

ACTS
Part 12
Grace in Conflict
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If you have your Bible you can turn to Acts Chapter 15. We have been journeying through Acts. We have been looking in the last few weeks at how the Gospel has expanded beyond Jerusalem across cultural boundaries, now that the Gospel is bearing fruit amongst Gentiles, amongst all different nations in multiple cities. The Gospel continues to expand.

And one of the things you notice when you stand back from the book of Acts and look at Chapters 1 through 15, when Jesus met with the apostles in Chapter 1 and told them that they would be His witnesses and that this Gospel would spread to the ends of the earth, He didn't necessarily tell them how it would all unravel.

He didn't give them detailed plans about some of the tensions that would exist. He said certainly some persecutions will come, but He didn't give them a complete revelation as to who the Gospel was for except that it be declared to the ends of the earth.

And so one of the things you notice is in Acts Chapters 1 through 7, this new covenant understanding of Jesus bumps into the temple system. All kinds of offerings are being made at the temple, offerings that are frankly no longer required because the one sacrifice for all time for sins has been made when Jesus died on the cross.

But as the first seven chapters progress and the Gospel fills Jerusalem, the Jewish people's relationship with the temple is completely altered because the temple for generations was the place where God's name would dwell, and Jewish people had to come to Jerusalem to celebrate and worship together there.

But as Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, a time will come where you don't have to worship in Jerusalem; you can worship in spirit and in truth anywhere and everywhere.

And as the Gospel starts to permeate throughout Judea and Samaria and into Antioch, you see that this church begins to grow and spread. And people can worship Him from any location.

As the New Testament develops this thought, it becomes clear through Paul's writing in Corinthians that the temple is in fact the body of Christ, the living stones, the gathering of believers. And that can take place in a home, that can take place anywhere in society. Oftentimes it was taking place by rivers.

So the dramatic understanding of temple changing in Acts Chapter 1 through 7; when Stephen delivers his speech, part of his speech to the Sanhedrin includes the fact that God does not live in buildings built by the hands of men.

Then in Acts Chapters 8 through 11, the new covenant starts to bump up against tradition. Peter is given a vision. He is told by God to go into the home of a Roman centurion in Caesarea.

That's a really big deal. For us that just seems normal but for Peter, he grew up where there was completely against his upbringing and against his tradition. Jews didn't associate with Gentiles. Now the Gospel was requiring him, calling him to go against his traditions. So it was impacting his understanding of temple, it was impacting their understanding of tradition.

And what we see in Acts Chapter 15 is that the Gospel starts to bump up against the Jewish believers' understanding of our relationship to the law, to Torah.

And that is what is at the heart of Acts Chapter 15. On what basis is our salvation secured before God?

What is the Christian's relationship with the Torah?

And what is cultural in our Christianity and what is covenant in our Christianity?

These are the things that are at the heart of the debate in Acts Chapter 15.

And we read in Verse 1:

“Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: ‘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 throughout Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers 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 keep the law of Moses.’

“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 did not discriminate 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 Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors 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 signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.

“When they finished, James spoke up: ‘Brothers,’ he said ‘listen to me.

“Simon has described to us how God at first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles.

“The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, 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, that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name,” says the Lord who does these things, things known from long ago.”

“It is my judgement, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.

“Instead we should write them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexuality immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.

“For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.””

We will stop there.

What I want to look at in our time together is The Debated Question, the Declaration of God, and the Disputable Matters.

We all must admit in this room that when we first put our faith in Christ, when we entered into a relationship with Jesus, we entered into it with a personal history, maybe some cultural baggage that we carry from our upbringing.

I grew up going to church. I showed you a photo last weekend of the suit that I was put in by my mom sometimes on the way to church. (You don’t remember that suit, do you?) Polyester

reversible suit – don't stand near an open flame, three-piece suit – I mean on a hot summer day, you're just sweating the whole time.

And I grew up going to a Brethren church. Sunday was the Sabbath; the Lord's Supper was celebrated every week.

What you wore to church mattered. It wasn't necessarily spoken about, but there was an unspoken code of conduct as to what you wore.

Drinking was shunned and looked down upon. Smoking was scandalous. And listening to non-Christian music or dancing would be questionable.

And so when I first surrendered my life to Christ, when I first experienced the Gospel of Jesus Christ, I stepped into my relationship with Christ with that as my upbringing. And I started to enjoy my new found faith; I started to consume portions of the Bible.

And many of my friends who weren't Christian (because I was coming out of a pretty wild lifestyle) I started to share with them about my new found faith, but oftentimes would talk about the complete change that took place within me.

I would talk about how smoking was a sin, drinking was evil, and listening to non-Christian music wasn't profitable – probably wasn't a sin but it's a gray zone so I just avoided it altogether.

And what I shared with them was all these convictions that I had carried into my Christianity.

And when I started to read the Bible, I was surprised that some of the code of conduct that I had been brought up in wasn't actually in the Scriptures.

I thought to myself, "I've been wearing a three-piece suit." And in my Bible I couldn't find where it talked about wearing a suit to church.

Now I'm not against wearing your Sunday's best – don't misinterpret me – but it's not a requirement. Hallelujah!

I was surprised that I saw Jesus at a wedding make about 120 litres of wine for the celebration. And I had grown up thinking that drinking was just completely awful and to be avoided.

Yes the Bible talks about drunkenness, but it doesn't give certain teaching on enjoying a glass of wine, and that just seemed scandalous to me. And it started to rub up against my cultural understanding that I had grown up with.

I started to see in Scripture that nowhere could I find a verse talking about the sin of smoking. It's not that smoking is good for you – don't misunderstand what I'm trying to say – smoking is bad and it will potentially give you lung cancer, so it's to be avoided, but sometimes we take these teachings and we enshrine them, and they are more cultural than they are biblical.

I remember thinking that non-Christian music wasn't a sin but it wasn't really profitable. But as I read through the Scriptures, it started to dawn on me that some of the things that I had grown up, although they were there to help me and guide me as I was a child, weren't actually in the Bible.

And I have since come to believe that it had more to do with my social upbringing and my cultural Christianity than it did with the actual Christianity that you read about in the New Testament.

And if we are all honest in this room, depending on your tradition that you grew up in, you may have cultural practices within your Christianity that are not in the Bible. They are traditions that have been passed down through the ages to you.

And for the early church it was the same. The debate and the discussion that we encounter in Acts Chapter 15 has come about from Jewish believers who were members of the party of the Pharisees.

The Pharisees were a Jewish sect, a group that got formed in the inter-testament periods between the Old Testament and the New Testament. When the Greeks invaded and dominated the land of Israel, a group of Jewish people saw that Greek culture was influencing their Jewish culture and decided to separate themselves from the dominant culture and devote themselves to the study of the Bible. Not a bad thing, is it?

And they consumed the Old Testament. They studied it back and forth. They were experts in the law. And they were devout in their religious observance of the Torah. They saw the exile as God's punishment against His covenant people because they didn't walk in His ways.

And they didn't want that to happen again. So these believers, who are Pharisees, that are bringing the customs taught by Moses and demanding that all believers live by them, are probably well-intentioned in their desires. They want what is best for the church. They are not malicious in their desires.

But the Gospel is in conflict with their understanding of the Torah. They didn't want the church to fall under the same pattern as the nation of Israel in the Old Testament. They didn't want the church to not walk in God's ways, and be exiled.

But you also have to understand this party of the Pharisees, this group who understood the Old Testament; they also held to the oral traditions of the law that we now refer to as the Talmud. The Talmud in current print is 7200 pages long of rules and regulations to govern your life.

So now just imagine this if Acts 15 passed a motion that we were to obey the Law of Moses – 7200 pages of membership classes. Welcome to membership at the Peoples Church; sit down; we will be in this class for the next 15 years. Isn't life in Christ so abundant and freeing - 7200 pages to govern every decision that you make.

And that is what is at the heart of Acts Chapter 15 and the discussion is what is the Gospel's relationship with the Torah?

Now when you look at those three things in the first 15 chapters of Acts, whether it's the Temple or the traditions that we have or our understanding of certain Torah laws; when you look over church history, the church itself has wrestled in these three areas.

I can't tell you how many elders' meetings I was called into at Urban Promise because of the temple. And some of the youth that we would invite from the community into the building didn't necessarily recognize that the main room, that we call the sanctuary, was sacred.

And so they brought food and drink into it and spilled something on the sacred holy carpet. And it raised a holy mess for me.

I would be called into elders' meetings because apparently, according to certain traditions, the temple is the building. And that the carpet and the drywall and the paint in the lobby (which is the exact same carpet, paint and drywall in the sanctuary), somehow becomes different when you step through those doors. You are now on a sacred space.

So even we as Christians sometimes start to enshrine certain things that have nothing to do with the Bible.

I remember working with a number of kids who we desired to come out to church – that's why we partnered with churches, so that they would come out on a Sunday and hear the Gospel, not just from us Monday through Saturday in our after-school programs.

And there were a few youth that God was starting to work on and they decided to go out to church on a Sunday. And the particular church that we were partnering at the time had a pretty strict dress code for Sunday. You wore Sunday's best and you dressed to the nines.

And so these youth showed up and they were wearing what they wear on the block in the neighborhood. They showed up with their baggy clothes and their baggy shirts and their chains and their do-rags and stuff like that. And they showed up for church.

And when they showed up to the door they were turned away. And what was stated to them was, "You need to go put on something better so that you can come and worship with us."

And see we look at this text and the question that sits before us is what is it that we have to do for our salvation? Is there a requirement for us in the area of earning God's favor?

But when we look at this passage we also have to look at ourselves in the mirror and at our church history and wonder, have we strayed at times in our enshrining temple practices or our traditions, or have we created our own Torah, our own vision of the unspoken rules you need to follow? And sometimes it's how you dress.

You hear of churches splitting over worship music - worship of all things. Now I love the old hymns – I adore them. But sometimes when I go into a church that is 120 years old, it feels like you are stepping into the 1800's because everything seems like it is from 120 years ago.

So even our traditions can become sacrosanct in the community, and when we look at the Scriptures we have to ask ourselves is it really what it is all about, do we enshrine the wrong things?

And so this group of Pharisees went up to the Antioch church and I just want to understand the apostles and elders in Jerusalem considered to meet this question. And I want to specify the question that they are meeting around and get clarity as to what they are discussing. And in Verses 1 and 5 we are told what they are meeting about.

In Verse 1,

“Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.”

That is what this group of Pharisees is advocating to the Gentile believers in Antioch when they hear that the Gospel has gone beyond cultural boundary lines. They say, “You need to be circumcised in order to be saved. You need to observe the laws of Moses.”

In Verse 5 we are told that,

“The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.”

This is the worst news for the Gentile believers. That is not great membership classes to be observed. And so this debate comes front and center for this church.

And in Acts Chapter 15 we also need to realize that as we look at this text it has some important lessons for us when we disagree in our theologies. When we have some questions that need clarification, and we have strong emotions going into those discussions, there are some useful things to understand in Acts 15 that help us work through these tensions.

Because right now in North American Christianity there is some debate raging throughout North America on certain theologies, and the danger is that two different sides are arguing with one another, oftentimes over social media, and demonizing the other side, throwing holy hand grenades to the other side, saying that they are evil and awful. And it is breaking down unity.

What you see in Acts Chapter 15 is that they come together and work towards unity. And there is much discussion. We are a community of learning together and we need to be in the same room talking to one another, not hiding behind keyboards and using social media to air our arguments.

So there are some important principles here. But the question becomes do we have to obey the laws of Moses? God's grace is seemingly at the heart of this conflict because, as the Gentiles

have entered the church, those who grew up with all these traditions are wrestling with the implications of that.

And notice that we are told in Verse 7,

“After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them.”

And he gives them a speech. He tells them about what God did when God led him to preach the Gospel to Cornelius in Acts Chapter 10.

And I just want to look at the progression in Peter’s statement. Look at what he says. “God made a choice about the Gentiles. God showed that He accepted them. God gave them the Holy Spirit. God made no distinction. God purified their hearts by faith.”

What exactly did man do?

Nothing.

It doesn’t say God made sure that they had it all together, then He accepted them.

It doesn’t say God told them to get circumcised and then He would give them the Holy Spirit.

What Peter stands up and says is, “Hey guys, God is the One who initiated this Gospel being proclaimed among the Gentiles and when they heard this Gospel and they put their faith in Jesus, whom we were preaching, God gave them the Holy Spirit.”

God is the One who purified their hearts. Yes, there was a radical transformation but they weren’t required to have their lives all together prior to receiving the Gospel. There are huge implications in that.

So Peter is effectively addressing the crowd and he is saying, “If God did all this, what are we talking about here?”

And Peter states the danger of testing God. Are you unintentionally implying, he asks the Pharisees, that God wasn’t satisfied by Christ’s sacrifice? That somehow it wasn’t finished even though Jesus said, “It is finished.”

That He shouldn’t give the Gentiles the Holy Spirit when God is the One who led them to even hear the Gospel.

And look at how Peter refers to their demands that they obey the Law of Moses in order to be saved. He refers to it as putting on a yoke that neither Peter nor his listeners, nor their ancestors were able to bear.

Now think of who is speaking here. This is the apostle Peter. This is the one who, when Jesus needed him the most, when He was arrested and tried before the Sanhedrin and subsequently nailed to a cross, Peter was the one who denied that he even knew Him three times.

Peter was the one who, when Jesus came to call him into ministry, said, “Away from me Lord, I am a sinful man.”

I think Peter is taking an inventory of his own life and he is looking at what God did amongst the Gentiles and he is saying, “If salvation depends on us, you know what, guys? We’re all dead. None of us have been able to bear this yoke. Only Jesus Christ Himself could fulfill every requirement of the law.”

And when He had fulfilled every requirement of the law, Jesus laid down His life in our space. No, it is by the grace of the Lord Jesus that we are saved.

Isn’t that good news?

Jesus dramatically changed our relationship with the Torah. And we are now under a covenant of grace, not a covenant of law. And the boundaries of God’s grace stretched this early church beyond its ability to understand the mysteries of God’s grace because maybe they could understand the Gospel bearing fruit amongst the Samaritans because, after all, they held to some of the Old Testament books of Torah.

But when the Gospel started to go to a Roman centurion; yes, but he was a God-fearing Roman centurion. So maybe God’s Gospel is for God-fearing Gentiles.

But then it started to go to Antioch and it was amongst pagans, people who knew nothing about worshiping God in a proper holy life. But the Gospel started to bear fruit.

See, their understanding of who the Gospel was for was being dramatically changed by Acts Chapter 15. And it was hard for them to understand the implications of all this because they had grown up with Torah, a law based relationship with God.

Acts 15 reminds us how important it is to know what actually happened on the cross. See, God’s law continually testifies about the sinfulness of man. The law cries out against humanity’s sins forever. It lingers and convicts those who are outside of Christ.

And it will forever until Christ returns be testifying that what man does is evil, that man in fact falls short of God’s holiness. That is the whole purpose of the law is to make us conscious of our sin and our need for a Savior.

And when Jesus went to the cross, the cross didn’t remove the law but rather it was the place where the law was fulfilled.

You see we are told in Romans 6:23 that the wages of sin is death, and so the cross is where the penalty of the law, the penalty that justice demanded was doled out against sin. It is where all

the wages of our collective sin was paid out against the person of Christ. It is where He paid the penalty that God's justice demanded.

So when we pray and ask God for forgiveness, when we put our faith in Jesus, we are not only appealing to His grace and mercy; we are also appealing to His justice. We appeal to the truth that the wages of sin have been paid in full by Christ on our behalf.

And God forgives us because His law has been fully satisfied. And when we think of mercy and we think of grace as simply forgiveness and stop there, we miss so much.

See, mercy is not being given what you deserve. We deserved death because of our sins but His mercy didn't give us what we deserved. The cross received it.

Grace is being given what you don't deserve. We don't deserve reconciliation with God. We don't deserve the life of God to be restored to us, but because of Christ's work, it is given to us.

The cross is where God's grace, mercy and justice all meet together. Mercy, in giving Christ what we deserved; His death became our death. Justice, in satisfying the law that demands justice be served. And grace, in giving us what we didn't deserve – His righteousness.

That was the exchange that took place when we put our faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross.

Let me illustrate it this way. I want you to imagine that you have borrowed some money from the bank, just a small amount, about three billion dollars. And I want you to imagine that you make roughly thirty thousand a year. And it is impossible in this lifetime that you will be able to pay back that debt.

And so they begin to foreclose on everything you own. This is the Gospel, people. We have a debt that we could never pay back to God. We have broken His law and we stand as in debt to Him.

And Jesus came along and He paid our three billion dollar debt to the max. He paid every last penny. Therefore God was fully satisfied that He took our sin debt and paid in full. The cross writes over every single sin that we have ever committed in this room, "Paid in Full."

But it doesn't stop there – that's just mercy. That's just justice in that Christ received it.

The good news about His grace is that not only did He pay your debt in full; He also deposited untold riches into your account, called the Holy Spirit, to give you the grace to live the life that He calls you to.

So not only did He cancel the three billion dollars; He deposited an endless treasure into my life. And we are told in Scripture that that is just the firstfruits of His goodness to us.

The firstfruits was just the small portion of the harvest. So whatever you have experienced of the Holy Spirit, whenever you have had a moment of exhilaration as to who God is and an overwhelming sense of grace, that's just the firstfruits of what is to come, people, in heaven.

Isn't that amazing?

Think of the most intimate time you have had with God; it's just a small taste of what is to come. That is the mystery we are talking about in Acts Chapter 15.

David Gooding puts it this way. The believer has been saved from the penalty of sin. That's our salvation – once for all – Christ has saved us from the penalty of sin.

The believer is being saved from the power of sin. That is the process of our sanctification, where the Holy Spirit comes into our lives and starts to save us daily from the sinful patterns that are in our life, the process of sanctification. And one day we will be saved from the very presence of sin.

I can't wait till that day. I live in Scarborough. I lock my doors every night. I make sure my car is locked. My garage is closed, and stuff still can get stolen.

Imagine a day where every tear over every sin committed, every hurt, every pain, every wound, every sinful expression that we see, is just removed and all we stand in the glory of is who He is and His holiness.

That's the good news. So when Peter gets up and he says, "God has done all this and why would we put this yoke of slavery that we weren't able to bear back on, basically he is saying if salvation depended on us, it is over for all of us because we can't do it. But hallelujah, it is by the grace of the Lord Jesus that we are saved.

And we need reminding of this every week. We need reminding of this every single day, because our misunderstanding about the Gospel can lead us down all kinds of destructive paths.

For the legalist, they can create all kinds of external rules to govern their lives and its right standing with God is based on religion.

For the liberal, they can take the grace of God too far and say, "Since God is love, it doesn't matter what I do or how I live. I rest in the finished work of Christ."

Both are in danger of doing what Peter describes as testing God, adding something other than Christ to the work of salvation, and adding something other than the person of Christ Himself to the process of sanctification.

It is all about Christ, not just for our salvation but also how we walk out the Christian life. It is a life by faith in who He is and what He has done.

And so for the legalist and the liberal – both have self on the throne, not Christ. One has self-imposed rules, the other self-imposed worship.

One is religious; the other is irreligious.

And as we see in Acts 15 and certainly in the first 15 chapters of Acts, the church over its history, has wrestled with our understanding of temple tradition and Torah and we need to be reminded of the Gospel, we need to be reminded that it is about a relationship with the person of Jesus Christ.

And the New Testament writers, whenever you read through any of the New Testament in a nuclear fashion, defended the Gospel because it called into question the work of Christ. And our adversary, if he can lure us away from the person and work of Christ, can then confuse us and obscure our assurance and introduce all kinds of false thinking.

Paul warns of this to the Corinthian church. He says; he opens Chapter 11 of 2 Corinthians and warns them about other Jesus's and other gospels that have gone out into the world. He warns about false prophets and false teachers.

So why is it that we need to be in His Word? Why do we need to understand who Jesus was, why He came, what He did for us? Because there are all kinds of gospels out there. There are all kinds of Jesus's. Just turn on late-night TV and you will see all kinds of Jesus's described that you sometimes listen to and go, "That's not the One I have encountered in the Scriptures."

And so as this council comes together to meet and discuss the question about the Christian's relationship with the Torah, Peter reminds them about the centrality of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

And we are told in Verse 12,

"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."

Paul and Barnabas confirm Peter's message because God does extraordinary signs and wonders welcoming Gentiles into the kingdom and giving them His Holy Spirit based upon their belief in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, not based upon their getting circumcised and obeying certain laws of Moses.

We come just as we are into our relationship with Christ. Yes, when His Holy Spirit comes into our lives, it transforms us into a new creation. And yes, that transformation is life-long, called sanctification. But our salvation is secured by Him alone.

And so James, hearing this deliberation; James who was clearly a leader within the Jerusalem council; after he has heard the testimony of Peter, after he has heard how God has moved amongst the ministry of Paul and Barnabas, stands up and is reminded of a passage from the Old Testament in Amos. And he says,

“The words of the prophets are in agreement with what we are seeing right now with this, 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, that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things.’”

And so the Scripture that James brought up was essential. You notice a pattern in the Bible. God announces His changes in advance. He had left passages in the Old Testament that pointed to the fulfillment they were now seeing as a church.

And He provided them clarity in the midst of their disagreement and His Word confirmed what they were seeing.

And so when we meet to discuss our disagreements, we cannot simply point to testimonies or experiences as our evidence of what God is doing. In our area of understanding we also need to sit under His Word and confirm it by His Word.

And that’s why we have the Bible, so that we can test what we are hearing according to His Word.

Acts 15 is a useful pattern for understanding how the church is to resolve its disagreements. We are to meet together. We are to talk through these things where we disagree.

And in the area of our salvation and the work of Christ, we defend that completely. And when you look over church history, the person and work of Jesus Christ is constantly being challenged, both outside the church and sometimes within the church.

But then there is this whole other area of the Christian life in the areas of our traditions, in the areas of our unspoken Torah’s that we bring into it, that Paul refers to in Romans 14 as disputable matters.

And so now we are left to understand the letter that James writes to the leadership of the church and James seemingly puts four things in there that leave us somewhat puzzled when he writes,

“It is my judgement, 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.”

So, how are we left to understand these four things that James includes in the letter? Isn’t salvation by Christ alone through faith alone?

What are these four things that he adds? Are they additional rules? Why does the council feel that these need to be included in the letter? Are these rules to live by? Are they a revised code of conduct that secures our salvation? That's the question that we are left with.

And I just want to remind you that this council gathered together to put under the microscope the question of what we contribute to our salvation. And Peter answered that unequivocally when he said, "No, by grace alone through faith alone in the Lord Jesus we are saved. Our salvation rests completely on him."

But then there is this whole cultural area between the Jewish believers and the Gentile believers that are described by Paul in Romans 14 as disputable matters.

See, for the Jewish believer who has been saved by grace alone through faith alone; they have grown up with certain food and dietary restrictions that if they are now about to enter into table fellowship with Gentiles, because of the Gentiles' customs and traditions, these two groups, when they would be experiencing table fellowship, it would be very difficult for a Jew to engage in certain meals such as food that has been sacrificed to an idol, or meat with blood in it from a strangled animal, because they have grown up their whole life thinking that that was evil and awful, and it was plaguing their conscience.

And so James includes these as a cultural concession so that the church may demonstrate unity in the city of Antioch, or wherever the church is, as the Jewish believers and the Gentile believers come together, so that they can engage in unity and model sensitivity to one another's consciences, this was included.

Because it would have plagued their conscience to sit at a table and eat meat that they had grown up their whole lives convinced was a sin against God. And so it was a food based concession that they make for the early church so that they can enter into table fellowship together.

Again, church, there are some important guidelines for us in Romans 14 – really unpacks this concept well. Paul, in his letter to the Roman church unpacks this deeply.

In areas where we have disputable matters and we might disagree on certain practices or traditions within our Christianity, we are to model unity. And if what I eat causes my brother to stumble, I shouldn't eat it.

If my brother and their conscience struggles with a certain practice in my Christianity, so that I might preserve unity, I need to forsake it.

And the Gentile culture, even in the areas of temple worship, sexual immorality was prevalent in their worship systems. And so the Jerusalem council is writing to the Gentile believers and saying, "You need to rethink and retool parts of how you worship God and you need to understand that we want to preserve the unity; yes you are saved by faith alone through grace alone, but we need to also labor towards a unified expression of the church."

And boy do we need a dose of that today. This is not a set of rules to be added to the work of Christ because there are too many important commands of Jesus that they leave out of the letter.

They don't say anything about anger, they don't say anything about murder or bitterness, gossip, or slander –and we would all agree that Jesus taught on those things. None of these are added to the letter, but we would all agree that when Jesus told the disciples to teach people to obey everything that He had commanded, that teachings on anger and bitterness and slander would be included.

So this isn't a theological treaty for the conduct of the believer; it is a cultural concession that James is making so that the church can preserve its unity.

Acts 15 is a beautiful chapter that reminds us both how to work through our disagreements and the absolute undeniable, unalterable fact that our salvation rests on Christ's finished work on the cross. Isn't that good news, church?

So over the next couple of months we are going to move away from the book of Acts for a while and we are going to look at how are we as a church to be a kingdom community, what should be evident in our lives as a community that expresses who Jesus is? How are we to live as Christians?

We will start to move into that in a couple weeks.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank You for Jesus. We thank You for what He has done on our behalf. We thank You that we can come to You as we are, and Lord, that when we put our faith in Christ, that debt that stood against us is paid in full.

When we put our faith in Christ, we receive untold riches deposited into our account. We thank You for Your grace, Your mercy and Your justice. We thank You that this new covenant stands separate from the law that testified against us. Thank You for securing our salvation in Christ and not us, but also Lord, that we would be obedient to Your Spirit, shaped and molded into Your image and Your likeness.

Bless us as we go through this week. Give us eyes to see those who need to hear this message and the courage...