

Unit 33

Don't Forget

Acts; Epistles

Memory Verses

“But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled and put on the armor of faith and love, and a helmet of the hope of salvation. For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,”

—1 THESSALONIANS 5:8-9

The Church Is United in the Essentials

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: Justification is through faith alone.

BACKGROUND PASSAGE: Acts 15:1-35

Church History Lesson: Sometimes the difference between orthodoxy and heresy can be as small as a single letter of the alphabet. In AD 325, for example, Arius was teaching that because Jesus is the Son of God, “there was a time when he was not.” That is, if the Son was begotten, then He must have had a beginning as a created being. Athanasius, on the other hand, argued that because Jesus is divine, “begotten, not made,” He must be of the same substance with the Father. Jesus, as the only begotten Son of the Father from eternity, is God. Therefore, He can have no beginning, unlike a creature. Essentially, an “i” distinguished between these two positions of error and truth.



Why is it important to work to resolve doctrinal disagreements?

Group Time


Point 1: The church debates the nature of salvation (Acts 15:1-5).

¹ Some men came down from Judea and began to teach the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom prescribed by Moses, you cannot be saved.”


² After Paul and Barnabas had engaged them in serious argument and debate, Paul and Barnabas and some others were appointed to go up to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about this issue. ³ When they had been sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and they brought great joy to all the brothers and sisters.

⁴ When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church, the apostles, and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. ⁵ But some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to command them to keep the law of Moses.”

Reread verse 1—that’s what *legalism* sounds like. At the heart of legalism is the idea that “unless you add _____ to your faith, you cannot be saved.” But if, as the Bible teaches, we are graciously accepted by God as righteous by faith alone in Christ alone (see Acts 15:9,11), then to add any other means of seeking God’s acceptance is misguided, wrong, and dangerous.

 What are some ways people are tempted to fill in this blank: “Unless you also _____, you cannot be saved”?

Legalism also threatens the joy and unity of the church. How? After adding demands to the gospel of grace, the legalist passes judgment on all who do not meet those demands. The legalist also criticizes the leadership for not imposing his or her preferred standard on the whole church. Additionally, the legalist divides the church by trying to win people to his or her standard while separating from those who do not. These demands and judgments tear the church apart.

 What are some ways we can battle the temptation to pass judgment against other Christians?

Point 2: The church affirms justification by faith alone (Acts 15:6-11,14-18).

⁶ The apostles and the elders gathered to consider this matter. ⁷ After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brothers, you are aware that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the gospel message and believe. ⁸ And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he also did to us. ⁹ He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now then, why are you testing God by putting a yoke on the disciples’ necks that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ On the contrary, we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus in the same way they are.”

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¹⁴ Simeon has reported how God first intervened to take from the Gentiles a people for his name. ¹⁵ And the words of the prophets agree with this, as it is written:

¹⁶ After these things I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. I will rebuild its ruins and set it up again, ¹⁷ so that the rest of humanity may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles who are called by my name—declares the Lord who makes these things ¹⁸ known from long ago.

Peter recounted his eyewitness testimony of how God saved Cornelius and his household by faith alone (15:6-9). Paul and Barnabas shared all that they had seen God do among the Gentiles on their missionary journey (15:12). God had revealed to these men that salvation, for both Jews and Gentiles, has always been by God’s grace through faith in His promise—in other words, we are justified by faith in Jesus alone.

Justification by Faith: Justification refers to the moment when a person is objectively declared _____ before God based on the righteousness of Christ’s atoning death. This act of declaration takes place through _____ in Christ and not as a result of human works or effort.

 How would you explain salvation by grace through faith in Christ to someone who’s never heard it?

After Peter, Paul, and Barnabas shared their insights, James, the leader of the Jerusalem church, affirmed their conclusions. He also quoted from Amos 9:11-12 to point out that they should have known this was God’s plan because the prophets had prepared them for the inclusion of the Gentiles in the Jewish promises (15:14-18).

Point 3: The church advocates freedom in love (Acts 15:19-21).

¹⁹ Therefore, in my judgment, we should not cause difficulties for those among the Gentiles who turn to God, ²⁰ but instead we should write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from eating anything that has been strangled, and from blood. ²¹ For since ancient times, Moses has had those who proclaim him in every city, and every Sabbath day he is read aloud in the synagogues.”

While justification by grace through faith frees us from the yoke of the old covenant law (Acts 15:10-11), it does not free us to sin and to disobey Jesus’ commands. Jesus sent us out to make disciples, and one aspect of making disciples is teaching them to observe everything that Jesus has commanded (Matt. 28:19-20). In keeping with Jesus’ teaching and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28-29), the apostles instructed the Gentile believers to observe **four commands** of the Mosaic Law (Acts 15:20).



How does holiness relate to our belief in the gospel?

The apostles and the elders, with the help of the Holy Spirit, maintained the unity of the church by not adding anything to the gospel of grace. But with their **four commands**, for the sake of the Jews, they did ask the Gentiles to obey the “law of Christ” (1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2), or “the royal law”—“Love your neighbor as yourself” (Jas. 2:8; see Matt. 22:36-40). Our obedience to God and His Son, Jesus, is out of love. If we love God, we will obey Him. If we love Jesus, we will keep His commandments (John 14:15). The doctrine of justification by faith does not free us to sin; it empowers us to love—to love God and to love others.



Voices from Church History

“Faith alone justifies but a justified person with faith alone would be a monstrosity which never exists in the kingdom of grace. Faith works itself out through love (cf. Gal. 5:6). And faith without works is dead (cf. James 2:17-20). It is living faith that justifies and living faith unites to Christ both in the virtue of his death and in the power of his resurrection.”¹

—John Murray (1898-1975)

Inerrancy of Scripture: Scripture is an _____ guide to salvation and it is _____ in all that it affirms.

Daily Study

Day 1: Read Acts 15:1-5

The salvation we enjoy first came to the Jews in Jerusalem and Judea. The Jews were expecting a Jewish Messiah to come and restore the kingdom to Israel on the promise of a new covenant: a new heart, forgiveness of sin, and the coming of the Holy Spirit. When they heard that Gentiles were also experiencing this salvation, some Jews took it upon themselves to travel to Antioch and demand that these Gentile believers also be circumcised if they were to be included in the people of God (v. 1).

Naturally, a great debate arose between Paul and Barnabas on one side and these Jews from Judea on the other. Since they were unable to resolve the debate, several representatives were chosen to go to the apostles in Jerusalem so that they might settle the debate (vv. 2-3). The report of all Paul and Barnabas had witnessed among the Gentiles on their missionary journey was received with great joy among the apostles (v. 4). Still, the Judaizers demanded that the law of Moses be added to what must be required for salvation. In essence, they promoted salvation by faith plus works. That's a form of legalism.

Voices from the Church

“The essence of legalism ... is a heart distortion of the graciousness of God and of the God of grace. For that reason, as now becomes clear, legalism is, necessarily, not only a distortion of the gospel, but *in its fundamental character it is also a distortion of the law.*”³

—Sinclair Ferguson



Why is adding a demand like circumcision to the gospel so dangerous? What other things might we add to the gospel?

Day 2: Read Acts 15:6-18

As the apostle Peter recounted the event of Gentile salvation at Cornelius's house (see Acts 10–11), he reminded his Jewish-Christian brothers that God made no distinction between the Gentiles and the Jews in the way that He saves (vv. 8-9). Both Jews and Gentiles are saved in the same way: by “the grace of the Lord Jesus” (v. 11) and through faith (v. 9). That's the good news of justification by grace through faith.

James, another apostle, also reminded the Jewish Christians that God had foretold of the inclusion of Gentiles in the salvation of the Jews. He cited the end of Amos's prophecy (Amos 9:11-15). By the mouth of two apostles from the Jerusalem church, it was established that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, and in Christ alone for all who believe. To the Jew first, then also to the Gentile.



Why is it important to establish that salvation is the same for all—by grace alone, through faith alone, and in Christ alone?

Day 3: Read Acts 15:19-21

In verses 19-21, we find the apostles' response to the debated question of the time. Because salvation is by God's grace alone through faith alone, the apostles refused to add any other demands to the gospel (v. 19). However, they did make four requests of their non-Jewish brothers (v. 20). What do you notice about these requests?

All four were tied to pagan worship practices in the Gentile world. Interestingly, all four are prohibited in the Levitical holiness code (see Lev. 18–22). While affirming that sexual immorality is universally wrong, the apostles were helping the Gentiles understand how to live with Jewish Christians throughout their world. The Gentiles were to abstain from practices that would be offensive to Jews. The Gentiles were free in certain respects (e.g., eating meat sacrificed to idols), but their freedom had to be informed by love for others.



What are some ways we may need to sacrifice our freedoms to show our love for other Christians?

Day 4: Read Acts 15:22-29

Even after doctrinal debates are settled, the repercussions need to be addressed, and the church needs to be informed. For those reasons, the Jerusalem church selected men to return to Antioch and give a report (vv. 22-23). Notice the wisdom in their actions. They sent representatives of the Jerusalem church along with Paul and Barnabas, men that the church in Antioch knew and trusted.

The report (letter) recounted the council's conclusion from verse 20 but added that theirs was no mere human decision; the Holy Spirit led them to their conclusion (v. 28). The decision? Not to place any additional burdens on them, for the gospel is a message of grace for all types of people. Nevertheless, this gospel of grace requires that Christians live in a manner worthy of it. All will do well to live likewise (v. 29).



Why is the command to “live worthy of the gospel” (see Phil. 1:27) not in opposition to our belief in salvation by grace alone?

Day 5: Read Acts 15:30-35

As expected, the selected party returned to the church in Antioch and gave their report (v. 30). The result? Great joy (v. 31)! The gospel is a gospel of grace, and it is a gospel of joy. The Christians in Antioch were encouraged by the report because no burdens were added to the gospel or to them.

This gospel of grace is what unbelievers need for salvation, and it is what the church needs for continued strength (v. 32). Notice how the wise leaders took their time, remaining with the believers for some time until the church was built and strengthened (v. 33). Still, Paul and Barnabas remained yet longer. And again, they continued teaching the word of the Lord—the good news of the gospel.



Why is it important for members of the church to continue hearing and sharing the gospel with one another?

