

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

The Case for Grace

Acts 15:30-31

Intro: Ch15 opens with what I consider the greatest threat to the gospel yet seen in the Book of Acts. So far, we have seen many Christian congregations popping up all over the ancient Near East world and the vast majority of them are populated by newly saved Gentiles. Paul and Barnabas had just spent a year traveling through Cyprus and the region of Galatia, risking their lives to carry the gospel to these unreached areas. Though they experienced great opposition and some determined persecution, the Lord also blessed them with some great success. But now, all of that was in jeopardy of being severely damaged or destroyed because of one group's faulty perspective of grace.

Luke tells us in vs1 that certain men from Judea, ostensibly from the Jerusalem church, travelled all the way to Antioch in Syria just so they could teach the Gentiles there that unless they were circumcised (and followed the Mosaic Law) they weren't really saved! According to their doctrine, a Gentile had to become a Jew first before they could have their sins forgiven and receive salvation. Paul and Barnabas "disagreed" to say the least. In fact, they had no small dissension and dispute with these certain men. This wasn't an argument over a trivial matter; this went directly to the heart of the gospel itself; straight to what it means to be a Christian – a follower of Jesus Christ.

So, the Antioch church sent Paul and Barnabas back to Jerusalem to address this problem with the Apostles and elders of the church. As we saw, there was much back and forth over the subject and it was revealed that the group that supported this version of the gospel was originally from the sect of the Pharisees, which makes perfect sense. But, after much dispute, a few notable leaders stood up to speak to this issue. Peter was 1st and he merely reviewed what God had done with the Gentiles through his ministry in the past. Next, Paul and Barnabas reported what God was doing among the Gentiles through their ministry in the present. Finally, James spoke and related all of it to what the Scriptures says about God's plan for the Gentiles in the future. Scripture agreed with the previous testimonies.

The decision was made that the Gentiles should not be burdened with the Law of Moses or its requirements and that salvation was by grace through faith alone. The council wrote a letter to that effect to the Gentile believers and added a couple of simple command and a couple of concessions. As we saw, the letter brought joy and encouragement to all the Gentile believers (30-31). This wasn't just because they dodged the bullet of circumcision, though probably a great relief. No, the encouragement came from the fact that the gospel originally delivered to them was correct, it was comprehensive – it was enough. They were as saved as they would ever be and that had to be a great relief.

30-31 – I read vs31 and I can feel the relief washing over that congregation. The natural result of understanding the simple gospel is joy and encouragement! I am both blessed and disturbed by this revelation. I'm blessed because I and nearly all who attend Grace Chapel have and do experience the joy and encouragement the gospel brings into our lives. At the same time, I am disturbed because I fear that this encouragement has been lost to some degree over the centuries and thus, the rejoicing has been lost as well. There's a large amount of people who claim to be Christian who currently don't even know that joy and encouragement, let alone experience it on a regular basis.

The examples of church life that Luke provides for us in Acts describe a life that is filled with some difficulties, yes, but also a lot of excitement. There is joy seen in the church. There is community, there's mutual love and support to the point where people are willing to do without certain things so that others will be provided for. There is service and fellowship and caring and work. Yes, there's plenty of that! But, work that takes place in an environment of love is not really work- it's just love in action. The point is: church life is not supposed to be a burden, a "duty" – a chore! It's supposed to be a joy and a pleasure – at least that's what it was originally designed and intended to be. If it's not, and I contend that it's not a many places, then something's not right and more than likely, it's something related to the important point we are discussing in this text.

Because this topic is so critical for the spiritual life of the individual believer, the local body of believers and the church as a whole, I think it's important for us to take a step back and define a few principles, namely: what the gospel is, what it is not, why we need it and if there's another way to be

saved?

The doctrine these certain men taught claimed that circumcision and following the Law were necessary requirements of salvation. Paul addresses this idea in [Rom 4:1-12](#). Note [5b](#): “his faith is accounted for righteousness” and that righteousness was accounted to Abraham while he was “still uncircumcised” ([11b](#)). Paul is using Abraham as an example of saving faith. Abraham believed and was accepted by God before he obeyed any rules. The rules came later and were simply about showing that he believed. They were never a substitute for his belief.

What was it that Abraham believed? He believed God ([3b](#)) – he believed what God said He would do for him. That’s all? That’s all that was required. And that’s all that is required today: believe what God has said and done for you. What is that? Well, it’s the gospel! It may be difficult to grasp but there are a lot of people who go to church that don’t really understand the gospel, at least not enough to articulate it. Still, others who do get it seem to struggle with the utter simplicity of it. They struggle with believing that the gospel is all that’s needed to have eternal life.

So, what is the gospel? The term gospel means “good news” but why is it good news? What’s contained in God’s offer of salvation? What are the details of the good news? Paul describes the gospel in several places ([1 Cor 15:1-4](#); [Rom 1:1-5](#)). Basically, the content of the gospel is: God sent His Son, born in the line of David, as the man Jesus, who died for our sins, was buried and rose from the dead. That’s it! So, if that’s the good news, why is it good?

It’s good for many reasons! One reason is that salvation doesn’t depend on our performance. There’s nothing in those verses about having an amazing track record or maintaining a clean slate. The gospel is not about what you have done, might do or need to do. The gospel is all about what someone else did for you. That’s great news for us because none of us are perfect. None of us please God all the time. None of us are fit to be part of His family on our own. We all have to be made acceptable to God. The gospel tells us how that happens.

Note how Paul describes the intended result of his evangelistic ministry – to bring about obedience to the faith. He wanted the recipients of his message

to hold tight to what he said. How do you obey the gospel? Get baptized? Give money? Act properly? Stop being a jerk? Help the underprivileged? All are good things but no – God desires obedience to the faith. You obey the gospel by simply believing it! Notice also that Paul doesn't say the obedience of comprehension. We might not completely understand the details of the gospel like; how God could become a man or how the resurrection happened. But that's fine. God doesn't expect us to figure it all out and then take a pop quiz. He wants belief first. Understanding the details can wait.

The content of the gospel is God's offer to extend forgiveness of sin and entrance into His family to any and all who will believe Him. His offer of salvation reveals His love and kindness towards sinners. The Bible refers to this as grace. Since there is no greater power that exists above God, we know that He was not coerced into making this offer. No one is twisting His arm. He offers us salvation because He wants to have a relationship with us. All He asks is that you believe. That is the good news!

So, the gospel is good news but do we really need it? There are so many churches out there with all these rules and requirements to be met for salvation, can they all be wrong? Yes! We need the gospel because without it, we have absolutely no hope of eternal life with God. Our sin has separated, estranged us from God and believing the gospel is the remedy for our predicament. The Bible describes our situation in different ways; all of them accurate – none of them good. We are lost ([Lk 19:10](#)); dead in trespasses and sins ([Eph 2:1](#)); ungodly ([Rom 5:6](#)); alienated...from God ([Eph 4:18](#)); hostile towards God and His enemy ([Col 1:21](#); [Rom 5:10](#)). That's not a very pretty picture.

We are born in rebellion against God. Lacking His nature, we constantly abuse our intelligence and freedoms to get what we want, usually hurting others in the process. We live in self-destructive ways. We break God's laws, we violate, manipulate and abuse other people – that's sin. We're sinners by nature; self-absorbed and rebellious. The good news of the gospel is that God knew all of this and He still loved us anyway. It's His plan of salvation, a plan laid down before the foundation of the world that makes us acceptable to Him, no longer enemies but His children.

Are there other ways to be saved? This may seem like a silly question but

the fact that so many “Christians” are confused about the gospel means it needs to be addressed. Look at it this way: God offers forgiveness, salvation and eternal life with Him for free! It can’t be earned or deserved. All that’s required is faith - trusting in God’s promises and the completeness of what Jesus did. But, here’s the catch: believing the true gospel means rejecting false ideas about salvation. The Bible says there’s no other way of salvation. Jesus said it Himself (**Jn 14:6**).

That’s what was so dangerous about the doctrine these certain men were teaching. Not only did it confuse the status of the Gentile’s salvation – it brought their own salvation into question. We know that unsaved Pharisees believed they could be justified before God by keeping the Law. So, for a Pharisee to actually become a Christian, it would require more than just an acknowledgment that Jesus was the Messiah. The Pharisee would have to forsake his attempts to justify himself by keeping the law and accept the work of Jesus as the basis of his justification.

When Paul preached to the pagans of Lystra (**ch14**), he didn’t allow them to just add Jesus to their pantheon of Roman gods. He commanded that they turn from their vain, pagan gods to the true God. Similarly, these Pharisees who had been saved had to do the same thing. They had to consciously and deliberately turn from their efforts to earn justification before God by keeping the law and look only to Jesus. They couldn’t just add Jesus to their beliefs and say, “Now Jesus helps me to justify myself through keeping the law.” That’s not how salvation works. The problem was that these men were trying to put new wine into old wineskins and that could only ruin both.

We discussed the dire consequences that would have resulted had their doctrine been accepted as truth. Paul and Barnabas would have been false teachers; justification would not have been by faith only and all the Gentiles who thought they were saved would still be lost – from then until now. But, there’s an even greater consequence. If this doctrine was accepted as true – it would mean that Jesus came to this earth as a man and suffered and died in vain! Why would God send His Son to die such a horrible death on the cross if there had been another way for sinners to gain access to His presence? That idea is completely unacceptable. It is beyond irrational.

The Bible is clear. No one gains entrance into God’s family except through what Jesus has done. God’s Son had to become a man and death had to be

overcome. This was the only way and believing in God's plan is the only way to be saved. There is no one besides Jesus who can save. You can't add the gospel to other beliefs. It is exclusive. Believing the gospel means turning away from other beliefs. That's just one part of what the Bible calls repentance.

The content of the gospel concerns what Jesus accomplished for us by dying on the cross and rising from the dead. Eternal life, forgiveness of sin, salvation is the gift given to all those who believe and accept what Jesus did on our behalf. The gospel is as simple as that but our modern day church culture often tries to complicate this simplicity. It offers self-improvement (Live Your Best Life Now) or vague spirituality (Come get some!) as substitutes. The biblical gospel doesn't allow for this. It has nothing to do with personal enlightenment or self-discovery. The gospel is not about selecting different ideas to try from a spiritual catalog. These mind games have nothing to do with the gospel.

The Apostle Paul took great pains in his epistles to preserve the simplicity of the gospel

So, what's the deal? Why do so many people stumble over or fail to rest in the simplicity of God's good news? In a few cases it's obvious that some people reject the gospel because they don't think they are bad enough to need it. But, in most cases, the opposite is true. The reason most people struggle with the gospel is because they are caught in a performance trap. It's one thing to understand the content of the gospel and recognize the necessity of it but still, we have to do something, right? Or else, how could we deserve it?

Of course, if you know the Bible, you know we don't deserve what God offers! Many people struggle with that. They want to feel like they've earned the good things they have. They don't want to be a charity case. It doesn't seem right to get something good without working for it, at least a little. These feelings are the result of the guilt of our sin. This guilt inhibits our ability to see the gospel as the unconditional gift it is. Guilt forces us to justify a gift by believing it was deserved because we did something for the giver in the past. If that fails, we determine to do something for the giver in the future to make us feel deserving of the gift. In our guilty thinking – a gift obligates us to the giver. Our guilt blinds us to the love God reveals in the gospel and we must come to grips with how self-centered this thinking is.

Working overtime to make someone else think you have value requires you to focus on yourself. You can't be properly focused on another person when your goal is to make the other person think you're worthy of their attention or love. We want to feel good about ourselves and we want other to feel that way about us too. But the gospel does not allow us to focus on ourselves. It exposes us and demands our humility. It insists the focus be completely on God and on Jesus Christ. That's why it's so difficult for so many to accept. The gospel doesn't allow us to take any credit.

Because we are sinners living in a fallen world, we are convinced that no one would love us if they really knew us fully – inside and out. Thus, we can't fathom god loving us since there's nothing about us that's hidden from His view. He knows every thought, word, impulse and action - and we know He knows! The guilt that knowledge creates in us, combined with all our other conditional relationships, make the unfiltered love of God that the gospel reveals hard to accept. It just doesn't make sense to our fallen, guilt-ridden way of thinking.

The long and the short of it is this: the gospel cares nothing about what you do but it cares everything about who you already are. You are human. You are and always have been the object of God's unconditional love and irreplaceable plan of salvation from the very beginning. None of that requires performance – it's just the way it is. The sad fact is that many Christians live tormented, defeated loves – not because of the gospel – but because of the way their guilt has distorted the clarity and simplicity of the gospel. When they read the Bible, they only see their sins and failures. Every sermon they hear is an indictment against them. The glorious wonder of the story gets lost and is forgotten.

Salvation is not about performance. It never was, never will be, never can be – not if God is who He says He is. We can do nothing to put ourselves at the level of God, to make ourselves fit for His presence. That's because we lack God's perfect nature. We are like God, created in His image, but that also means we are less than God and God knows it. That's why His solution was Jesus and not you or me.

It's insane to think we could bridge the gap between us and God by doing this or not doing that. God never learns anything new about you when you

fail. He's known you from the very beginning and still loved you right where you are. Paul tells us that, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom 5:8). While we were His enemies, He performed the greatest act of love imaginable. This means you don't need to perform at a certain level to prod God into loving you. It also means God is never disappointed with you because He never has false expectations of your behavior. He has already factored our stubbornness, stupidity and propensity to sin into the equation of His plan for our lives. God has loved you all along – even when you were unlovable, God still loved you (Jn 3:16).

Salvation cannot be earned, it can only be received. God offers it because He is a gracious and loving God. There is no other reason; there can be no other reason. "That can't be all there is to the Christian life!" You're right! There's plenty more to it but none of it matters if you don't get salvation right first. Jesus is the only cure for the guilt of sin. Will you come to Him today?

