

35—Acts 15.1-21—By Grace Alone Through Faith Alone in Christ Alone for the Glory of God Alone

- I. Introduction
 - a. This morning we will look at the second major controversy within the church. This debate proves to be extremely important to preserve the gospel. Within the history of the church, this has happened many times and on a small scale we must battle for it in our own hearts every day.
 - b. The enemy would love to see the gospel tainted with a poison go unnoticed or unresolved. Let's see what how the Lord preserves the church through this debate.
- II. Main Point
 - a. Entrance into God's Kingdom is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.
- III. Outline
 - a. Entrance into the Kingdom Debated
- IV. Exposition
 - a. As we break into chapter 15, we are immediately confronted with another conflict within the church. There's a question concerning the salvation of Gentiles (non-Jews). It is a very important question with eternal consequences. Entrance into God's Kingdom debated
 - i. Barnabus and Paul are back in their home church from which they were sent out in the grace of God for the work which they had fulfilled. Upon their return with the church gathered, (Acts 14:27) they reported all the things God had done with them, and that he [God] had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles.
 1. How might Paul and Barnabus know that God opened a door of faith for the Gentiles?
 - a. God's word gave them their orders as they quote Isaiah 49:6 while they are on their missionary journey which says: (Acts 13:47) ⁴⁷ For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth."
 - b. Upon the Gentiles hearing this, (Acts 13:48) as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.
 - c. Okay. So what? How do we know this was legit? It says in verse (Acts 13:52) ⁵² And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.
 - d. Additionally, God bore witness through signs and wonders to the Gentiles while they were in Iconium.
 - e. Paul and Barnabus have witnessed God's amazing grace bestowed upon the Gentiles. For nearly two years, they have no doubts about what it takes for Gentiles to enter the Kingdom of God.
 - ii. So they are back in their home church. And after the report, Luke tells us there in (Acts 14:28-15:1) ²⁸ And they remained no little time with the disciples. 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."
 1. Do you agree with this teaching? Obviously, Paul and Barnabus disagree.
 2. In verse 2 it says they (Acts 15:2) engaged them in serious argument and debate.
 - a. We aren't given the particulars of this debate here but they will become more detailed later.
 3. What this debate resulted in was the church in Antioch appointing Paul and Barnabus and some of the others to go up to the church in Jerusalem to meet with the apostles and elders concerning this issue.
 - iii. This is a serious issue. The response of the church in Antioch takes it seriously. Their response shows just how important it was.
 1. You are talking about a 250-mile journey for a meeting. Yeah...they believe this is a grave error.

2. On the way to Jerusalem, Paul and company describe in detail the conversion of the Gentiles.
 - a. This brought great joy to all the brethren!
 - b. There seems to be a consensus from everyone except this band of men from Judea who were teaching that circumcision was necessary for salvation.
- iv. A point of application here: it is extremely important to know and teach sound doctrine.
 1. Everyone has things for which they believe. The question is whether your doctrine will be sound or not.
 2. A qualification for an elder/pastor is to teach and maintain sound doctrine.
 - a. As it states in (Tit. 1:9-10) ⁹ He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it. ¹⁰ For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party.
 - b. Paul and Barnabus were doing their job. It is not okay to teach and believe whatever you want. The teaching of these men was eternally dangerous. Some things obviously do not rise to this importance.
 - i. For example, I think there are implications from this text on church government but it's not a gospel issue.
 - ii. We can get church polity wrong and still be saved. We cannot get how a person is saved wrong.
- v. The appointed members of the Antioch church arrive in Jerusalem and were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders.
 1. I'm eager to get to the heart of this issue which shows up more clearly in Peter's response.
 2. But before Peter says anything, Paul and Barnabus seem to give the same report they gave to the church in Antioch and to all the brethren on the way.
 3. When they get finished, there are some for whom this did not bring joy.
 4. Notice in (Acts 15:4-5) 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."
 - a. There it is. What God had done wasn't sufficient. Turning from sin and trusting Christ was not enough. It was faith plus something.
 - i. This still happens today. They are those who add to the gospel and there are those who subtract from the gospel.
 - ii. Both are eternally dangerous. Both need correcting.
 - iii. Sound doctrine must be maintained.
 - iv. But how are disagreements corrected? Here, the apostles and elders are gathered together to consider this issue.
 1. This task is still necessary and the job of the pastors and elders for the whole church.
 - a. (Eph. 4:12-14) ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, ¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

- vi. After much debate, Peter makes his address.
 - 1. He takes them back some ten years to the day Cornelius and his household came to faith and receive the Holy Spirit.
 - 2. He maintains that God did this as we discussed before.
 - a. “God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.”
 - b. As did Paul and Barnabus’ report, so too Peter when he states that God bore witness to them by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us.
 - i. He qualifies this by saying that God is the “heart-knower.”
 - ii. Peter doesn’t claim and nor should we to know someone’s heart. Has it been cleansed by faith in Christ?
 - iii. The evidence is, yes. God knows the heart. He gives the Holy Spirit.
 - iv. And with Cornelius, it was obvious!
 - 3. Let me clue you in on what Peter continually does through this exchange. He makes the same statement as before after seeing the vision of the sheet come down out of heaven that God makes no distinction.
 - a. Back in verse 8—giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did us.
 - b. Verse 9—he made no distinction between us and them.
 - c. And in verse 11—we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus just as they will.
 - d. He repeatedly brings the “us and them” as though the cross of Christ is the great equalizer and payment for anyone who repents and believes.
 - 4. Remember the main point of this message is: Entrance into God’s Kingdom is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.
 - a. Peter claims this is true for both Jews and Gentiles.
 - b. I would like remind you just how amazing this is.
 - i. “Grace is God’s goodness towards those who deserve only punishment” (Grudem 200-201 for quotes below too)
 - ii. “There is an emphasis on God’s grace throughout the Bible. In regards to how one enters God Kingdom one must have God’s favor.”
 - iii. “And God’s favor is never obligated but is always freely given on God’s part.”
 - iv. “God says in (Exod. 33:19) I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion.”
 - v. “Peter calls him the God of all grace in 1 Peter 5:10.”
 - vi. “Grace for those who do not deserve it is always described as the opposite of salvation by human effort, for grace is a freely given gift.”
 - 1. (Rom. 3:23-24)²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift
 - vii. “The distinction between grace and a salvation earned by works that merit a reward is also seen in Romans 11:6—But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.”
 - viii. “Paul also sees that if grace is unmerited, then there is only one human response appropriate for receiving such grace, namely, faith.”
 - 1. (Rom. 4:16)¹⁶ That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace

- ix. "Faith is the one human attitude that is the opposite of depending on oneself, for it involves trust in or dependence upon another."
 - x. "Thus, faith is devoid of self-reliance or attempts to gain righteousness by human effort."
 - xi. "If God's favor is to come to us apart from our own merit, then it must come when we depend not on our own merit but on the merits of another."
 - xii. That's why I stated in the title: we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.
 - 1. And if it's not like this then we cannot say for the glory of God alone too.
5. To think of salvation by needing to add circumcise and keep the law Peter claims would be testing God.
- a. (Acts 15:10-11) 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."
 - i. The yoke of the law cannot be the means by which to gain God's favor.
 - 1. For the obvious reason, the Jews nor the Gentiles can bear it.
 - 2. There's only been one to live in perfect righteousness according to the law and that was Jesus.
 - 3. That's what is so amazing about the gospel. By faith in Jesus, our hearts are cleansed by his blood and we get his righteousness...his merit credited to our account. Wow!
6. Notice the response in (Acts 15:12) ¹² And all the assembly fell silent.
- a. God's grace does this. It shuts every mouth! It excludes all boasting that you did anything to contribute to your salvation.
 - i. (Rom. 4:1-5) What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? ² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³ For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." ⁴ Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. ⁵ And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness
- vii. Paul and Barnabus get to speak again when everyone fell silent. They are listening now as they relate what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.
- viii. After they finished, James speaks.
- 1. This is not the apostle James that was the brother of John. This is Jesus' half-brother who also wrote the book of James.
 - 2. He is one of the elders at the church in Jerusalem.
 - 3. He commands that the brothers listen to him.
 - 4. Much of what has been shared so far was based on visions that Peter had and God bearing witness through signs and wonders and the giving of the Holy Spirit just as he did to the Jews when they repented and believed.
 - 5. James wants to give the biblical basis for what Peter has explained.
 - a. So, James relates what happened with Simeon (Peter) when he preached the gospel to Cornelius and his household and they all turned to Jesus by faith.

- b. Notice James describes this as God visiting the Gentiles.
 - i. Now, that sounds strange. How did God visit Cornelius?
 - ii. Look back at verse 7 where it says: (Acts 15:7) "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.
 - 1. In other words, God visited the Gentiles by way of Peter sharing the word of the gospel.
 - 2. If I can say another way. God visited Cornelius by way of Peter's mouth.
 - 3. Do you want God to visit your lost family members? The way that happens is by speaking the gospel. Faith comes by hearing the gospel.
 - 4. You are not responsible for how they respond to God's visit. They are. You just sow the seed and trust the Lord and pray hard.
- c. This visit from God was for the purpose of taking a people for his name.
 - i. That's the same kind of language used of Israel!
 - ii. (Deut. 14:2) ² For you are a people holy to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.
 - iii. Does this sound familiar to a New Testament passage?
 - 1. (1 Pet. 2:9-10) ⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.
 - 2. Wow!
- d. James alludes to the text in Deuteronomy but then he quotes Amos 9:11-12 as in agreement with what Peter has said. In fact, James claims that the prophets (plural) are saying the same thing.
 - i. Let's hear this quote: (Acts 15:16-18) 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.'
 - ii. So what does this mean? It means that God rebuilt the tent of David so that the Gentiles could come into his Kingdom.
 - 1. When Israel was cut down and the stump lie there in ruin, he promised the Christmas promise that a shoot from the stump of Jesse would come forth.
 - 2. And though the Davidic line lay in ruins, God brought forth the Son of David, namely Jesus!
 - 3. But why? Verse 17 gave the reason...THAT the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord and all the Gentiles who are called by my name may enter my Kingdom by his grace through faith in his Son.

- iii. By grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone we are part of God's family too.
 - 1. In Ephesians 2:19–20 when he said to the converted Gentiles— you and me—"You are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone."

- V. Response
 - a. The Lord's Supper