

Dig Deeper into Acts 15:1-35 for personal study and lifegroups...



Acts 15 Grace is Amazing...don't spoil it!

The story...

- ① The dispute v1-5
- ② The discussion v6-18
 - Peter
 - Barnabas & Paul
 - James
- ③ The directives v19-35

The lessons...

- ① Don't deny the gospel with rules
- ② Don't hinder the gospel with barriers
- ③ Don't dishonour the gospel with strife

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Acts 15 is the story of the Council of Jerusalem. It is central to the book of Acts, in position and importance. As we pick up this new series and will see the gospel going out on Paul's second missionary journey, this passage sets up for what is to come. It's also hugely impactful for us, as we make sure we are believing and sharing the true gospel of grace...

1. Looking at Luke 24:46-49 and Acts 1:1 and 1:8 what is the book of Acts all about? Why is it of relevance to us? What are you looking forward to over the next 7 week series?
2. v1 & v5. What was the behind the "troubling" (v24) teaching that the "circumcision group" (as they are called in Galatians) were pushing? Why was it such a problem? Spend some time thinking about equivalents of this today?
3. What are the reasons from Peter (v7-11), Paul & Barnabas (v12-13), James (v12-18) for why this teaching had to be resisted? How can you put these in a few of your own words?
4. *[IF TIME... In the light of the fact that the apostles are insisting on a law-free gospel, why are the 4 things mentioned in v20 and in the letter in v29 so surprising? So why is James demanding them? Is he adding rules to the gospel? (see over the page if you want to go a little deeper and pursue this in your own time)].*
5. How does all of this impact a) your sense of relief in terms of your relationship with God, b) your evangelism and c) your relating to Christians of different backgrounds?

Resources...

- <https://bibleproject.com/guides/book-of-acts/> See here for some resources from the Bible Project including two videos overviewing the book as a whole in a pictorial way.
- **"The Glories of God's Love"**. We are selling this book for £1. Charlie still has a few copies left. **Milton Vincent** tells the story about how he wrote Bible truths on index cards to "rehearse the gospel to himself". It took him from being worried about his Christian performance, to rejoicing in the free grace that God had given him.

For those who want to dig deeper into the “Jerusalem directives”, here are the issues....

1) What is being requested by the council?

There are four things that the council (v20) and the letter (v29) insist on. These are actually picked up again in 21:25....

A) Avoiding food sacrificed to idols Paul speaks more about this in 1 Cor 8-10 where he maintains that because idols are not true gods, one is free to eat food that comes from the meat market that has been used in idol worship. However, if your conscience, or the conscience of someone you are eating with doesn't sit right with it, you must avoid it.

B) avoiding blood. This most likely refers to avoiding meat with the blood still in it. This was outlawed in Leviticus 17:10-16, but in Mark 7:19 Jesus declared all foods clean, something confirmed in Acts 10. Some think it could be a reference to murder, but that is unlikely.

C) avoiding the meat of strangled animals. While not specifically outlawed in the Old Testament, this was a way of killing an animal that left the blood in it, and therefore would have been difficult for those with Jewish scruples.

D) avoiding sexual immorality. The Greek word “*Porneia*” means all sex outside of heterosexual marriage. However, some see the directive as specifically avoiding the close-kin marriages in Leviticus 18 (something that Gentiles may have been guilty of), or it could be outlawing sexual immorality in general. I think it is most likely that it is the former. This would mean that the principles being explained are not moral ethics (which all Christians are to maintain, eg sexual purity) but some specific Gentile practices which would have been difficult for Jewish consciences.

2) Why are rules being added at all?

We have just established that one does not need circumcision or the law of Moses to be saved. So is James now just contradicting all that has been agreed? I think the key lies in the phrase “the law of Moses has been preached in every city” v21. Paul is thinking about Jews scattered throughout the Roman Empire. They have lived all their lives believing that certain foods are not “kosher”. They may have a conscience that tells them that they mustn't go back on this. In order to enable evangelism to Jews and table fellowship with Jewish background believers, the apostles are asking the Gentiles to be flexible with regard to issues regarding food. Amazingly Paul who has been so strong against circumcision will have Timothy circumcised in chapter 16.

So these are not conditions to entry to the family of God (that would be to undo the principle that the council was seeking to establish- salvation is by pure grace). But these are recommendations to the Gentiles, seeking that they remove barriers to a) gospel proclamation to Jews and b) gospel fellowship with Christians from a Jewish background. I wouldn't call these rules, but principles of practice to remove barriers from the gospel.

The Jerusalem council therefore gives a model of applying gospel principles to complex pastoral situations in the real world, while preserving the free gospel of grace.

For more on the weak and the strong conscience, read 1 Cor 8-10 and Romans 14 & 15.

Do come back to me if you have questions. I can also lend John Stott's BST commentary which is very helpful on all this.

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