

Acts 15:1-35  
Drifts to Avoid  
ACTS: HTCWP

### Introduction

Tim. Pastor. Sup. Acts 15 (pg 538).

Have you ever gotten in a really stupid fight with someone?...some fights are just not worth fighting....

What we're going to see today in Acts 15 is the early church fight a fight worth fighting.

It's a major turning point for the church - what is often referred to as "The Jerusalem Council". They come face to face with a conflict and it's by walking through this conflict that the mission of God moves forward, the church is strengthened, and God is glorified.

What's at stake in this debate is the very gospel of Jesus Christ and the salvation of the nations. The church must wrestle with these things and fight for the truth of the gospel...and what we're going to see today in Acts 15 is that we must fight for these things as well.

If I could summarize what we're talking about this evening in one phrase it would be this - **we must fight for the gospel of grace that is good news for all people.**

So let's look at Acts 15 together.

### Acts 15:1-5

**1 But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."**

In Acts 11, four chapters prior to this, the author Luke introduces us to the church in a city called **Antioch**. This first Gentile mega-church. It's a center for the Christian movement. It was planted by a bunch of people who Luke doesn't even name, who went there after the persecution that took place in Jerusalem following the death of Stephen. It's here at Antioch that followers of Jesus are first called "Christians" or literally - "Those who belong to Christ".

**And some folks from Judea, a Jewish region nearby, have heard about what's going on and come to Antioch to tell these new Gentile (Gentiles were basically everyone who is not Jewish) believers that they have to be circumcised in order to be saved.**

**Why did they do this?** A lot of the first Christians were Jews, and Jews had been raised on Old Testament law. One of the most important Jewish OT laws was that every male had to be circumcised. This was a part of the covenant promise God had established with Abraham all the way back in Genesis 17, near the very beginning of the Bible, that every man who was going to become a part of the people of God whether through natural birth or through conversion later in life must be circumcised. **It was a God-given physical sign to mark a separation of the people of God from the rest of the world.**

So, a lot of these new Jewish Christians were teaching the new Gentile believers, "If you are really going to be a child of God, you have to be circumcised."

**There's two points of contention and questions here:**

- The first is do they have to be circumcised to be saved?
- The second is do they have to follow the Jewish customs in order to be a child of God?

**2 And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them** [good gospel conflict, a willingness to fight for the right reasons and right things], **Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.**

Now this is not a small, out of the way detour for Paul and Barnabas. Right before this they had been traveling the world planting churches left and right, seeing many come to faith. But this debate and topic is important enough to get right for them that they pause their missionary activity, and spend the time to go to Jerusalem to get this sorted out.

**3 So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. 4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. 5 But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses."**

So they get to Jerusalem. They share all about what they've seen God do, some people are stoked. Some, not so much. There are some believers who are still serving as Pharisees in the Jewish religious system who start saying the same thing those other false teachers were saying - They must be circumcised, and they must follow the OT law of Moses.

In response to this conflict, you're going to see 2 responses from 2 leaders in this Jerusalem church. The first is from Peter, the second is from James. Let's look at Peter's first....

### **Peter + Grace vs. Law**

**6 The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. 7 And after there had been much debate** [again, good gospel conflict], **Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.**

Peter starts his speech by referencing back to **Acts 10**. Something that took place 10 years prior to this Jerusalem council. And what happened in Acts 10 is that God gives Peter a **vision** and a **visitor**.

- In the vision Peter sees a sheet coming down from heaven, and on it was all kinds of foods that were off limits to Jews, in particular pork, certain birds, and some reptiles. God tells Peter to rise, kill, and eat.
- Then right after this Peter gets a visitor, sent by a Roman government official named Cornelius, who asks Peter to come to his house and tell the entire Gentile family of Cornelius about Jesus.

God uses this vision and this visitor to show Peter - "I am doing a new thing." Just like the Jewish customs of what they could eat no longer apply, so it is with circumcision. These signs that used to set us apart as God's people are no longer needed. God shows Peter **that the gospel and God's family and God's kingdom are no longer about the one people group of Israel, no longer based on their ethnic identity and heritage, but God is making a new people for Himself from every tribe, tongue, and nation by grace through faith in Jesus.**

Peter's summary of this whole situation in **Acts 10:34-35** is this - **"34 So Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, 35 but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."**

So Peter says here at the Jerusalem council - you guys know 10 years ago God used me to preach the gospel to Gentiles.

Then he's gonna keep going vs 8:

**8 And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, 9 and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. 10 Now, therefore, 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? 11 But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."**

**This is the first thing we must fight for within the church:**

**1. We must fight for the gospel of grace.**

At this time there were **613 Jewish laws** that those who wanted to follow God had to obey. Circumcision was 1 of those laws, there were 612 others...And I love Peter's honesty here, he's like, "All of these rules and regulations, **I can't follow them**....but here's the thing you can't follow them either, and one more thing our ancestors - the ones we look up to so much, David, Moses, Abraham, Solomon - none of them could follow them. Why do we feel the need to insist that now these Gentiles try to do what none of us for centuries have been able to do?"

In fact that wasn't even the point of the law. One of the big reasons for the law of Moses (**Romans 5:20**) was to show that we can't measure up. Was to show how sinful we are. Was to show that we need something or someone besides ourselves to save us.

**"We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."**

We can't follow the law, and even if we could, it wouldn't save us. It's the grace of God that saves us! Not our works. Not our deeds. Not our physical circumcision or rules following or customs or regulations. It's by grace through faith!

### **Hard-wired Hearts**

We must fight for the gospel of grace through faith. Pete stands up and defends the gospel of grace to his Jewish companions in the church. He's willing to get in good conflict and fight this fight with them.

But that's not the only way and place we fight for the gospel. It's not just an out here with others fight. **One of the biggest arenas in which we must fight for the gospel is in our own hearts.**

This whole controversy starts with Jewish **believers**, not non-believers, Jewish **Christians** telling these Gentiles they must be circumcised. These guys putting these rules and regulations up were saved! They believed they were saved by putting their faith in Christ, but after that they started to drift back toward a rules-based relationship with God.

**This is what always happens. We constantly drift back from grace to law. From relationship to rules. From approval-given to approval-earned.**

**Our hearts, as Martin Luther said, are hard-wired for works-based righteousness.**

**Alignment.** This past week I took both Lindsay and I's cars to get the tires rotated and aligned. You don't do that on a regular basis, you know what happens? You're driving on I-77 or I-85 and your car starts drifting and you have to fight to keep it straight and on the road.

This is what our hearts do. We know - I'm saved by grace through faith. We have that conversion moment where God shows up and saves us through our belief in Jesus... but our hearts, because of sin, always want to keep drifting back to a works-based righteousness, a works-based salvation.

Now, for us it's probably not the need to be circumcised, but it's a million other little things that can either crush us or puff us up.

- **Parenting:** So if we have a day where we're just crushing it as a parent - we think we're all that. Then we have a day where we're impatient, our kids are going crazy, we don't feel like we're doing a good job - we're just crushed.
- **Work:** We have a day where we are killing it at work - boss is happy. We're productive - we feel awesome. Bad day at work? Boss is mad at you, feel like your job is a pointless mess - we feel crushed.
- **Porn/Lust:** Two straight weeks of not looking at porn or lusting - we feel like "man, God must be really happy with me!" Give into temptation - we're crushed. "No way God could ever love me."
- **Mission:** Had an awesome conversation about Jesus with a neighbor - I'm the best Christian ever! Jesus loves me, this I know! Shrank back in fear and didn't engage in a conversation when we could have - "Man, God must really not like me right now."
- **Comparison:** Well, I'm not doing great at reading my Bible, but at least I'm doing better than that other person in my CG, God must really like me now! Or...man they fast like every other day, I'm never gonna be that holy, God must love them more than me.

And our own opinion of ourselves and what we think is God's opinion of us just ebbs and flows, up and down, with how we are doing or not doing. Maybe it was faith and grace that started our relationship with God, but now it's on me to keep Him happy with me!

**That's works-based-righteousness. Works-based-salvation. Works-based perseverance. It's anti-gospel.**

**A gospel that says God's approval of me rises and falls with my performance is no gospel at all.**

Because the true gospel of Jesus says that our approval by God is based on faith in Christ and his performance and his work which He did completely and perfectly through His life, death, and resurrection.

The true gospel says that when we turn from our sin and trust in Christ that He takes our sin and gives us His righteousness. That God actually views us as He views Jesus - holy, righteous, perfect, washed clean, made new, redeemed.

Piper - "you're not guilty."

And it's out of that fullness of approval we have from God through Christ and by the power of the Spirit that we learn how to put sin to death, grow in our faith, parent well, be a good worker and a good church family member, all of that.

**But the gospel is first and foremost that we come to Jesus and by His grace He cleans us up, not we clean ourselves up to come to Jesus.**

**We must fight in our hearts and in our church for a gospel of grace.**

And that's what Peter is saying don't put this burden on them, don't put this burden on yourselves - **"We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."**

**James - ALL People**

**12 And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. 13 After they finished speaking, James replied, “Brothers, listen to me.**

James gets up to speak. He is another one of the leaders in this church in Jerusalem. He’s also the younger brother of Jesus.

**14 Simeon [Peter’s Jewish name] has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. 15 And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, 16 “After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, 17 that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things 18 known from of old.’**

James points back to an OT prophecy, **Amos 9**, to show that God is fulfilling His plan to gather together a people for himself from all nations - Jew and Gentile.

Many theologians point to Acts 15 as this kind of gospel explosion bomb. The early church settles it - **the gospel is good news that we are saved by grace through faith**. And then the mission of God just takes off like wildfire, even more than it had been up until that point.

- It goes to Philippi, and Thessalonica, and Berea, and Athens, and Corinth, and Ephesus, and Macedonia, and Greece, and finally to Rome.
- It hits every people group, every nation, every demographic.
- Young and old are getting saved.
- Men and women are getting saved.
- Married folks, single folks.
- Highly religious and anti-religious.

Like it just spreads like mad. They get the gospel right - **Through Christ and Christ alone and that leads them to take it to all people.**

**That is because the gospel of grace and the gospel for all people are so intricately linked together.** The gospel is available to all because salvation:

- Is not based on your works - what you’ve done or can do.
- Is not based on your family of origin - who your parents were or where you’re from or the color of your skin.
- Is not based on your job title or how much power or prestige or influence you have.
- Is not based on your income or the size of your house or bank account.

**The gospel is the good news that Jesus, and only Jesus saves - by grace through faith.** And that compels us to take the gospel to the nations, across the world. Giving up our lives for those around the globe who have no access to the gospel, have no way of hearing about Jesus. Because salvation is only through Christ we are compelled to go, and to send, and to give, and to pray.

But not only does that compel us to go to all parts of our globe, it also compels us to go to all parts and people in our city.

And this leads to the second thing we must fight for within the church

- 1. We must fight for the gospel of grace.**
- 2. We must fight for the gospel of grace that is good news for all people.**

Look at what James says here as his encouragement to this Jerusalem council:

**19 Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God,**

In other words - **let's not put unnecessary barriers between these people who are not like us and the gospel of Jesus Christ.**

**We must have a deep-rooted conviction that the gospel is for all people, and so our church should be for all people.**

### Unnecessary Burdens | Diagnostic

**And so I think verse 19 is a helpful diagnostic for us to ask our church:** Are we creating unnecessary burdens between different groups of people within our city and the gospel of Jesus Christ?

**Now, the Bible says the gospel is a stumbling block for people.** What that means is that it's a hard message to accept. You have to believe and own - I'm a sinner, I'm messed up, I can't save myself. Jesus demands total devotion to Him. We must change. We must give up control of our lives. We must deny ourselves and follow Him. The gospel is a hard message.

**AND, am I or are we adding barriers that don't need to be there such that I lose focus of the mission that God calls us to of making disciples of all *people* for the glory of God?**

So we have to ask...if we believe as a church that the gospel is good news for all people in our city, does our church reflect that? An easy way to tell is just to look at some demographics:

- **If Charlotte is 55% non-white** and the gospel is good news for all people, does our church reflect that?
- **If 14% of our city lives below the poverty-line** and the gospel is good news for all people, does our church reflect that?
- **If 60% of adults in our city are not married** and the gospel is good news for all people, does our church reflect that?
- **If the median age of our city is 34 years old and 45% of the population is above the age of 35** and the gospel is good news for all people, does our church reflect that?

And are we doing anything outside the bounds of Scripture that keep people from hearing the good news of the gospel?

**And here's the thing - I'm doing everything I can as your pastor to not create unnecessary barriers to the gospel here in our church.** Through leadership, through illustrations and examples I use in sermons, even down to what types of events and classes we do and what time we do them and all of that. And I'm far from perfect at this. I'm actively repenting and trying to shift my heart, my preferences....

But this is not all on me or on our leadership team or on Citizens Church as an organization. Let me remind you from a few weeks ago - **"I am they. You are us."** If you're a member here, the responsibility for what you want to see God do in this church family also falls on you!

And let me say this as strongly and directly as I can - **It is hypocritical and wrong of you to be frustrated with the lack of diversity in our church (in every way - age, race, economic means, socially), and not be willing to live a diverse life yourself.**

Or let me say it positively → **We will never have a diverse church, until we start living diverse lives.**

And let me make something clear - these aren't bad desires. To want our church to be more diverse - age, race, socioeconomically - in every way - that is a good thing. I'm asking - **are we willing to do this with our own lives?**

Do our actions line up with what we say we care about? Does your life intentionally or unintentionally exclude people that are different than you?

- Is your life set up in such a way that you only and ever hang out with other 24-year-olds?
- Are there unnecessary barriers you're creating to building diverse friendships?
- Is your life built in such a way where you exclude people in different life stages, different economic groups, or whatever it may be, than you?

This takes intentionality. From us as a church. From your CG. From you as an individual.

**We must fight for the gospel of grace that is good news for all people.**

### James' Final Arguments

**19 Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, 20 but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. 21 For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues."**

He just told these Jewish believers → Don't make it difficult for the Gentiles to come to Jesus. But now his encouragement is to the new Gentile believers - don't make it difficult for the Jewish Christians either. They have cultural sensitivities, they have certain things because of tradition and history that would make it hard for them to be in fellowship with you. Be gracious to them. Kind. Patient. These things are not a salvation issue, but they are a unity issue.

**Both sides must learn to dwell in unity together.**

**What happens after this:**

- The Jerusalem council all agrees.
- They write a letter to send back to the church at Antioch that affirms salvation by grace through faith
- The gospel continues to spread with much rejoicing.

### Conclusion

Here's where I want to close us tonight. It is so easy to drift from a gospel of grace to a gospel of law. And as you do that the next natural shift is away from God's heart for all people and away from unity within the church. **And this is exactly what happened to Peter.**

**Do you know what happens between Acts 10 and Acts 15? Galatians 2.**

Peter gets it in **Acts 10** - Cornelius, weird sheet vision from God. Gospel is by grace through faith. Gentiles too can be saved by faith! They don't have to be circumcised, they don't have to follow the Jewish customs and traditions! The gospel is for all people!

But then you have Galatians 2. Peter and Paul in conflict, and Paul writes this: **11 But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. 12 For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. 13 And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. 14 But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?" 15 We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; 16 yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.**

When you **forget** the gospel you start wrongly believing:

- It's by works through effort....so only the best or certain people can come....and if you don't measure up you're out.

When you get the gospel **right** you know:

- It's by grace through faith....so anyone can come....because we're all sinners in need of Savior.

And Paul is willing to fight him. He confronts him to his face. And a little while later you have Peter saying in Acts 15:11 - **we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."**

How quickly we can drift. We must fight. **We must fight for a gospel that is good news for all people.**

Anyone can come, but you must come through faith in Christ and Christ alone.

**Communion (one of the ways we fight).**

**Pray.**