

A Gospel Worth Fighting For

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[0:00] Acts chapter 15, we're going to be reading the first 35 verses. Acts 15 verse 1. Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers.

! Unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved. This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them.

So Paul and Barnabas were appointed along with some other believers to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted.

This news made all the brothers very glad. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

Then some of the believers, who belonged to the party of the Pharisees, stood up and said, The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.

[1:05] The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them. Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe.

God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.

Now then, why do you try to test God? By putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear. No, we believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.

The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. And when they finished, James spoke up.

Brothers, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this.

[2:21] As it is written, After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild and I will restore it. And the remnant of men may that the remnant of men may seek the Lord and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord who does these things that has been known for ages.

It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead, we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.

For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath. Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decide to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.

They chose Judas, called Barsabbas, and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers. With them they sent the following letter. The apostles and elders, your brothers.

To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia, greetings. We have heard that some went out from among us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said.

[3:42] So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements.

You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.

Farewell. The men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers. After spending some time there, they were sent off by the brothers with a blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them.

[4:45] But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord. Let's hear the preaching of God's word.

The Lord Jesus Christ has promised to build his church, and Satan and his demons are doing all they can to stop him.

They fight against every single conversion of a sinner, because every gain to the church of Christ is a loss to the kingdom of darkness.

And the reality is that Satan is fighting to keep some of you here in his kingdom. Now, for hundreds of years, Satan had his way in the Gentile world, keeping them in darkness and ignorance.

They didn't know the gospel, and he just kept them in idolatry and superstition and fear, holding them in bondage as his slaves. But with the coming of Christ, God's eternal plan and promise was to include the Gentiles among his people, and that was now to be fulfilled.

[6:00] And so the risen Christ sends his church with the gospel light into all the world to make disciples to Jesus from all the nations.

That's what the Gentiles mean. Not non-Jews, all the rest of mankind. They, too, are to believe the gospel and be added to the church.

Well, that was a frontal attack on Satan's kingdom. And the book of Acts shows all hell fighting back with a vengeance. Now, Paul and Barnabas, if you remember, had been sent on a missionary journey to the Gentiles, sent out by a predominantly Gentile church, the church at Antioch in Syria. That's not the Jewish nation. That itself was a mission church there at Antioch. And they sent Paul and Barnabas out deep into Gentile territory, as we've seen on the map in the last month.

There where Satan had held sway. And what we found is that over and over, Gentiles were converted right out of paganism, turned from idols to serve the living and true God and to trust in the Lord Jesus and wait for him from heaven.

[7:18] Well, when that happened, the Jews, stirred up by Satan, persecuted the missionaries, Paul and Barnabas.

And they in turn, the Jews in turn, being stirred up by Satan, stirred up the Gentiles to apply pressure and to persecute them, to drive them out of town.

And you remember, they even stoned Paul once and left him for dead, thinking him to be dead. Now, sinner friend, I want you to read Satan's heart in that.

He hates you. He wants you damned. He doesn't want you to hear the gospel. That's what we're seeing in the book of Acts. And I want you to read the heart of Jesus in the great commission that he's given to the church to take his saving gospel to every creature believing they might be saved. He's the friend of sinners. He's willing and able to save all who come to God through him. Well, persecution then is Satan's tactic to hinder the church on its saving mission to sinners.

[8:32] And especially to hinder it as it now moves into Gentile territory. But Satan has other tactics as well. And that's what we're seeing today in Acts 15.

Not only persecution from the outside, but controversy from the inside. And in this controversy, we see the Lord Jesus guiding and protecting his church, bringing them through it victoriously with the true gospel preserved intact and continuing to go out and save sinners and adding to the church both Jews and Gentiles.

So that's what we're seeing here in Acts 15. Let's look then, first of all, at the inward controversy a false gospel introduced. What was going on here in this chapter?

Well, verse 1 says, Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers, Unless you were circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.

Now, who were these men from Judea? I believe they're the same men that we see in verse 5, and it included believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees.

[9:51] Those who believed in Jesus, but were still very zealous for the law of Moses. And these professing Jewish Christians were clearly bothered by what they saw happening in Antioch and

what they heard was happening through the Antioch missionaries all around the Gentile nations.

Namely, that Gentiles, as Gentiles, were being told that they could be saved from sin simply by repenting and trusting in Jesus Christ. And those Gentiles who did turn from their idols and trust in the Savior were baptized and accepted, welcomed right into the church.

as Gentiles without being circumcised and without having to keep all the old covenant laws of Moses, the dietary laws, the clean and unclean laws, the many ceremonial laws that distinguish the Jews from all the rest of the people's laws that served as markers, that these are the people of God, not those.

They didn't have to obey all those laws. And so these legalizing Jews, it didn't sit right with them to see the Gentiles just being able to join the church and come right in and claim salvation without having to be circumcised and keep the law.

Now, we can understand them even if we don't agree with them. What I mean is this, that in the old covenant, circumcision was indeed required by God for all males belonging to his people.

[11 : 32] And so it was to be an outward sign of an inward circumcision of the heart, that my heart has been cleansed and purified to serve and to fear and to love and to trust the living God.

And this outward sign upon their flesh was to be a sign of an inward heart that feared the Lord. And so for 2,000 years, ever since the founder of the Jewish religion, Abraham, the father of the faithful, for 2,000 years, the Jews had circumcised their boys and men as God had commanded for all who would belong to his people.

And if Gentiles wanted to belong to God's people, fine. They, too, would need to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses.

And so for 1,500 years, belonging to God's people meant, yes, you were obligated to keep all of those laws of Moses, things that affected every area of life from what they ate to what they wore. So as these Jewish Christians now saw Gentiles in Antioch and all over the Gentile world wanting to be a part of God's people in Jesus Christ, they would say to them, unless you're circumcised, you cannot be saved.

[12 : 54] In essence, they're saying, you've got to become Jews before you can become Christians. Here you are, uncircumcised Gentiles. If you want to be saved and become Christians, you need to be circumcised and keep the laws of Moses.

In other words, become a Jew. And then, as a Jew, believing on Messiah, you can be saved. Well, we've tried, then, to put ourselves into the shoes of these Jewish Christians from the party of the Pharisees.

We can understand they had a long-standing tradition that all of God's people submitted to the law of Moses, and for men that meant circumcision. But now try to put yourself into the shoes of these Gentile believers in Antioch.

Okay, so you're a Gentile. That means you're a pagan. You probably didn't know anything about Jesus maybe a year ago. You had received idolatry from your parents and their parents and parents and parents all as long as you could remember and could be traced back.

But then, these missionaries came to town, and they talked about a way to have your sins forgiven, not by earning it, but by what Jesus of Nazareth did.

[14 : 10] God's Son came and died on the cross and took the punishment that sinners deserve. And if you believe on Him, you will be saved, forgiven, given eternal life.

And you put your trust in this Jesus. And you were baptized and you joined the church, the gathered assembly there in Antioch at Syria. And you're rejoicing and you're having these teachers teach you the word of God and you're growing in your faith and your joy and peace are abundant in Christ.

And then some very serious Jews, Jewish Christians from Judea came to Syria, came to Antioch, to your church, and they said, you know, you're really not saved.

You can't be unless you're circumcised. And keep the law of Moses and you're not living that way. You're eating things that are forbidden. You're wearing things. You need to keep the law of Moses and be circumcised in order to be saved.

[15 : 19] Well, that troubled them. We see that in verse 24, don't we? It disturbed the peace of the believers in Antioch. It troubled the minds of these Gentile believers.

You can understand why. You're rejoicing that you're forgiven and now suddenly you're told you're lost and on your way to hell? What a blow to them. And it troubled them.

But it wasn't just the Gentile believers who were disturbed. We read in verse 2 that this brought Paul and Barnabas. They're Jews. They're Jewish Christians. It brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. Literally, it says, no small dissension and debate.

No small disagreement and debate. It was not a calm response that it drew from Paul and Barnabas. It was the sort of response to be expected of a mother bear when someone's messing with her cubs.

[16 : 19] These spiritual shepherds who were given the charge to care for these sheep take seriously any threat to their well-being. But they also care deeply about the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And so Paul and Barnabas disagreed with them vehemently and eagerly contended for the faith once delivered to the saints.

and they realized that what is at stake here was nothing less than the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. What must you do to be right with God?

The gospel according to Jesus in Mark 1 15 is repent and believe the good news. But these had altered the gospel from repent and believe to repent and believe and be circumcised.

Now that might sound like a small addition but to add anything to Christ's work is a denial of the sufficiency of Christ's work. To add any work of ours for salvation for justification to be right with God means that Christ's work was not enough.

[17 : 39] And so this was a Jesus plus gospel that these folks from Judea had brought to town.

It was Jesus plus circumcision and circumcision was just a marker that meant and all the rest of the laws of Moses. And in the end it doesn't matter whether your contribution to salvation is 50% 75% or a half a percent.

it's a denial of the saving work of Christ. It's a refusal to rest on Christ alone for salvation and as such it strips the gospel of any power to save.

What is the power of the gospel to save? Paul says it's the righteousness from God in Christ that he puts to the sinner. It's that perfect obedience of Christ it's his work that he gives to the sinner.

That's the power that's what makes a man right with God. And by introducing the smallest bit of man's work to merit salvation you have stripped the gospel of its power to save.

[18 : 50] Paul sees that. Adding anything to Christ for salvation is in fact subtraction. Subtraction of the power to save.

It's a so-called gospel that saves no one and what kind of a good news is that? A gospel that doesn't save. It's what Paul calls another gospel which he says is no gospel at all.

There's no good news in that gospel. It's only a perversion of the one and only saving gospel. So Paul writes to the Galatian believers, the Galatian churches, those churches that we saw he established on that first missionary journey and he writes to those and there were some among them who were trying to be justified by keeping the law and he says to them, mark my words, I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no profit to you at all.

Wow. Christ is either all profit to us or no profit to us. It's an all or nothing gospel.

It's all of grace or there's no grace in it. So Paul saw that this was no tame attack of the devil. It was no slight diversionary tactic just to knock them off course a bit.

[20 : 14] No, Satan is going for it all because if he can introduce a false gospel as the true gospel, that would be no small triumph. All of his subjects would be safe, you see.

Okay, let the missionaries and evangelists take their gospel to the ends of the earth as long as it's this false gospel. And these pagans, by believing the false gospel, oh, yeah, they might be religious and they might be reading the scriptures and all the rest.

They might be circumcised, but they'll still be lost. They'll still be mine, Satan is saying. We don't like controversy in the church, but some things are worth dispute and debate.

And namely, when the very nature of the gospel is at stake. And so Paul and Barnabas are set for the defense of the gospel. They plant their feet and they will not give an inch to these Judaizers. And it seems that this perversion of the gospel gained no traction in Antioch. We don't read of the people in Antioch going over to this side and being circumcised.

[21 : 29] Rather, it troubled them. It disturbed their minds. It disturbed their peace. And so Paul and Barnabas answered the threat.

They stood against it and preached the gospel of grace. But Antioch sees that this issue is bigger than just one church. This is not just a problem here. These fellows have come up from Judea.

This has far-reaching consequences for all the churches. Indeed, for all future missionaries that are going to take the message of the gospel out to the Gentile world.

But what is that message? Is it repent and believe on Jesus or is it repent and believe on Jesus and be circumcised and keep the law of Moses?

And so Paul and Barnabas and others were sent to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem to deal with this question. Now they had an advantage we don't have.

[22 : 30] There were still living apostles when this controversy came up. That is hand-picked apostles of Jesus who had spent three and a half years with them and whom Jesus had made the foundation of his church and said these are the men who will lay a foundation foundation of building upon me Christ the chief foundation stone.

Well we don't have apostles anymore to go take our questions to but we do have the writings. This is where we go. We go to the writing of the apostles. Well they went down then to Jerusalem the mother church there and they bring this question.

So that's the false gospel introduced. This is the great controversy in Antioch. Now the second point this morning is the Jerusalem council itself then where we see the true gospel upheld.

The Jerusalem church welcomed the brothers when they came from the Antioch church and Paul and Barnabas reported to the church everything that God had done to them on their missionary journey.

They told about the many Gentiles who had been saved and put their trust in Jesus Christ and as they're testifying to these wonders of God's salvation to the Gentiles.

[23 : 48] These Pharisees who had believed in Christ stood up and said but the Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.

What do we learn from that? Clearly they were unpersuaded by Paul and Barnabas' argument back up in the Antioch church. They're still holding their ground and thinking their opinion will fare better down here in Jewish Jerusalem than it did in Gentile Antioch.

And so there was a lot of discussion followed of which we have no record. Those would have been interesting minutes to have as they debated and discussed this issue back and forth.

But then the heavy hitters came to the plate to weigh in on the matter. The likes of Peter and Paul and Barnabas and James. First Peter, he's the leader, often the spokesman for the apostles, isn't he?

And Peter says, Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe.

[25 : 03] Peter's testimony is simply to tell what God had done. Nearly ten years ago at the Gentile Cornelius' house. God had made a choice that Gentiles should hear the gospel and believe and that when they believed God had showed that he accepted them just as they were without circumcision and he showed it by giving them the Holy Spirit, the same spirit that he gave to us Jews on the day of Pentecost.

And God made no distinction between us and them. It was the same gospel gift of the Holy Spirit. He didn't make the Gentiles become like us circumcised.

For he purified their hearts by faith, not by circumcision, not by outward circumcision. No, he saw faith in their hearts and accepted them just as they were and gave them that inward circumcision of the heart.

But he did not require them to be circumcised. It was as they heard and believed that he poured out his spirit showing that he accepted them. So do you see what Peter's doing here at the Jerusalem Council?

He's saying, brothers, God has already decided this matter. Case closed. It's over. There's nothing for us to decide here. It was his decision ten years ago to send the gospel to the Gentiles and he did that.

[26 : 32] He had planned it before the creation of the world. He did it ten years ago. He has included the Gentiles into his family and he's done so on the basis of faith alone without circumcision.

This is a decision that God alone made and he made it clear to us. So you see, he's saying this decision of including the Gentiles as Gentiles who believe in Jesus was not Peter's decision to make, though he'd be an exalted apostle.

It's not his decision. It wasn't his decision to make ten years earlier. He said if God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I?

That I could oppose God. It wasn't my decision. God decided and I went along with it. That's his account of what happened at Cornelius' house. So it wasn't Peter's decision to make whether the Gentiles should be circumcised.

It was God's. Neither was it the Jerusalem council's decision to make. They were not given the authority to determine whether or not Gentiles had to be circumcised.

[27:47] No, it's not for man or church councils anywhere to determine the terms upon which the holy God will accept rebel sinners. If he accepts any sinners, that's his prerogative.

And the terms on which he will accept it, those are his prerogatives alone. That's his business and we'd better leave it to him. Peter's saying, God's already opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. He's already granted the Gentiles repentance unto life. He's already shown that he's accepted them without circumcision. So who are we to do anything else? What God did must regulate what we do. That's what Peter's argument is. So he says, be careful. Be very careful about putting a yoke on Gentile believers that God has not put on them. You're thinking about demanding circumcision in order for them to be saved.

That's putting a yoke on them that God hasn't put on them. Who are you to stand in God's place? You see? The yoke of circumcision, the yoke of the law of Moses, something that we were not even able to keep.

[29:06] And so he calls it testing God. Remember that language from the Old Testament? It's not a small sin of Israel's when they tested God. And he says, if you require circumcision, you are testing God.

as if God had made a mistake and you could correct him. No, Peter says, we believe. Isn't it interesting?

We, speaking on behalf of the whole apostolic band, perhaps speaking on behalf of the whole church, we believe that it's through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved just as they are. There's not two gospels. There's not two ways to be saved. One for the Jew and one for the Gentile. We were saved by grace, not by circumcision.

And they are saved by grace, not by circumcision. Yes, we were circumcised, but it wasn't our circumcision that saved us. And neither will it save them.

[30:10] No, it's the grace of our Lord Jesus by which we are saved. You see, Peter sees the requirement of circumcision as a violation of the very principle of grace in the gospel.

It's a departure from grace. It undermines the gracious nature of the gospel. The gospel which is the message of his grace. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Although he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor. He became poor. That you through his poverty might be made rich. It's all his grace. I'm not sure being circumcised.

A hush fell over the whole assembly when Peter was done. Could have heard a pin drop. Peter's word had carried the consciences and had left no rebuttal.

How do you rebut God? If God has already decided the case, who's going to speak next? And that's what Peter said. God's already shown us. He's already decided this matter.

[31:20] Now who's going to stand up in the face of that and speak? No. The place grew silent. God's own actions had closed the case. Well, then Paul and Barnabas are the next two big hitters.

Remember, they carry weight in Jerusalem. Barnabas used to be in Jerusalem. Remember, it was the apostles there that renamed him Barnabas, son of encouragement. He encouraged the saints and they all loved him.

And here's Barnabas back here. And now Barnabas is going to talk. And the church listens with interest as Barnabas. And Paul, too, you remember, had preached in Jerusalem. They first were wary about him, but then they embraced him and protected him and sent him off when the Jews tried to kill him.

Now Barnabas and Paul speak into the silence to an attentive audience and they drive home the same point about what God had done. It's not about what we think.

It's about what God has already done. And done on their missionary journey because they were telling about all the miraculous signs and wonders that God had done among the Gentiles through them.

[32:29] They told him about Elemas. He was struck blind on the spot for opposing the gospel. to the procouncil. They told him of the man who was born blind in Lystra and with a word.

He could see. He told him of many of these signs and wonders that God did. Do you remember the reason why God did those signs and wonders?

Chapter 14 and verse 3 says they were speaking boldly for the Lord who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders.

In other words the miraculous signs and wonders confirm that this message is from God himself. He is putting his imprimatur on it by performing signs and wonders through them.

This is no message of man. This is no man made gospel. This is the word from heaven. And so what Paul and Barnabas are saying is that as we took this gospel to the Gentiles do you think God would have given confirming signs to confirm a message of a false gospel?

[33:38] If you had to be circumcised to be saved we were preaching a false gospel because we were only requiring men to turn from their idols into trusting Christ.

And God confirmed that. He confirmed the message of his grace. That's what we proclaimed. The message of his grace. And he confirmed it.

And so you see Paul and Barnabas are making the same point. It's what God has done. He's already put his stamp upon the message of his grace. That salvation is all of grace and is not by our keeping of the law of Moses.

And that's a truth that God showed not only at Cornelius' house but now he's shown it all over the Gentile world where we went preaching the message of grace.

Hard to rebut. God himself. There was none. Every mile stopped. And then thirdly James. James. Not the apostle James.

[34:42] Brother of John. Remember he was killed by the sword by Herod back in chapter 12. But rather the step brother of the Lord Jesus. The author of the early epistle of James.

And he had become a prominent elder and leader in the church at Jerusalem. Probably the moderator of this very council. And as moderator he reviews what has been said and sums up the evidence.

And again notice the emphasis on what God has done. It's consistent throughout. Verse 14. James says Simon. That's another word for Peter. Has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself.

So again it's what God had done. Himself. To choose the Gentiles. As a people for himself. But now James calls forth new witnesses.

Namely the prophets of the scriptures. Verse 15. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this. As it is written. So all the prophets.

[35:47] Plural. Sound the same note about the conversion of the Gentiles. That God was going to gather in people to himself. Not just from the Jews. But from the Gentiles. And so this is not found in one or two obscure texts.

All the prophets. Plural. So James brings the controversy into the light of God's written word. And that's where all controversies must be brought.

And where all controversies must end. With what saith the scriptures. What does the word of God say? If they do not align with the law and the prophets there's no light in them.

Don't care how long they've claimed to be a Christian. How holy their life looks on the outside. If it's not according to the law and the prophets. There's no light in them. We shouldn't pay them any attention.

And so James. Yes. Summing up. He says you know. All that we've heard here today. It aligns with what God has written. What God said to us hundreds of years ago through his prophets.

[36:53] And then he quotes just one of them as an example. Quotes a prophecy from Amos to prove the point. Where God had promised to establish his kingdom through David's line. Through David's house.

But you remember David's tent was fallen. There was no king of David on the throne. The whole monarchy. The nation was in subjection to Babylon and now to Rome.

And centuries went on without a king on the throne of David. Without the nation prospering. But rather living under the heel of foreign oppressors. And Amos lived before that time.

Before Israel had ceased to be a nation. But he spoke about those times. When they would not have a king. And what would happen after that.

What God would do after that. And he quotes God's own words. After this. This is what God says. After this. After there's no king upon the throne.

[37:54] I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild. And I will restore it. That the remnant of men may seek the Lord.

Even all the Gentiles who bear my name. Says the Lord. Who does these things that have been known for ages. Again notice it's something that God claims he himself did.

It's what God himself will do. Restoring the house of David. Restoring the people of God. Putting the king upon the throne. Namely the Lord Jesus Christ.

The greater son of David. Raised him from the dead. And at the coronation in heaven put him on the throne. throne. And now is filling his kingdom.

Not just with Jews. But with the remnant of men. The leftovers of men. All the other nations. All the Gentiles who bear his name. Now the Jews had been the one who bore the name of God.

[38:53] But now the Gentiles as well are to bear his name. Showing his ownership. We belong to the Lord. And that's true as much of Gentiles as it is of Jews.

And so James is drawing the conclusion. Brothers we shouldn't be surprised at what God is doing with the Gentiles. Because long ago in his word he told us he was going to do it.

What Amos and the prophets said was coming is now being fulfilled. And so the threat was met and the true gospel of grace was upheld.

Well we come to the decision reached and carried out. James sets a proposal before the council.

He says therefore in other words in light of all that has been said and all that God has revealed and done it is my judgment that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.

Now that's the most important point in the whole council. By their circumcision by their keeping of the law these Pharisees were making it hard for the Gentiles.

[40:03] It was not the easy yoke that Jesus promised to all who came to him. And he says we should not do that. It's clear God has spoken.

We should not make it hard for the Gentiles. We should not add to the gospel of grace circumcision and keeping the law. And so the true gospel of grace is affirmed and is defended and all the legalistic encroachments were categorically denied.

Instead what we should do is just write to them and tell them our decision and then tell them to abstain from food polluted by idols, sexual immorality and meat of strangled animals and from blood.

The Gentile world was full of idolatry and these Gentiles had been saved right out of it. And so they're being warned about the danger of returning to idolatry.

And they're also living in a pagan culture where sexual immorality was okay. In fact it was encouraged and practiced.

[41:19] It was a very part of the ritual of their idolatry. That's the culture in which they now live. And they once practiced that and now they're saved.

Just tell them to be sure to abstain from sexual immorality and from food offered to idols and from meat of strangled animals and from blood.

For the reason is given. Moses is preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in synagogues on every Sabbath. The whole church and its leaders adopted the proposal of James.

It was a unified response and in their letter they identified these Gentile believers there at Antioch as brothers. Brothers, we accept you as you are, not circumcised, full brothers in Christ.

And they distanced themselves in their letter from those legalizers who had come from their midst and disturbed their minds. Isn't that something? We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbs you troubling your minds by what they said.

[42:28] We want you to know for sure that we had nothing to do with their message. And so we're writing it down and we're even sending two of our leaders here in the church at Jerusalem to personally tell you of our decision.

We're sorry these men came and troubled you. That's not the true gospel. and they encouraged the people there. They said it's a decision that we could all agree upon and it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.

This is not just again some council that has authority of their own. No, it seemed good to the Holy Spirit. and to us because this is what God had done.

And so they sent the letter and the messengers up to the church at Antioch. The church at Antioch gathers together and were told they were glad with the encouraging message. To hear that faith in their Lord Jesus Christ and in what he had done was indeed enough.

That they didn't have to add some works of their own to merit God's acceptance. They were glad. Does the message of God's free grace make you glad? It wasn't the first time they heard it.

[43:51] They'd heard it many times. It came back once again in the council at Jerusalem. They rejoiced in the grace of God. You know, that's the safest people from all legalizing encroachments upon the gospel is a people who are rejoicing in the grace of God.

who every day are making use of the gospel. Coming as a sinner to receive forgiveness of sins by pure grace.

Coming with nothing good to say for ourselves, Lord, I've sinned. Have mercy on me. For Jesus' sake, forgive me. And the people who are living on the grace of the gospel, I tell you, these heretics will find it hard going there.

They found it hard going at Antioch. These were a people that rejoiced and were enjoying the freedom that was theirs in Christ to be saved by pure grace, by all that Jesus had done and nothing that they had done.

Well, the decision that the true gospel upheld and then carried out as it was taken around to the area and said, sorry about these who troubled you.

[45:07] Here's the decision. This is the true grace of God. This is the true gospel. And they were encouraged. Four practical lessons and we're done. First of all, Jesus preserves his gospel from perversions in every age.

Now by this, I do not mean that there are no perversions of the gospel in the world. No, there are plenty. What I do mean is that there are no periods of history where the world is entirely without the true gospel.

And the reason is because Jesus is preserving his gospel. gospel, he will have a people on the earth until he comes back. And those are the people who believe the true gospel.

So if there is a church, there must be a true gospel. How does the church survive? You see, the wonder is not that there are false gospels in the world. The wonder is that there is still the true gospel.

In the midst of all the lies that religion and Satan is spreading in the world, it's a wonder that the true gospel has survived. That the church has survived. And what's the answer?

[46:11] Jesus was fighting in Acts 15 for the true gospel, his true gospel of grace. He is fighting in this day for the true gospel.

He preserves his gospel from perversions. Think what a victory would have been scored by Satan if he could have introduced the false gospel.

At this point in history, it would leave sinners trusting in something they've done to save themselves, only to find later at the day of judgment that they were lost because they didn't put all their weight on Christ, but they put some weight on their own law keeping.

To find that they are now damned. They had not submitted to God's way of righteousness, but had tried to make themselves presentable to God.

can you see that this piece of church history here in Acts 15 is not disconnected and unrelated to you and to me.

[47:13] This victory of Jesus 2,000 years ago at the council in Jerusalem was for us. He's preserving the saving gospel, the truth, so that it might reach Bream in Indiana.

It might come to your house and you might have the true gospel, the way of salvation through faith alone in Christ alone, by grace alone.

And it survived intact because Christ fought for his gospel, for his name, for his glory. Yes, for your salvation that you might have a gospel that saves.

So what have you done with that gospel that saves? He's gone to all this trouble to preserve the gospel from all of its encroachments so that you have this precious word that if you will believe and receive, all your sins will be forgiven and you will be translated out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of Christ and have everlasting love.

What are you doing with that gospel? Have you received it? Or are you despising it? you treating it as if it's unworthy of your heart and life?

[48:34] Do you know that according to Jesus there's no hotter place in hell than for those who heard the true gospel and did not believe?

You know, people are living and dying without ever hearing a gospel. A lot of others are living and dying with a false gospel. but no one here. No, you have had the true gospel, the gospel that really saves, preserved for you, and you've heard it week in and week out.

And you know that salvation is not based on something you do, but that Jesus freely offers you full forgiveness as a gift, as pure grace.

Jesus, and if you do not accept that offer, you will have to stand and give an account to God for why you rejected the gospel. When you had it preserved for you to hear it, and you would count your sins more precious than Christ.

It's not a small thing to have Christ preserve his gospel. gospel. And if you have heard that gospel, and you have rejected it, let this be the day you reject it no more, that you embrace the Savior.

[49:56] And if you've embraced the gospel and trusted in Christ, pass it on just like you've received it. You received the true gospel, pass it on without any additions.

Pass it on is the gospel of grace. grace is the most important thing that every person you meet needs to hear. The true gospel of the grace of Jesus Christ.

Well, Jesus preserves it. Secondly, Jesus uses difficult controversy for the good of the church. He took what Satan meant for evil, and he used it for the good of his church.

We don't like controversy, and rightly so. Something's wrong with us if we like controversy. We don't like it. It's ugly. It threatens unity. It's full of dangers and snares of sin, easily inflames the flesh and pride, and yet Jesus worked good for his church through the ugly thing of controversy.

It was no controversy about secondary things, about periphery things. This was the most important thing. What must you do to be saved? It was a battle worth fighting, not unlike other battles, and it was fought at a critical time as the gospel was then stretching out and advancing to the ends of the earth.

[51:14] We have a story. We have a story to tell to the nations, but what is that story? What is that message? Oh, it must be the pure grace of God in Jesus Christ.

And so Jesus has often used controversy as a time for clarifying important truths of the gospel. Most of the historic creeds and confessions that have come down to us were hammered out on the anvil of controversy.

It worked like this. Someone started to introduce serious error, and the churches gathered, and they searched the scriptures, and they hammered out statements further clarifying God's truth against Satan's counterfeits.

And they wrote it down that the church might stand on their shoulders and say, this battle has been fought before. Here's what God's word has to say on the matter.

And so though the process was painful, it was necessary in defense of the truth, and the result has often been that the church has come through the fires of controversy, unsinged, and actually strengthened in their belief of the truth.

[52:23] And the reason is because Jesus has been the one in the fire with them, fighting for his truth. Third, Jesus maintains the threat and unity of the church.

How the evil one would have enjoyed dividing the church at this early stage. Split it right down the middle. So you have the Gentile churches up there in Antioch, and you've got the Jerusalem church, the Jewish church down here in Jerusalem.

Emphasizing the differences, fanning the prejudices, confusing old and new covenant. No, to have a Jewish and a Gentile believers each go their own separate ways, that was the devil's desire.

But that too would have been a denial of the power of the gospel, and Jesus Christ would not have it. He died to make the two one.

Ephesians 2, he's destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility that stood between Jew and Gentile by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations, and his purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross by which he put to death their hostility.

[53:39] You see, the division in the church into Jew and Gentile would have destroyed the very purpose of the cross, which is to bring the two together in Jesus Christ.

So let us magnify the power of Christ's cross to bring peoples with many differences together in Christ. Christ. You see, what we have in common in Jesus Christ far exceeds anything we may

have by the way of differences.

So let's make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace. Unity is important to the Lord Jesus. We see that here. It's important to the Lord Jesus.

We see it on the night he was arrested. We see him praying for it. And the next day on Golgotha, we see him dying for it. And in Acts chapter 15, we see him fighting for it.

To make of the two one. Lastly, Jesus' church must keep fighting old battles. You know this issue about circumcision and keeping the law of Moses.

[54 : 44] This issue raised at the Jerusalem council was not an entirely new one. Peter had faced it ten years earlier after coming from Cornelius' house, the Gentile. As soon as he got back in Jerusalem, he's called on the carpet by those Jewish believers.

We heard you ate with Gentiles. What's up, Peter? And so that issue was there. The rest of the New Testament shows us it not only went before the Jerusalem council, that even after this council let this letter be known and the decision made, it didn't solve it.

Rather, we see this problem going on. There's whole letters in our New Testament that are written to correct this problem of legalism and trusting in something other than Christ alone. church history is full of this false gospel of legalism.

These old heresies just keep resurrecting. They're put to death and then they come back to life. Or if you want to change the metaphor, they're recycled. And the old milk bottle comes back as something else.

But it is the same thing, really. It's just recycled. Just recycled. We need to be prepared for that, to see these same errors coming back, coming back up.

[55 : 59] They were dealt with before. We go back to what God has said and what God has done. And there's other perversions of the gospel. It's not just legalism. Legalism. There's perversions of the gospel that would claim that man's greatest need is health, wealth, and prosperity.

And if you've got that, that's the salvation Jesus offers. There's a gospel that claims everyone's basically good and goes to heaven when they die. There's a gospel that is without the call to repentance.

As if God will save them in their sin rather than saving them from their sin. well, we need to be ready to fight those old battles again. As truth and the gospel is important to Jesus, our passage opened with controversy.

It closes with Paul and Barnabas and others preaching and teaching the word of God there in the congregation at Antioch. Isn't that something? So Satan again trying to oppose the gospel, stirring up controversy, trying to introduce a false gospel.

In the end, the true gospel is upheld. The word of God goes on being taught and preached the church in Antioch's strength and from her the gospel goes out to the ends of the earth until it finally made its way over here to you and to me.

[57 : 21] Yes, we're here in Acts chapter 15. Let's praise and worship the Lord Jesus for fighting for the true gospel. Let's pray.

Lord, the author of those words was able to pen them many years ago because you, Lord Jesus, fought for the gospel and protected it so that it came down to him.

And now to us, here we are, a congregation singing and glorying in Jesus Christ and putting no confidence in the flesh. We thank you that you have preserved your gospel and it's made its way to us and to our hearts with power because it's only by that gospel whereby we could be saved.

Only through what Christ alone has done and we rejoice in him. And you've chosen that same gospel to be the way that the church survives and the way it's built up. And you've chosen that true gospel as the way that you alone receive the glory and praise.

So make that gospel to run in our hearts and throughout the ends of the earth, save sinners here and in every place where this gospel is preached and receive the glory and praise and do everlasting good to sinners.

[58 : 39] We ask it in Jesus' mighty name. Amen.