

## Acts 15:1-11:22-29

### Gospel Clarity

**Introduction:** Acts is the history of the earliest Christians. Through this book we understand how it all began, what the early Christians were all about, how they lived their lives, and where they got their power.

We've come this morning to a long theological debate within the early church about the Gospel and the Gentile Christian's relationship to the Law of Moses. It's a very long debate so we're going to consolidate it into four points.

#### 1. Truth - What the Gospel is

1. The Apostles have been testifying all through the book of Acts to all different kinds of people that salvation is by God's sheer mercy and grace. Now certain Jews (Those belonging to the party of the Pharisees) have risen up saying that this isn't true. That people cannot be saved apart from becoming Jews first and by continuing to keep the Law of Moses. So now the Apostles and the Elders of Jerusalem are all together to discuss and work this issue out. How do they do that? They listen to one another's testimony about how God had been working and saving people by the simple message of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone and they studied the word in community. And this is what they affirm - **"we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."** Jews are saved by grace and so are Gentiles. In all their experiences of the gospel going out God has made no distinction between people - he saved each one by grace through faith.
1. We talk about this a lot at Refuge but it is so important for us to get together often and reaffirm the gospel of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. We have to do this often because there are tendencies in each of us to either overemphasize works and deemphasize grace and faith. Often there is the legalism of our own hearts that we are prone to or the liberalism that comes from the culture surrounding us. I love how the early church continually brought all the external issues and internal issues back to the Gospel. When we settle on the truth that every single one of us are damned and doomed sinners apart

from God's sheer grace and mercy, and our simple faith in what Christ has done so many things are cleared up for us. We want to be a church that continually wrestles with whatever internal issues or external issues may come up in light of the truth of the Gospel.

## 2. Liberty - What the Gospel does

1. I Love that the Apostles and Elders of Jerusalem are determined to let the gospel do what it has been doing from the beginning which is removing all barriers and relieving all burdens. Peter says, "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?"
2. And the Apostles collectively write a letter saying - "**For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements.**"
3. Christianity is so vastly different than all the other religions of the world that say - bear this burden, carry this weight, do these things, observe this and that and you will be accepted. Religion says do and God will accept you, Christianity says, that God accepts you because of what Jesus has already done. Even when we look at the life and career of Jesus it is clear that his life was not about adding burdens, guilt trips and more religion to people - he said himself he came to set free those who were bound, he came to relieve our spiritual hunger and quench our spiritual thirst. Christianity is about relieving our burdens of sin and guilt and shame from the past, and our burdens of measuring up for the future.
4. Just even consider the narrative of our secular culture. From a very young age we are taught - you choose for yourself what you're going to be and do with your life, don't let anyone tell you what you can be or not be... do you know how crushing and overwhelming that is for a kid?? No one can live up to that and little by little you'll scratch things off your list of dreams and aspirations because you couldn't live up to your dreams and you'll feel like a failure. Christianity frees you from the past and from the future of proving your value and worth by what you do. We talked about this a few weeks ago but true freedom is not doing what you want - it's being who you were created to be - A dearly loved child of God that bears the image of Jesus christ.... You don't need to earn your right to live, or earn favor with God, you can have it freely through Jesus.

5. Religion and legalism burden, the Gospel fills you up and sets you free. In the Gospel we have the offer of unfailing love and total acceptance, continual unbroken fellowship with God by the knowledge that our sin has been dealt with once and for all and nothing can now separate us from God's love, and the knowledge that God is preserving us for his kingdom and working everything for our good and his glory - What freedom these truths bring when grasp them with both our heads and our hearts. how it changes the way we live and treat people and things...

### **3. Diversity - What the Gospel brings**

1. In this situation there were certain things that these Gentile Christians must make a clean break with - particularly Paganism. If you take all of these together and not as individual disjointed commands - it seems to be a command against association with pagan temples and worship practices. You see they had been turned from these worthless things to serve the true and the living God. so they are to live no longer in the way or the practice of pagan lifestyle and worship. What the Apostles do not command is that they must change their cultural ways, they do not tell them to become Jewish in any way shape or form. In fact if you look at Paul's letters he discourages Gentiles from adopting Jewish custom and culture, precisely because it sends the wrong message about who God accepts and receives.
2. As we've been seeing throughout Acts this is evidence to the inclusiveness of the Gospel- God, the living God is the creator of everyone and everything. He is not just the God of the Jews, but he is the God over all people - therefore not one culture is the right or only way to live.
3. We constantly need to be reminded of this because of human pride we tend to demonize what is different. We turn differences in opinion, politics or culture into moral judgments.
4. But only a message as diverse and accepting as the gospel can free us from cultural, racist, caste based, gender prejudice.
5. A gospel that says, "For in Christ Jesus you are all first born sons of God through faith....there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, there is no male or female."
6. This should make Christians the most culturally adaptable, culturally accepting people, this should give us the freedom to lay down our

cultural taboos and prejudices in order to reach people with the gospel. As Paul says, "I become all things, to all men that I might win some for the Gospel."

1. But I want to bring up another point before we move on - This passage is hugely important in our day and age because more than ever people are saying that Christians are hypocrites in the sense that they themselves choose out of the Bible what they want to believe and don't want to believe, to obey and not obey and then they usually cite passages from Leviticus usually one law about sexual sin and another law about shell fish. (Might I recommend Paul Copan's book on this very subject - Is God a Moral Monster? or Christopher Wright's book - Old Testament ethics for the People of God)
2. But this is accusation is simply not true. The Bible is totally authoritative and completely binding for all Christians for all time and we have no right to put aside anything in the Bible and say that doesn't fit me anymore unless the authoritative Bible itself tells you that it is no longer binding or fitting. If the authoritative Bible in the NT tells you this part of the OT isn't binding then you aren't picking and choosing- you are doing exactly what the Bible says. So we are not allowed to put anything aside in the Bible unless the Bible tells us we can put it aside.
3. Why isn't the ceremonial law of Moses binding? What was circumcision and the law of Moses all about?
  1. Because Jesus himself made it clear that he was the one who fulfilled all the righteous requirements of the law and that it was always pointing to him and what he came to do and the Apostles and the writers of the NT under the inspiration of Holy Spirit continually agree.
  2. It was first a spiritual message of uncleanness and of God's holiness - example: if you touched a dead body, you were unclean and couldn't worship at the tabernacle for a time.. This was getting the point across that human beings are sinful and unclean and God is holy and pure we can't just waltz up to him, to his holy presence. We need cleansing we need to be made pure...
  3. The Law continually shows again and again how the blood of a substitute was able to cleanse from sin and uncleanness - all

the Animals were innocent third parties but through the shedding of their blood a temporary cleansing came.. or another way to put it is: The law teaches us to know the Holy nature and will of God, and the sinful nature and disobedience of our hearts, and thus our need of a savior... All of this was pointing forward to what God would do through Jesus that he would deal with the sin and uncleanness of humanity by his perfect Son Jesus Christ becoming our substitute.

4. But why all the washings and kosher dietary restrictions - because it would make it very difficult for a Jew to integrate with the surrounding nations. God did this on purpose so that the message of salvation would not get mixed in with the pagan religions and be lost. It was for the preservation of the Gospel. But now that Jesus has come and the righteous requirements of the law have been fulfilled in and through him - the ceremonial laws that brought distinction and cultural separation are no longer needed

#### 4. **Purity** - What the Gospel gives

1. I was listening to a pastor this week talk about circumcision and I have to share what I learned. He talked about how circumcision was a sign - of the curse of the covenant. You remember that in ancient times when you made a covenant or contract with someone, you would act out the repercussion of the covenant as a sign or picture of what would happen if one of you failed to keep up your end of the deal. Abraham is a perfect example of this - where the animals are split in half and the two makers of the covenant walk through them saying may I be split in half if I don't fulfill my word...
2. Think about how vulnerable, painful, bloody and just down right shameful circumcision is.. it is such a weird unpleasant act or sign and it was meant to be.. it was an acting out of the repercussion or curse of the law. Think about how many times the Law Moses says, that if someone does such and such a thing he shall be cut off from his people - A picture of the curse. That's what circumcision was all about - a sign of the curse.
3. Listen to what Paul says in relation to circumcision about those who are in relationship to Jesus Christ by faith - **“See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world,**

and not according to Christ. 9 For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, 10 and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. 11 In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, 12 having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. 13 And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, 14 by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. 15 He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.”

4. What is the circumcision of Christ? - This is not a reference to Jesus being circumcized on the eighth day according to the Law of Moses. This is a reference to the cross where Jesus bore the curse of all - it was bloody, it was humiliating, it was excruciatingly painful, and it was a cutting off of his life!! That is the circumcision that you and I have been made clean by - Paul says, through this circumcision we've been made alive to God, we have our sin/trespasses forgiven, and the debts of legal demands that were against us have been canceled..
5. What is Paul telling us? There is no human law or or religious act that can make us clean or add to the purifying work of the cross of Jesus, so have nothing to do with those things. “Cast your deadly doing down—Down at Jesus’ feet; Stand in Him, in Him alone, Gloriously complete.” Or the Hymn -“Jesus paid it all, all to him we owe, sin had left a crimson stain - he washed it white as snow! To try to add to the work of Jesus only takes away from it.

**Conclusion:** I think it's clear to see what is at stake when we compromise the truth and purity of the Gospel. May we by God's grace do what Paul and his companions did in the face of legalism He says, -“**we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.**” May we preserve the truth of the Gospel so

that no person, ethnicity, culture, political view point, or gender is barred or burdened unnecessarily from coming to Jesus.

As Paul says Again, **“Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Romans 15:7).** The more clearly that doctrine is taught, and the more beautifully that culture is developed, the more powerfully a church will bear prophetic witness to Jesus as the mighty Friend of sinners.