

November 3, 2013

A Gospel Centered Community

Gospel Clarity

Acts 15:1 – 21

In chapter fifteen here we come to another one of those defining moments in the early church. There have been several that we have come to in this study of Acts, beginning with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost in chapter two; the outbreak of persecution against the church that resulted in the wider spread of the gospel in chapter eight; the opening of the gospel door to the Gentiles with Cornelius in chapter ten; and the inception of an intentional gospel missionary movement in chapter thirteen. And in each of these we see the gospel character of the church being formed as it were that serves to set the standard for what the church is supposed to look like. And here in chapter fifteen we see another one of those defining moments as the very nature and character of the gospel is challenged and defined. And I think there are at least four things that the text teaches us here. The importance of gospel truth – the importance of gospel clarity – the importance of gospel community – and the importance of gospel cleansing. Gospel truth, gospel clarity, gospel community, gospel cleansing.

First of all, **the importance of gospel truth**. What we have here before us this morning is essentially a dispute over truth, a dispute over doctrine, and it goes right to the heart of the gospel. Luke has just spent a couple chapters telling us about the great things that God was doing in and through the church in Antioch – the church was growing – hundreds of people were coming to Christ – the church was sending out missionaries into the surrounding communities – persecution was happening (always a sign of the effective spread of the gospel) – and then we begin to hear the dire overtones of impending conflict: *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."* Acts 15:1

I think right away you see the importance of gospel truth. The church in Antioch had been founded by the preaching of the gospel to unbelievers, and had been growing on the basis of that truth, that doctrine. Now that gospel is called into question by another truth – another doctrine of the gospel is being preached. I know that in today's society, in our western culture, people would rather focus on how does this thing help me, rather than on whether or not it is true. And I know that many eyes will begin to glaze over at the prospect of engaging in doctrinal arguments. But we're not talking about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. The question here is 'How can a man be saved?' and on the answer all eternity hangs.

The importance of gospel truth cannot be overstated, and there are many reasons why. First of all, look at the **priority that Paul** attaches to this issue. *And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.* Acts 15:2 When Luke says that they had no small dissension and debate, it is his way of saying that this was a real controversy in the church. One of the words he uses is the word for insurrection. Paul and Barnabas went at this issue as though they were stopping some kind of rebellion in the church. And it was so important that they dropped what they were doing to get on the road, travel three hundred miles to hash this out in Jerusalem. In other words, there are some things in the Christian faith that are important enough to defend with all your might.

Secondly, **the gospel is not good advice – it's Good News** – it is not a prescription of what you must do, it is a proclamation of what has been done for you. The gospel is not behavior modification, becoming a better person or learning to become more moral. It is not looking at the life of Jesus as a model way to live or a means of transforming or redeeming society. It is not living in community with others and sharing generously with those who practice Christianity. These are all good things but they are not the gospel. They are the fruit of the gospel. They are means God uses to authenticate the gospel and soften hardened hearts yet they are not to be seen as replacements **for** the gospel. The gospel is good news about what Jesus Christ has already done for us in His life and death and resurrection. The gospel is the life-changing news that Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, became man, lived a sinless life under the Law, died for sinners and rose again to reconcile them to Himself. Christ's accomplishment, not ours, is the essence of the gospel.

Every other religion can only offer advice. They come to you and say, 'Here's what you must do to connect to God or here's what you must do to reach heaven or nirvana or whatever'. Only Christianity says, 'The way to God has been made – it is not something you achieve, it's something you receive. You don't earn it or pay for it or follow certain rules to get it. There is no eight-fold path or four noble rules or five sacred pillars to follow. All other religions may look inspiring at first, but in the end they enslave you. You have to do this, you must do that. Only the gospel brings you the good news of liberation. The gospel begins by taking all burdens off – it is Good News.

Finally gospel truth is important because, **what we believe determine how we behave**. In other words, our worldview determines our walk. There is an absolute correlation between what we think and how we act. If two people are standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon; one believes he can fly, and the other believes he cannot – their next actions are probably going to be very different. Or take a man who believes the gospel and one who doesn't. C.S. Lewis contrasts the two in his essay, Man or Rabbit: *'The one believes that men are going to live for ever, that they were created by God and so built that they can find their true and lasting happiness only by being united to God, that they have gone badly off the rails, and that obedient faith in Christ is the only way back. The other believes that men are an accidental result of the blind workings of matter, that they started as mere animals and have more or less steadily improved, that they are going to live for about seventy years, that their happiness is fully attainable by good social services and political organisations...'*

Those two men are going to act in very different ways. They simply see a different universe. Lewis goes on to say: *'They can't both be right. The one who is wrong will act in a way which simply doesn't fit the real universe. Consequently, with the best will in the world, he will be helping his fellow creatures to their destruction.'* Christianity alone gives us a map to reality, an outline of the world the way it really is: God's moral and physical order. And if we want to make our way effectively through life, to live in accord with reality, we have to follow the map.

The second point the text makes here is **the importance of gospel clarity**. That is, what is the gospel? What does it tell us? What does it tell us about us? What does it tell us about God? And what does it tell us about salvation? The reason Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem was all about gospel clarity. *When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. 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."* Acts 15:4-5 So on the one hand, the news that converts to Christianity were being made was welcomed – but there were Christian Jews who felt that Paul and Barnabas had not done a completely thorough job with the gospel. There were additional things that needed to happen. There was circumcision and the law of Moses to consider.

And so what we get is **a gospel of addition – Jesus plus something**. Believing in Jesus was a great start – now we need to add the good stuff. You have to be circumcised and you have to observe and obey the law of Moses. Do you see what the real issue was? The real issue was: 'Are we going to add stuff to the gospel? Will we burden the Gentiles with the same burden we Jews have borne?' There it is in verse 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?* Acts 15:10 The New Testament talks a lot about the fact that the Levitical customs were a standard the Jews were never able to live up to. No one could. We were never meant to come to God on the basis of what we could do.

And Peter stands up and exposes this for what it is and then he says: *But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.*" Acts 15:11 **It is a gospel of subtraction**. The gospel begins by taking all burdens off. It is God doing for us what we could never do in ourselves – making us the righteousness of God in Christ. The gospel is the good news that we are saved by grace. Peter says 'We're saved by grace and they are saved by grace. The gospel removes the burdens that the law loads on. And Peter exposes the futility of all their efforts to prove themselves to God. The gospel of grace removes **the burden of the present** in trying to prove yourself anymore. It removes **the burden of the past** – of all the guilt and regret and all the things you've done wrong. It removes **the burden of the future** – the fear that you won't live up to the standard. It removes **the burden of cultural expectations** – you're saved by grace, not by what others think of you. The gospel of grace is incredibly freeing, wonderfully liberating.

But the idea that we must work for our salvation is buried so deep inside the human psyche, and the gospel of grace is so incredibly scandalous, that although we may initially experience the liberating joy of grace, we too often fall back into adding something to it. That's what was going on here. **'Unless you're circumcised according to the customs of Moses you can't be saved'**. Whenever you have Jesus plus something else you throw the burdens back on and you lose your freedom. This was the whole reason Paul wrote the letter to the Galatians who were falling back under the bondage of doing stuff. And he pleads with them, *For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.* Galatians 5:1 And the church is constantly slipping back into a Jesus plus something – faith plus works – mentality.

One church historian, writing about one of the early church Fathers, Tertullian said: **'When] the church had lost track of an important element in the saving work of Christ and was teaching that believers are justified not by faith but by being sanctified...'** That is, you're not just made holy by grace through faith but you have to do a lot of these other things otherwise God won't love you. Then what happens is he says **'...it produces an unconscious need for lists of clean and unclean activities and a rebirth of Pharisaism. Hard-line fundamentalists like Tertullian ruled out many intellectual activities: the theater (because of its origins in pagan worship), dancing (because it might inflame ill-controlled sexual passions), and cosmetics and perfume (if God meant you to smell like a flower, he would have given you a crop of them on your head).'** —Richard Lovelace, The Dynamics of Spiritual Life, pgs.190-191,198

This has implications not only for our spiritual freedom, but our cultural freedom. The Gentiles were being told, 'If you want to become a really saved person, someone God really loves, then you have to become a Jew.' And being a Jew meant, apart from ethnicity, that you kept all the Levitical laws of Judaism. But what were they? If you look at all the Levitical laws you can't help but wonder, 'What's this all about? What are these ceremonial laws, these clean laws, all that stuff about blood all over everything, all these sacrifices, what you can touch and what you can't touch? What's it all about?' And the answer is that **all these laws intentionally pointed to spiritual truths about salvation.**

The fact that if you just touch something that is dead you become unclean and you have to undergo an extensive and lengthy cleansing ritual and you couldn't go to the Temple and worship God until you were clean – what was that about? That was driving home the fact that you are spiritually unclean. That everyday, no matter what you do, you can't help but fall into sin. And God is holy and you can't just waltz into the presence of a holy God. There is a real barrier between you as a sinful person and a holy God. Levitical laws were an incredibly vivid and intense way of driving home the point that human beings are spiritually unclean and that every day we continually get dirty again. And something has to atone for our sin. If we try to come to God on our own merits, we'll die. We need a substitute. That's what all the blood is about, that's what all the sacrifices are for; that's the picture of the scapegoat in the Bible. Through the blood of the perfect sacrifice, your uncleanness can be purified.

And it was these laws that kept the Jews culturally separate from every other people group and ethnicity in the world, during a period of time in which they alone had the word of God, they alone had the promises and the revelation of God, they alone had the writings of the prophets. And it was absolutely crucial that they kept themselves from intermarrying and mixing with the people and cultures around them. Otherwise the truth of the revelation of God would get mixed and mangled with the religions of all the other people around them and it would be lost. So God gave them a way that kept them totally separate from everybody else. And the bottom line was, 'Don't get mixed up with Gentiles'.

But now what? Gentiles are coming to Christ. And Paul and Barnabas in Antioch, and Peter in Jerusalem are arguing that no longer should these laws be required of believers. First of all, **the thing the Levitical laws were pointing to has come** – when the real is here, the imitation must go away. They were the shadow, the reality has come. Jesus is here. Furthermore, not only Jews are experiencing grace, but it is spreading to people from every tribe and tongue and nation. So if you're a Greek, you don't have to become culturally Jewish to belong. You don't have to become culturally anything. Whatever you are, you become a Christian where you are. But if you lose the sense of grace, and you fall back into grace plus works, then you become more and more a person who starts to pick up all kinds of little cultural things and turn them into being ways of being righteous. If you lose your grip on the gospel of grace you lose your grip on faith. The essence of a gospel that is grace plus works, is trusting in the religious activity rather than trusting in God. It is putting your confidence in a practice rather than in a Person. And without fail this will lead us to love the practice more than the Person.

When I was in the Ukraine a few years ago, we were in a village in which the church had experienced incredible growth over the last couple of years. Most of that was due to a local evangelist from another denomination who was on fire for God. He would speak and people would get saved, and the church was happy – mostly. But there was an issue that we were called upon to sit in judgment over while we were there. It seems that this young evangelist had taken seven new converts and had baptized them at another church because they were meeting in a school building that had a swimming pool. Now the church in this little village had a practice of foot washing during communion. The problem came about because the church that had the pool was a non-foot washing church. And the great doctrinal issue was – are these baptisms valid? If we are not vigilant to preserve gospel clarity, we will start adding burdens to people that neither we nor our fathers were able to bear, and find ourselves in bondage, not freedom.

Thirdly, we see the **importance of gospel community**. The fact that everybody, Jew and Gentile, are saved by grace means that the gospel creates a new community that is neither Jewish nor Gentile. It is totally something other. What we're all guilty of is cultural arrogance. You see the Jews who became Christian were already wrestling with an attitude of cultural superiority. 'We're God's chosen people – and now we're *really* God's chosen people. And if you want to be one of us you need to adopt our culture'. And culture becomes the saving issue – not Christ. Circumcision and observing the rules become the measure of true spirituality. I remember my aunt who went with her husband to Liberia as a missionary in the 60's telling us that the first thing western missionaries did with the natives is to make them wear western clothes – dresses for the women and suits for the men. Never mind the fact that it was 90 degrees in the shade with 90 percent humidity. Good Christians dressed like this.

But it was also very subtly saying something else. It was saying, 'Our western culture is far better than your African culture because not only are we Christians but we wear clothes'. And unless the gospel of grace is clarified in your own heart and soul, that's the message that goes out. Christians ought to be the most culturally flexible people in the world. We ought to be able to move between cultures without destroying people in the process. We need to be those who realize down deep in our souls that we are saved by grace just like they are and we are accepted with all our issues and messes just like they are and not look down our noses on them. We need to adopt Paul's motto – *I became all things to all people so that by all means I might save some*. 1 Corinthians 9:22

The importance of gospel community is also shown in the way that this issue gets resolved. Most of the chapter is taken up with this long debate over gospel clarity. They were reading the Bible, going back and forth over the Scriptures, bringing out this text and that – and what happens? What happens is that they come to agreement. After talking about the Scriptures and studying the Scriptures they agreed that the Gentiles were certainly still under the moral law of God – sexual immorality was out – but they didn't have to obey the Levitical law. Here is how they put it: *For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.* So how did they know what the Holy Spirit wanted? They came together and studied the Bible in community and when they agreed on the revelation and meaning of the word, that's when they said 'It seemed good to us and to the Holy Spirit'.

One of the biggest problems in the American church is the idea of an individualistic Christianity. 'I can be a good Christian without being part of a church'. There are lots of people who claim to be Christians who don't attend church – who aren't in any kind of Christian community. And I say, and not just I, but I think the Scriptures say, you can't hold that position. If you are a Christian – then you will be part of a living community of other Christians. The fact that you're not indicates that you are at best disobedient, which carries its own penalty, or at worst, a liar. Because the fact is, the life of Christ is a community life – it knows no other definition. But these guys came together to ask the question, 'What does the word of God say to this?'

They didn't ask, as so many do, 'What does that verse mean to me?' individually, as though there is a private interpretation of Scripture. Who cares what it means to you? What does it say? Those who hold themselves outside of Christian community are saying, 'I decide what God is saying to me. I can understand God's will for me. I can discern the Holy Spirit's speaking all by my little lonesome' and some of the greatest errors of the church are cooked up in such atmospheres. But these guys came together in community, and asking that question, debating that issue, studying the Scriptures together, in community, they came up with an answer -'It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and us'. By ourselves we're prone to read in our own bias – by ourselves we're prone to interpret things in our favor – by ourselves we are too prone to see what we want to see. But in community there is clarity.

One last thing. Do you see the beautiful way in which this question was answered? It combined gospel clarity with real community. What they said was 'We don't want to trouble you fellow believers. We just would ask that you don't eat blood or stuff that's been sacrificed to idols, or things that have been strangled and keep yourselves sexually pure.' That's it. No circumcision or washings or sacrifices or cleansing rituals. Do you see how incredibly loving and sensitive and inclusive this answer was? 'We want to remind you that immorality is still a sin whether you're Jewish or Gentile – and for the sake of your Jewish brother's consciences – please go out of your way to not offend them. Although you have the right to eat idol sacrifices and bacon – please, for the sake of your weaker brothers, give up your rights'. That's community. Giving up your rights for the sake of your brother. That's the importance of gospel community. Gospel truth, gospel clarity, gospel community.

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, there is one more thing this text brings out – the **importance of gospel cleansing**. The main point of the ceremonial laws was cleansing, purification. Peter gets up and says, *And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as He did to us, and He made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.* Acts 15:8-9 Coming from a Jew – that was a remarkable statement. Jews had been taught all their lives that Gentiles were unclean, dirty, they had all sorts of abominable practices, they sacrificed to idols, they ate bacon. And for Peter to stand up and say – 'These Gentiles are just as clean as we Jews because they believe in Jesus' was at the very least earthshaking. What was it that shattered his world view and compel him to make this kind of statement?

It was because he had the same revelation that Paul later lays out to the Colossian Gentile believers in his letter to that church. *[In Christ] also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised with Him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised Him from the dead.* Colossians 2:11-12 In other words, one of the most important identifying characteristics of a Jew, circumcision, was now by faith given to the Gentiles. And you have to ask yourself, 'Circumcision – really?' Why does this thing center on circumcision? That has to be the most revolting membership requirement ever! I can think of a lot of other things that would get the point across in a much less bloody and disgusting manner.

But circumcision is the sign of God's covenant with His people. And in the Old Testament, the way covenants were concluded, the way the thing was signed and sealed, was that the parties would act out the curse for disobedience to the covenant. If you were making a covenant with a king and you would promise to do this and this and this – and then you would seal the deal by taking an animal, cut it in half, walk between the pieces, through the blood, and you would say, 'If I do not fulfill the words of this covenant, may I be cut in half like this animal'. What you are doing is acting out the curse – you are taking the curse on yourself if you fail in any of your promises. And what is the curse of disobeying God? It's to be cut off – that's circumcision – a cutting off. That's the curse of sin – to be cut off. Cut off from people, cut off from community – cut off from God. You can feel this the moment you sin – the moment you lie to a friend or a spouse – you immediately feel cut off.

And circumcision is also a sign of cleansing – you are clean by virtue of being in the covenant. And here Peter is saying, and Paul is telling the Colossians, 'You are clean – you are covenant people now because you have been circumcised in Christ's circumcision'. What is that? The whole thing is pictured for us in Genesis 15 where God makes a covenant with Abraham and He has him take some animals, slaughter them, cut them in half and lay them out so that he can walk between them, pledging his obedience and calling down the curse on himself if he should disobey. But something remarkable happens here. Instead of Abraham walking between the animals in that river of blood that went between them – Genesis tells us that God walked between the pieces, pledging Himself to uphold the covenant, and in doing so calling the curse on Him – not Abraham.

That is exactly what happened at the cross. On the cross, the Son of God went under the knife, on the cross He bore the curse of sin, on the cross He was cut off from the land of the living, on the cross His blood was shed, He was cut off from God – 'My God, My God why have You forsaken Me?' And it means that because He was cut off you can be brought in – because He was made unclean, we can be clean – because He bore the curse we don't have to. So it doesn't matter what you've done – doesn't matter what you are guilty of – the circumcision of Christ cleanses you utterly. There's a great scene in Shakespeare's MacBeth where Lady MacBeth, who conspired with her husband to murder the rightful king – Duncan, is wracked by guilt and she starts seeing blood stains on her hands and try as she might she can't wash them away. And everybody around her is watching her descent into madness as she rubs and rubs the imaginary blood on her hands saying 'Out, out damned spot – Here's the smell of the blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, Oh, Oh! But faith in Christ means that all the damned spots come out – all the damned spots in your life are removed – you're clean.

Our gracious God and Father,

We thank You this morning for the good news of the gospel and Your love for sinners like us demonstrated on the cross. Before the cross of Jesus we kneel and see the awfulness of our sin that caused Him to be made a curse for us. And there too, we marvel at the grace, undeserved and astonishing, that removed our crushing burdens and laid them on Your Son. He was cut off that we might be brought in, He was accounted as an enemy that we might be welcomed as friends, and He surrendered to hells worst that we might gain heaven's best. Impress upon our hearts the futility of trying to add anything to this great work and strip us of every pretense of relying on our own righteousness to win Your favor. May we glory in the infamy of the cross and revel in the grace that brings us there. Come and work repentance in our souls and melt our hearts by the majesty and mercy of God and let us delight in You through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people we pray in the saving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.