *from* sexual immorality, *from* things strangled, and *from* blood. For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

a. **James answered, saying, "Men and brethren, listen to me."** This James is not the apostle James, whose martyrdom is recorded in Acts 12:2. This is the one traditionally known as James the Just - the half-brother of Jesus (Matthew 13:155), brother of Jude (Jude 1), and author of the book of James (James 1:1).

b. **God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people:** James begins by insisting God had a **people** among the Gentiles. This would astound a religious Jew in that day!

i. The Greek word for **Gentiles** (it could also be translated *nations*) is *ethne*. The Greek word for **people** in this passage is *laos*. The Jews considered themselves a *laos* of God, and never among the *ethne*. For them *ethne* and *laos* were contrasting words. So, it would be challenging for them to hear that **God at the first visited the Gentiles (*ethne*) to take out of them a people (*laos*).**

ii. "The paradox inherent in the contrast between *Gentiles* (or *nations*) and *people* is striking, since the latter term was often used of the Jews

as the people of God in contrast to the Gentiles. Now it is being urged that God's people includes the Gentiles." (Marshall)

c. **With this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written:** James will judge this new work of God by the way any work of God should be judged. James will look to what **is written**.

i. **Even all the Gentiles who are called by My name:** In this passage James quotes (Amos 9:11-12), it actually says that salvation will come to the Gentiles. This demonstrates that what God is doing among the Gentiles has a *Biblical* foundation.

ii. Today, many things are considered *Biblical* if they merely fail to contradict something in the Word, even though they may have no root in the Word of God whatsoever. An outside authority would settle this debate. The outside authority was God's Word.

iii. "Councils have no authority in the church unless it can be shown that their conclusions are in accord with Scripture." (Stott)

d. **I will return and will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down:** When James quotes the prophecy in Amos 9:11-12 about rebuilding the fallen tabernacle of David, he remembers that the Judaism of his day had **fallen down** in the sense that it had rejected its Messiah. Now God wants to rebuild that work, focusing on a church made up of both Jew and Gentile.

i. **All the Gentiles who are called by My name:** When God says there are Gentiles who are called by His name, He is saying they stay Gentiles. They are not Gentiles who have been made Jews. Therefore, Gentiles do not need to become Jews and under the law to be saved!

e. **Therefore I judge** implies that James had a position of high authority in the church. He was probably respected as the "senior pastor" of the church at Jerusalem.

ii. The Greek presents it even more strongly as "I determine" or "I resolve" (Expositor's). In addition, when the decision of James was published, it was presented as the mutual decision of all present (Acts 15:25: *It seemed good to us*). Clearly, James' leadership was supported by all present.

iii. "The rest either *argued* on the subject, or gave their *opinion*; James alone pronounced the *definitive sentence*." (Clarke)

f. What did James decide? **We should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God.** James essentially says, "Let them alone. They are turning to God, and **we should not trouble** them." At the bottom line, James decided that Peter, Barnabas, and Paul were correct, and that those *of the sect of the Pharisees who believed* were wrong.

g. **But that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood:** James' decision that Gentile believers should not be under the Mosaic Law is also tempered by practical instruction. The idea was that it was important that Gentile believers not act in a way that would antagonize the Jewish community **in every city** and destroy the church's witness among Jews.

i. If the decision is that one does not have to be Jewish to be a Christian, it must also be declared that one does not need to forsake the Law of Moses to be a Christian.

h. **To abstain from things polluted by idols . . . from things strangled, and from blood:** These three commands have to do with the eating habits of Gentile Christians. Though they were not bound under the Law of Moses, they were bound under the Law of Love. The Law of Love tells them, "don't unnecessarily antagonize your Jewish neighbors, both in and out of the church."

i. **To abstain from . . . sexual immorality:** When James declares that they forbid the Gentile Christians to **abstain from . . . sexual immorality**, we shouldn't think that it means common sex outside of marriage, which all Christians (Jew or Gentile) recognized as wrong. Instead, James is directing these Gentiles living in such close fellowship with the Jewish believers to observe the specific marriage regulations required by Leviticus 18, which prohibited marriages between most family relations. This was something that Jews would abhor, but most Gentiles would think little of.

j. Gentile Christians had the "right" to eat meat sacrificed to idols, to continue their marriage practices, and to eat food without a kosher blessing, because these were aspects of the Mosaic law they definitely were not under. However, they are encouraged (demanded?) to lay down their "rights" in these matters as a display of love to their Jewish brethren.

i. "All four of the requested abstentions related to ceremonial laws laid down in Leviticus 17 and 18, and three of them concerned dietary matters which could inhibit Jewish-Gentile common meals." (Stott)

4. (22-29) A letter of decision is drafted.

Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, *namely*, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren. They wrote this *letter* by them: The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings. Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, "*You must be circumcised and keep the law*"; to whom we gave no *such* commandment; it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men 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 will also report the same things by word of mouth. For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no

greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.

a. **It pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church:** Much credit goes to the *certain men* of Acts 15:1, who allowed themselves to be convinced by the evidence from the Scriptures and by the confirmation of the Holy Spirit. They all agreed!

i. We can almost admire the *certain men* of Acts 15:1, because they boldly stated their convictions, even though their convictions were wrong. But even more admirable is the way they are willing to be taught and shown they are wrong. A teachable spirit is a precious thing!

b. **To send chosen men of their own company to Antioch:** The Jerusalem council wisely sends two members of its own community (probably Jewish Christians themselves) with Paul and Barnabas back **to Antioch**, the place where the whole dispute arose.

c. **They wrote this letter by them:** The letter gives the express decision of the Jerusalem council, that Gentiles should consider themselves under no obligation to the rituals of Judaism, except the sensitivity which love demands, so as to preserve the fellowship of Jewish and Gentile believers.

i. **To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia:** This letter is written specifically to these churches where Jews and Gentiles mixed together in this tension; it was not addressed to every Gentile congregation.

d. **For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us:** Who made the decision at the Jerusalem council? When the apostolic letter says **it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us**, it makes it clear that it was the Holy Spirit who decided the matter. Significantly, the Holy Spirit made the decision through the decisive leadership of James (who declared, **“Therefore I judge,”** Acts 15:19).

e. Therefore, the issue is settled here in the infancy of Christianity, and for all time: We are saved by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ, not by any conformity to the law, and such obedience comes as a result of true faith, *after* the issue of salvation has been settled.

C. Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch.

1. (30-31) A joyful reception among the Gentile Christians at the church of Antioch.

So when they were sent off, they came to Antioch; and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter. When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement.

a. **When they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter:** We can imagine how these Gentile Christians felt, wondering how the

decision might come forth. Would the council in Jerusalem decide that they really were not saved after all because they had not submitted to circumcision and the Law of Moses?

b. **When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement:** How relieved they were to see that the principle of grace had been preserved! That heard that they *were* saved and right with God after all!

GALATIANS 5:6-12

3. (5-6) The answer of faith to the legalist.

For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love.

a. **For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith:** Those walking in the Spirit **wait** for **righteousness by faith**; they are not trying to *earn* it by performing good works. No one is a legalist **through the Spirit**.

i. Wuest on **eagerly wait**: “The word speaks of an attitude of intense yearning and an eager waiting for something. Here it refers to the believer’s intense desire for and eager expectation of a practical righteousness which will be constantly produced in his life by the Holy Spirit as he yields himself to Him.”

b. **For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love:** Those walking in the Spirit know that being circumcised or uncircumcised means nothing. What matters is **faith working through love**, both of which were conspicuously absent in the legalists.

i. Each aspect of this verse is precious. It sets us in a *place*: **in Christ Jesus**. Morris on **in Christ**: “Paul never defines what the expression means, but it clearly points to the closest of unities.”

ii. In that place, **neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything** – neither one *matters at all*. You aren’t better if you are circumcised or uncircumcised. You aren’t worse if you circumcised or uncircumcised. The only harm is trusting in something that is completely *irrelevant!*

iii. This verse also tells us what *does matter* in this place: **faith working through love**. You have **faith**? Wonderful; but it must be **faith working**

through love. If your faith doesn't *work*, it isn't real **faith**. If it doesn't work **through love**, it isn't real **faith**. But your **love** alone isn't enough; your **love** must also have **faith**; an abiding trust in who Jesus is and what He did for us.

iv. Faith must work **through love**. Herod had faith that John the Baptist was a true prophet, but there was no **faith working through love**, and he had John the Baptist murdered. Real faith, saving faith, will work **through love**.

4. (7-12) A final confrontation.

You ran well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion does not *come* from Him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump. I have confidence in you, in the Lord, that you will have no other mind; but he who troubles you shall bear his judgment, whoever he is. And I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why do I still suffer persecution? Then the offense of the cross has ceased. I could wish that those who trouble you would even cut themselves off!

a. **You ran well:** Paul remembers their good start in the faith, but he also knows that it isn't enough to start well - they are still in danger of falling from grace.

b. **Who hindered you from obeying the truth?** Paul knows that the false teaching comes from a person (**who hindered you**); but it didn't come from Jesus (**This persuasion does not come from Him who calls you**).

i. At the root of it all, the Galatians were leaving Jesus to pursue the false and empty teachings of man, in this case legalism.

ii. Lightfoot on **hindered**: "A metaphor derived from military operations. The word signifies 'to break up a road' . . . so as to render it impassable, and is therefore the opposite of . . . 'to clear a way.'" The Galatians were doing well until someone broke up the road they ran on!

c. **A little leaven leavens the whole lump:** The warning is driven home - the corrupting influence of legalism and other doctrines that diminish Jesus are like **leaven** in a **lump** of dough. A little bit soon corrupts the **whole lump**.

i. In the Jewish way of thinking, **leaven** almost always stood for evil influence. Paul is saying that the legalistic commitment they have right now may be small, but it is so dangerous that it can corrupt everything.

d. **I have confidence in you:** Wanting to leave the confrontation on a positive note, Paul expresses his **confidence** in the Galatians (which is really a confidence in the Lord who is able to keep them). Yet, Paul is equally

confident that judgment awaits those who lead them astray and away from Jesus (**he who troubles you shall bear his judgment, whoever he is**).

i. Remember Jesus' solemn warning against those who would lead one of these *little ones* astray (Matthew 18:6-7). The judgment is sure, **whoever he is**. "It does not matter who he is; he may be highly acclaimed in the community where he teaches, but if he is perverting the gospel he is a guilty person and his rank and reputation will not shield him." (Morris)

e. **If I still preach circumcision**: Paul makes it clear that he no longer preaches the necessity of **circumcision**. The fact that he is persecuted by the legalists is evidence enough of this. Instead, Paul proudly bears **the offense of the cross**.

i. How could anyone accuse Paul of preaching **circumcision**? Probably because he asked Timothy to be circumcised (Acts 16:1-3). But Paul didn't have Timothy circumcised so Timothy could be saved or "more saved." He did it so Timothy could more freely evangelize among unsaved Jewish people.

ii. Legalism can't handle the **offense of the cross**. The whole point of Jesus dying on the cross was to say, "You can't save yourself. I must die in your place or you have absolutely no hope at all." When we trust in legalism, we believe that we can, at least in part, save ourselves. This takes away the **offense of the cross**, which should *always* offend the nature of fallen man. In this sense, **the offense of the cross** is really the *glory of the cross*, and legalism takes it away.

f. **I could wish that those who trouble you would even cut themselves off!** Finally, Paul wishes that those who demanded circumcision among the Gentiles would go all the way themselves, and amputate their genitalia altogether, not merely their foreskins.

i. Sacred castration was known to citizens of the ancient world; it was frequently practiced by pagan priests in the cults in the region of Galatia. Paul's idea here is something like this: "If cutting will make you righteous, why don't you do like the pagan priests, go all the way and castrate yourself?" Morris rightly observes, "This was a dreadful thing to wish, but then the teaching was a dreadful thing to inflict on young Christians."

ii. "This word was habitually used to describe the practice of mutilation which was so prevalent in the Phrygian worship of Cybele. The Galatians were necessarily familiar with it, and it can hardly bear any other sense." (Rendall)

iii. In writing this, Paul also wished that these legalists would be cut off from the congregation of the Lord as required by Deuteronomy 23:1: *He*

who is emasculated by crushing or mutilation shall not enter the assembly of the LORD.

iv. With such a dramatic conclusion to this point, Paul has made one thing clear: legalism is no *little* thing. It takes away our liberty and puts us into bondage. It makes Jesus and His work of no profit to us. It puts us under obligation to the whole law. It violates the work of the Spirit of God. It makes us focus on things that are irrelevant. It keeps us from running the race Jesus set before us. It isn't from Jesus. A little bit will infect an entire church. Those who promote it will face certain judgment, no matter who they are. Legalism tries to take away some of the glory of the cross. In light of how serious all this is, it's no wonder that Paul says he wishes they would **even cut themselves off!**

v. "‘Circumcision’ stands for a religion of *human* achievement, of what man can do by his own good works; ‘Christ’ stands for a religion of *divine* achievement, of what God has done through the finished work of Christ. ‘Circumcision’ means law, works, and bondage; ‘Christ’ means grace, faith and freedom. Every man must choose . . . And behind our choice lurks our motive. It is when we are bent on flattering ourselves and others that we choose circumcision. Before the cross we have to humble ourselves." (Stott)

Guzik on GALATIANS 5:7-12 passage also referenced in Sunday's teaching...

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