

“Grace Alone”
Acts 15:1-21
August 31, 2008
Rev. Curtis J. Young

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You might expect that after Pentecost, Luke might make the centerpiece of his book some pronounced miracle, a parting of the Red Sea moment.

As Luke thumbed through his index cards, why wouldn't he select what we read about in Acts 19, when Paul was in Ephesus?

Any miracle is extraordinary by definition. Luke will write that “extraordinary miracles” occurred there - extraordinary, extraordinary acts of God. For two years, as Paul ministered, handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and evil spirits left them. (Acts 19:10-12)

Instead, Luke features a church council? Why, that's like a committee meeting! What could be so important as to give over such pivotal space to a committee report?

Let's remember what Acts is: Not just a history, but the first great defense of the Christian faith and Church.

We have seen how attacks and threats began almost immediately: Persecution, corruption (Acts 5), distraction and division. (Acts 6)

Now we come to another threat, which is more than just another. It is the most subtle and dangerous of all: Insistence that to the grace of God in Christ, something else must be added to be saved.

By grace I refer to Jesus' work on the cross, his becoming our sin bearer. I am talking about how he took upon himself God's justice in order to bestow on us God's forgiveness; how he assumed our death in order to give us life.

It was like receiving lead and producing gold. If you ask what divine alchemy could accomplish it, the answer is grace. From first to last it was God's work of grace.

Here is the most challenging of all truths about God, that it is by God's grace only and exclusively that anyone is saved.

If you ask, “The *most* challenging truth?”, I say “yes” because it is the most challenged of all truths about God. From within the church as well as from outside, there have been more attempts to add requirements to the grace of God than to deny so mysterious a truth as the Trinity.

If you look at church history, the parade of supplements has been long. You must be baptized to be saved. You must be a member of our particular church to be saved. You must do works to offset your sins (penance) to be saved. You must gain the prayers of elite saints to be saved.

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In the early church, given its Jewish roots, the demand was raised for circumcision: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” (vs. 1) Or in verse 5, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.”

In verse 5, Luke identifies those who made the claim. They belonged “the party of the Pharisees.” In Judaism, the Pharisees had a strong hope in the fulfillment of prophesy and coming of Messiah. Some of them or their disciples, became convinced Jesus was that Messiah, but a Messiah only for Jews. For Gentiles to be saved, they must not only believe, but become Jews.

These kinds of arguments are always hard to resist. It’s not like baptism or church membership, or acts of restitution, or circumcision is evil.

The power of the argument for circumcision was strong. In verse 11, Peter records Peter as saying, “No!” to circumcision. “We believe it is through the grace of our lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.” In other words God does not save us through our law keeping, so don’t require it of Gentiles.

There is more to the story. If you read Galatians 2, you will see that between the time Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch from their first missionary journey and the Jerusalem Council (between Acts 14 and Acts 15), their church had received visitors.

Peter was visiting just when a delegation arrived from Jerusalem to insist that Jewish law and customs were binding. Instead of opposing them, Peter, and even Barnabas, began to yield to them and separated from the Gentiles believers.

Paul was so incensed that he rebuked Peter publicly. This was the event that triggered the trip to Jerusalem and the council. Once and for all: Was the Gospel of God’s grace merely Paul’s Gospel, or truly the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

The language Luke uses makes it clear the issue was vigorously and hotly debated. Finally, Peter took a stand, followed by Paul who supported it with the evidences of God’s grace. Lastly, James rendered the judgment.

The latter two reinforced the point Peter himself made. I quote him from verses 10-11: “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.”

“Why do you put God to the test?” This language came from Deuteronomy. It was the sin of the Children of Israel in the wilderness when they grumbled against the Lord, when they questioned whether he was present among them to save?

Now Peter was saying, in effect, you who would require circumcision (or penance, or baptism, or membership in “my church”) are doing the same thing. In denying the sufficiency of God’s grace, you grumble against God himself.

The gentiles are not in danger as you claim. You are in danger! Because you are opposing God.

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It wasn't only the truth about God's grace that could have been lost here, but the truth about God himself.

To insist on any supplement to what God has done through Christ for our salvation placed them in direct opposition to God himself. What had the Lord in fact been doing? Saving Gentiles through Christ apart from circumcision.

This was the point Paul made before the council even began (vs 4) and then as he spoke after Peter. (vs. 12) God was working miracles, he was imparting his Spirit. While some were arguing over whether the Gentiles were acceptable in the church, God was drawing them and confirming that Jesus was their Messiah, too.

Finally, in verse 14, James summarized how Simon had described that “God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself.” He then quoted from the prophet Amos his prediction that God would place his name on the Gentiles.

It was by grace and grace alone, it was through Christ and Christ alone. No human effort, no human goodness, and no proof of sincerity must be added. As Peter put it literally in verse 8, God is the “heart-knower.” And he purifies the heart to believe in Christ. As Paul would later write, God's salvation is received this way, through faith, because it is entirely of God and entirely by grace. (c.f. Rom. 4:16)

Think with me about words we tend to equate with grace: Mercy, forgiveness, compassion, kindness, love. These are all wonderful things that we experience in relationships with one another.

Grace is entirely of God. It comes from within his being, because of who he is. We confess this entire creation does not limit in any way who God is or what he does. This applies to everything about him. So we say he is all knowing, all present, all powerful.

He is all knowing, all present, and all powerful because he is God. For the same reason, his justice, his truth, and his grace are just as absolute as his knowledge or presence or power.

You can accept grace or you can reject it. The one thing you cannot do is add to it. Mere creatures that we are, we cannot add to God's wisdom. We cannot add to God's power. We cannot add to God's justice. We cannot add to God's grace. How utterly foolish to think that we could, let alone insist that we must!

What misery we create for ourselves when we try, because the god of our prayers, whom we seek to please and honor, is not the God who is there to save us.

What would you think of an earthly father who told his daughter that he loved her, except when he disapproved of her, or she disappointed him, except when she did something wrong or didn't do enough of what was right? Then there were no words, no hugs, and every time she looked to him, he just shook his head and walked off. But because she loved him, she tried very hard to keep his approval. And 90% of the time, she had it.

Would you say this daughter was blessed 90% of the time? I wouldn't. I would say she was insecure and fearful 100% of the time. I would say it is likely she would become secretive if not deceitful with her father, find it hard to ever trust anyone who said he loved her, know throughout her life an anxiety in her

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heart that she cannot account for or get rid of. Because she had looked to her father for strong, rock solid love that he would not give her.

If you say, that’s a flawed father, why would we assume this is how God is? Yet that is what we do when we assume when we teach that his grace is not quite sufficient to save?

The one certainty above all certainties that Jesus conveyed is that the true God is the God of all grace. He taught us to name him and know him as our heavenly Father.

Jesus’ death on the cross was the grace of God fully revealed. What more could he give than his Son? What more could his Son give than his life? God’s grace is his complete self-giving for us. If God’s self-giving is inadequate for our salvation, who are we to think we can close the gap?

Throughout his ministry, Jesus showed time and time again, that the grace he possessed was absolute and needs no supplement. Whoever did he leave partially healed? To whom did he ever say, “You are nearly forgiven?” After he multiplied the loaves and fishes to feed 5,000, who was left hungry among that multitude?

James, in the conclusion of his speech said, “it is my judgment that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. (19)

“Difficult” does not refer to a mild annoyance. To “make difficult” is an emphatic form of the verb translated “torment” in Luke 6:18 of the demons’ affect on people. It is translated “defiled” in Hebrews 12:15, and used specifically to describe anything, like a poison, that ruins someone for the grace of God.

You and I could quickly generate a list of reasons that salvation by grace alone, and received through faith in Christ, is a bad idea. It serves as an excuse for many to go off and sin freely. It makes many others, who care about morality, cringe. Many others feel insulted because it implies they stand guilty before God’s justice.

Grace may not be what the patient wants or thinks he needs, but it is what the doctor has ordered. Jesus said, “It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Mark 2:17)

The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, not as an event, but in the person of Jesus Christ. Not all will receive him, but those who do are assured of this: You will know the God’s grace in its fullness. Because grace in its fullness, and nothing less, is what he has to give.

The message of grace through Christ does not end with a question mark and uncertainty. It ends with an exclamation point and worship.