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Allen Power

Acts 15:6-11, 24-31

Acts is the “history book” recording the spread of the gospel and growth of the early church. The good news of Christ was spreading beyond Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria (Acts 1:8) to other places and beyond just the Jews to the Gentiles. In Acts chapter thirteen we see Paul launch his first missionary journey. By chapter fifteen, he has made the circuit back to Antioch where he began. Many Gentiles were coming to faith in Christ and it was a time of great celebration!

Have you ever noticed that just as God’s plans are being accomplished, Satan finds a way to cause division among God’s people? That’s what happened in Antioch. *“Many Jewish Christians continued to hold firmly to their Jewish rituals and traditions. The more legalistic of these Jewish believers insisted that new Gentile converts must accept the laws and rituals of Judaism alongside their confession of Jesus Christ as Savior.”*<sup>1</sup> More specifically, they were insisting that a Gentile who accepted Christ as Savior ALSO had to observe the Jewish laws and (if they were a male) be circumcised. That word ALSO was the problem. **When we speak of salvation through Christ why is the word ALSO a problem? (Illustration: the “mathematics” of salvation)**

Big Idea: Salvation is available to everyone through faith in Jesus alone – Christ plus NOTHING. The idea that we must DO something in addition to trusting Christ in faith is “another gospel” (Gal. 1:8,) actually not the gospel at all.

As Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch, a group of men from Judea showed up to push this agenda of Christ PLUS the Jewish law: *“Unless you are circumcised as required by the law of Moses, you cannot be saved.”*<sup>2</sup> They believed a Gentile had to become a Jew before they could become a Christian.

*“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.*<sup>ii</sup> This meeting of the church elders to settle this critical question is known as the Jerusalem Council. We're a "fly on the wall" as we listen to that meeting beginning in verse six of chapter fifteen:

Acts 15:6–11 (NLT)

<sup>6</sup> So the apostles and elders met together to resolve this issue. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> God knows people's hearts, and he confirmed that he accepts Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. <sup>9</sup> He made no distinction between us and them, for he cleansed their hearts through faith. <sup>10</sup> 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? <sup>11</sup> We believe that we are all saved the same way, by the undeserved grace of the Lord Jesus."

- Let's look at these verses to spot words and phrases that reveal the nature of how salvation works. **What do you see in verses 8, 9, and 11?**
- Verse 10: **What do you think Peter meant by a "burdening the Gentile believers with a yoke" that even the Jews couldn't bear?**
- Wiersbe: *"The Law was indeed a yoke that burdened the Jewish nation, but that yoke has been taken away by Jesus Christ (see Matt. 11:28–30; Gal. 5:1ff; Col. 2:14–17). After all, the Law was given to the Jewish nation to protect them from the evils of the Gentile world and prepare them to bring the Messiah into the world (Gal. 4:1–7). The Law cannot purify the sinner's heart (Gal. 2:21), impart the gift of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 3:2), or give eternal life (Gal. 3:21). What the Law could not do, God did through His own Son (Rom. 8:1–4). Those who have trusted Christ have the righteousness of God's Law in their hearts and, through the Spirit, obey His will."*<sup>iii</sup>
- Three fundamental verses every follower of Christ should know:
  - John 3:16 (ESV)**For God So Loved the World**

<sup>16</sup> “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

○ *Ephesians 2:8–9 (ESV)*

<sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, <sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

- When Martin Luther launched the protestant reformation 500 years ago this year, he stated five “solas” (in Latin meaning “alone”) that defined the difference between his view of salvation and that of the Catholic Church. Let’s look at three of them: Sola Fide, Sola Gratia, Sola Christo:
  - **Sola fide** (faith alone) emphasizes salvation as a free gift. The Roman Catholic Church of the time emphasized the use of indulgences (donating money) to buy status with God. Good works, including baptism, were seen as required for salvation. Sola fide stated that salvation is a free gift to all who accept it by faith (John 3:16). Salvation is not based on human effort or good deeds (Ephesians 2:9).
  - **Sola gratia** (grace alone) emphasizes grace as the reason for our salvation. In other words, salvation comes from what God has done rather than what we do. Ephesians 2:8-9 teaches, “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.”
  - **Solo Christo** (sometimes listed as Solus Christus, “through Christ alone”) emphasizes the role of Jesus in salvation. The Roman Catholic tradition had placed church leaders such as priests in the role of intercessor between the laity and God. Reformers emphasized Jesus’ role as our “high priest” who intercedes on our behalf before the Father. (Hebrews 4:15)<sup>iv</sup>
- **Why do people naturally gravitate toward salvation by good works/deeds? How do groups today add requirements to salvation beyond having faith in Jesus Christ?**
- Back to the church business meeting in Jerusalem. James (the half-brother of Jesus) proposed a way forward, the delegates

came to a conclusion, and wrote it in a letter back to the church in Antioch verse 24:

Acts 15:24–31 (NLT)

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

<sup>28</sup> “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay no greater burden on you than these few requirements: <sup>29</sup> 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.”

- The church leaders led by James made it clear that “no greater burden” was necessary for the Gentiles to experience salvation than faith in Christ. They were convinced of this because God had clearly given the Holy Spirit to Gentiles just as He had to the Jews to confirm their salvation (15:8) so the Gentiles were saved in the same way as the Jews (15:11.)
- However, in the interest of unity among the Jewish converts and the Gentile converts, they did recommend some dietary and moral guidelines NOT as a way to earn salvation, but as a way to keep the peace.
- “Wait a minute! Are we saying you can be saved and live like a pagan?” **How would you explain to a new believer the relationship between what is required for salvation and what is characteristic of holy living?**

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

- The church leaders resolved the controversy and rejoiced that it was settled. It’s a great example for church leaders today. When there is a disagreement we should consult God’s word,

seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and the counsel of wise and godly leaders, then agree in Christian love.

So, What's the Takeaway?

- Faith alone, grace alone, through Christ alone. In the “mathematics” of salvation the formula is always Jesus’ work on the cross plus NOTHING.
- Yet, down through the centuries “religious” people have tried to add all kinds of “greater burdens” by making salvation about human effort and good works. That’s the same as saying Jesus’ death on the cross was not enough.
- Aren’t you glad to know that we don’t have to try to earn our salvation? There’s no way we could earn it even if we tried. Jesus paid it ALL and “it is finished.” Faith alone, by grace alone, in Christ alone!

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<sup>i</sup> Explore the Bible Commentary Acts 13-28 – Lifeway 2017 p.31

<sup>ii</sup> Tyndale House Publishers. (2013). *Holy Bible: New Living Translation* (Ac 15:1–2). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

<sup>iii</sup> Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 1, p. 462). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.gotquestions.org/five-solas.html>