

Let's open our Bibles tonight to Acts 15:1.

If you've been with us, and I hope that you have, on Wednesday evenings, Acts is really a thirty-year history of the early church. It is given to us by the Lord so that we might be able to, I think, look to the beginning and see what God intended the church to be like - their mission, our mission - as well as the kind of people that God would use. And so it is a thirty-year introduction. It's a one-generation, almost, if you will, look, and it is divided into pretty clear, I think, delineations. The first ten or twelve years, the gospel went, for the most part, to the Jews first. It was God's intention that all men would be saved. He began with the Jews, the ones that had His promises. It was then revealed, and it should have been in the Old Testament as well, certainly, that God's intention was to save all men. And as you go through the Scriptures, and as you read through the account of the book of Acts, it's an important book because it's narrative which means that you have to draw the lessons from what God has given to us to understand. It's not theological in the sense that you might read one of the epistles, and every verse has theology to consume and doctrine to unravel.

This is the presentation of what God would want us to know and how the early church grew so that by the time you get to chapter 15, fifteen years have passed since chapter 2 and the gospel has gone out to the Gentiles. Peter had been led by the Lord, miraculously, to the house of Cornelius. At the same time that Peter went there and presented the gospel and this entire household of Gentiles came to know Christ through faith, there were men who, if you go 300 miles north to Antioch, were from Cyprus and Cyrene who had fled from the persecution that followed Stephen's death; and they were Hellenists, for the most part. That meant that they were Jews that grew up in Greek cultures, and maybe in behavior you would call them Gentiles before you'd ever call them Jews. They also began to share with other Hellenists there in Syria, and soon the Gentiles were getting saved. And so in two places, 300 miles apart (Caesarea and up in Antioch), there was this outpouring of God's Spirit upon the Gentiles. It revolutionized Peter's outlook. It certainly moved the city. God sent Barnabas there to give a report back to the apostles in Jerusalem. He stayed and ministered; realized that he didn't have the gift of pastoring, though he was an encourager. He found Paul, who

had really been out of the limelight for about thirteen years or so (though he had gotten saved; we were just kind of introduced to him), and they ministered there for a year. They were sent out by that church; the Antioch church in Syria became the center for world missions in the next generation. And literally, Jerusalem fades away in terms of importance or in terms of leadership, and this church in Antioch takes center stage. They sent Paul and Barnabas out. They spent (46 A.D. - 47 A.D.) most of their time in the Galatia region. We gave you maps. In verse 36 of this chapter, we'll put up the map for the second missionary journey where we'll have lots more to learn, and you should have them. If not, they're in back at the counter. But needless to say, lots of these places in Galatia were populated by Gentiles. And so Paul came back after a two-year journey, back to the Antioch church, and said, "Man, God is doing awesome things!" And there was great joy. And Paul would stay in this church (in Syria) until about 50 A.D. (three years or so) before he felt led of the Lord to go out again, and he would spend the next seven years going out and preaching the good news of Jesus across much of Eastern and then Western Europe. So we will catch up with that in a few weeks.

By the time we get to chapter 15, like I said, fifteen years have passed. Many Gentile converts, many churches have been planted and established throughout the Galatia region. But it was the salvation of countless numbers of Gentiles that became the fuel that kind of fed the fire for many Jewish saints who had come to the conclusion that, since God chose them as His people, if any Gentile was ever to be saved, he must first become a Jew. And so until he became circumcised and he went to the Temple, and he was bar mitzvahed, and he went through the rites of sacrifice and all, he really couldn't jump from pagan to believer without passing through Judaism; and that was a well-held belief. It was fueled, if you will, by the fact that there was this pride amongst the Jews that God had chosen them. It was a struggle that Peter had to overcome; he'd been learning that since he was a young kid. It was a lesson that Paul had certainly overcome, despite the experience of what God had been doing with him all of those years. But needless to say, the arrival of these Judaizers, as they were called, into Antioch 300 miles away would prompt a meeting in Jerusalem that would settle this issue once and for all. It's a huge day of meeting. It's a summit and a conference on - is salvation truly by grace, or are there some works that needed to be added to it? It changes the scope of the church in the years to come.

I wanted to look at the first eleven verses with you of this chapter tonight - that'll be Peter's testimony at this big meeting - and then pick up with Paul and others down through verse 35 next week before we start off on the road with Paul again. In Antioch, as you might suspect, in Syria (and I keep saying in Syria because there's more than one Antioch; there's one in Pisidia as well that Paul, you might remember, went to on his first trip), being the center for world missions, they were quick to embrace salvation for all. In fact, they experienced it before Jerusalem had heard about it, and they quickly embraced the joy of men being saved. The Jews who were believers back in Jerusalem saw Christianity as a sect of Judaism. And because of that, they felt like they were the "mother ship," if you will. Right? "You go through us if you're gonna go at all." And the idea that somehow a pagan polytheist - a man or woman who believes in a multiplicity of gods as, really, every religion of the world except Judaism did - without coming through Judaism was, to their belief system, an offense to the choosing of God that He had made upon His people. So, first the confrontation in Antioch 300 miles away in the first couple of verses tonight and then the dragging of all these people to Jerusalem to the apostles and to the elders to have it solved once and for all.

The opposition to Paul and Barnabas' ministry of grace was brewing and now goes public. The ultra-conservative Jewish saints took an extremely vocal and angry stance against Paul and Barnabas; they wanted to stop wholesale evangelism of the Gentiles without them first becoming Jewish proselytes. They had even, as we will read, followed Paul back to Antioch and sent some of their emissaries into Galatia (where Paul had spent two years planting churches) to say to the people, "Yeah, Paul sent us, and he wanted to be sure that you all knew that before you were really saved, you've gotta be Jews." And they followed Paul wherever he went, and they oftentimes waited till he left before they showed up. And here they come to confront him in his home church, if you will. They viewed Paul and Barnabas as radical activists. They saw them undermining the great traditions of their fathers and the separateness which was sacred to the Jews. "We are God's people." If the door of salvation was being opened by the grace of God, the Judaizers wanted to put a screen door on it. They wanted another access, if you will. "You have to pass through this one first before you can go through the door." So the question as to whether Gentiles could be saved - that was no longer an issue fifteen years into the church. But it was still - how can they be saved? That's the big issue. That was the big argument. Are they saved by faith, by grace alone, or by the outward works and the conforming nature of the Jewish law (by which they could not be saved)?

Now, you say, "Well, gosh, that seems so far removed from us today." It's not really that far removed from us. There are lots of different sects under the banner of Christianity today. In fact, people put the world into three or four major religious groups, and Christians got a real big bunch of people in it that aren't saved, but they are under the Christian banner. Some of them have clearly deviated from the truth of God's Word. They follow the same line of reasoning. They want to add something to the gospel of grace. They want you to believe in Jesus plus something. And it is that works righteousness which threatens the gospel in every generation. It may come from man's understanding that you never get something for nothing. But the greatest and the longest-running heresy in the world is the heresy that is born when men are unwilling to accept the fact that God's salvation is free and man can't earn it; he needs to be given it. And that's the heresy most people live with. "I've got to do this to get that. I've got to perform here, to respond there, and then God responds to me." And it's a big, stinking lie. The Bible tells us nothing less than salvation is a free gift from God. To try to touch up salvation with your works is trying to fix the Mona Lisa with a pen and pencil and an eraser. Now, you need to get that right. You can be wrong about a lot of stuff - the gifts of the Spirit, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, baptism by itself, communion, eschatology. You can have it all mixed up, and you'll still make it to heaven. But get this one wrong, and you absolutely will end up in eternity in the wrong place, and then it'll be too late to fix it. You want to be sure you get this one right. And so it became a big issue to the disciples as well.

Verse 1 says this - you see how quickly we got here? "And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.'" Arriving teachers, I'm sure in this church, would have received a warm welcome - especially since they were coming from the mother church in Jerusalem, and they did use the name of James (who is found there in chapter 2 of the Galatians letter, a place that Paul had been). James was the senior pastor in Jerusalem; he was highly respected. He had written the first book in the New Testament which, by this time, was already in wide circulation. So the book of James in your Bibles was the only one in print, if you will, or at least the only one out there being read. I don't doubt that they arrived in Antioch (sent by James), and they got a friendly reception, but that soon changed as these legalists made their heart and their intention clear. They wouldn't sit to eat with the Gentiles. They wouldn't have communion or fellowship with them. They declared, very clearly, to them, "Unless you become a Jew, you can't become a believer," and that was the message that they had come to preach.

Since this church of Antioch was comprised mostly of Gentiles and Hellenists (Jews with much background of Gentile kinds of habits - Greek, Roman and all), I'm sure that this didn't set well with them. It certainly didn't set well with Paul. And from all I know about Paul, that's not a guy you want to mess with.....or his church or God's people that are under his care. There have always been false teachers and prophets in the church. Peter would write that in the last days, there will be more of them "who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction" (2 Peter 2:1). It's going to happen, and the longer we wait upon the Lord, the more, as we look into the culture, we find this. So it is vital for the church to be able "to contend earnestly for the faith which was," as Jude writes (Jude 3), "once for all delivered to the saints" especially when it comes to the way of salvation that is under attack. Jude will start his very short book by saying, "Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints." It is a fight worth waging. It is a fight you can't set aside. So, into the joy of a returning missionary - with churches planted and a two-year commitment, and the prayers of the saints being answered, and God moving mightily amongst the Gentile world - come these men out of Judaism now saved (they are brethren), who travel 300 miles to deliver a message that is a direct attack upon the idea that God saves solely by grace. And no doubt the problem for young Jewish believers was that seemed pretty probable. It's plausible, isn't it? God always dealt first with His people and then through His people to those around them. It was not a hard sell, I don't think.

Notice it says, here in verse 1, that they "came down and taught the brethren." The believers in Antioch now meet the legalistic truth squad from Jerusalem. Now, understand that this caused quite a stir because that wasn't their experience or their understanding of God's grace. This little church, by the way, had, a few years earlier, taken and heard a prophecy from a prophet named Agabus who said that there was a famine coming in Jerusalem. And so this young upstart church all gave money to Paul and to Barnabas and said, "Take this 300 miles away, and give it to the church. They're gonna need it." And the famine came, and the money was helpful, and this church was the first one that you find any missions giving in; it was a small church giving to the large church, and they did it out of love. Now these are men sent from that church to respond in anger to the work of God; it is a work of the enemy. It was during this time and this experience that you will find Paul writing the letter to the Galatians, the churches that he went to establish in

the first trip; the places he had traveled to with Barnabas for those two years to counteract or to speak to this heresy that you find in verse 1, that the Judaizers were teaching. And Paul found it necessary (and you'll read in Galatians) that these guys not only went to these churches that Paul left behind with great joy, but they claimed to be from Paul, they were zealous, they were divisive; they were believers, but their whole goal was to divide. The name historically given to them is Judaizers. It is imposing upon Gentiles Jewish ceremony, Jewish ritual and Jewish law to make the people who listen to them "savable." So Paul wrote to these precious young saints. To let this go without a fight would be a disaster. And creating two churches while Jesus sought to make us one was unacceptable to Paul.

Now Paul was in a pretty unique position because he was (before he was saved) a really on-fire legalist in a Jewish uniform, if you will. He met Jesus and found the grace of God and came completely out of that, though he was as schooled in the Law as someone could be, and so he finds himself kind of standing in the middle between Pharisee and saved by grace. But he begins to write to the Galatians. And let me just read to you a couple of the lines that he writes to the Galatians. For example, he writes this, "Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage" (Galatians 5:1). He says to them (in chapter 2:16), "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified." He writes (in chapter 3:11), "But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for 'the just shall live by faith.' Yet the law is not of faith, but 'the man who does them shall live by them.' Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree'), that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith." And on and on and on and on those words go. "I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain" (Galatians 2:21). So in your mind, when you read the Galatian letter, you know where to put it now. Right? It's in this arrival of these men from Jerusalem fifteen years after the church has been planted, two years after Paul has been out on the road preaching to the Gentiles and has a lot to say about what God has done; he saw a lot of what God had done. If right standing with God could be grabbed or attained through the keeping of the law, then you don't need grace at all. What you need is a good argument or an effective presentation. If you go to court and you're on trial, and they say, "You're

innocent," you don't need any grace. You're innocent. If you end up guilty, now you need some grace. Now if the Lord comes, "Well, let me just do your time," that's grace. And nothing you could do would make you less guilty at that point. You've been declared guilty. So, the law was given by God to us to teach us that we were guilty; not to make us holy but to drive us to the cross so that we could discover the grace of God. That's what the law is intended to do; not to be taken to make you right but to be clutched to, to know that you're wrong and so that you'll find Christ to be the answer. Paul said (in chapter 14:27 of Acts), "God had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles." So grace versus works. And notice in verse 1, the message of these men from Jerusalem and out of Judea was to begin to teach this false doctrine - that to be saved you must first become a Jew from whatever religion you might have come out of.

Verse 2 says, "Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined" (the church, apparently, the leadership) "that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question." A furious debate ensued. The words "dissension" and "dispute" are pretty strong Greek words. And, in this church of Antioch, it left the church in an uproar. Satan's way to make a fruitful church ineffective is usually through internal division. It is just his greatest tool. When you read in the Bible, "God hates those who sow discord" (Proverbs 6:19), you better know there're going to be a lot of people sowing discord. Because God makes His will known, but the enemy will do whatever God hates, and so if there're available tools and vessels that he can certainly find them. We know a little bit about what happened here when we read (you remember) that chapter 2:11 passage in the book of Galatians where it says, "When Peter had come to Antioch," (up to this place) Paul had to withstand him to his face, because he was to be blamed. He said, "Beforehand some people came here from the church of James, and Peter was eating with the Gentiles because he knew about this freedom that Christ had brought in grace. When they came, however, being such a legalist, he quietly got up from the hamburger table, and he went over to the kosher table and began eatin' some hummus; and he wouldn't eat with the Gentiles. He separated himself as if somehow these guys are now going to swing the door on him and all, and so he didn't want confrontation." And Paul said he played the hypocrite and, as such, he stumbled a lot of people - including Barnabas, the guy that had gone on the road with Paul. And so when they left, Paul says to Peter (in front of all of the church there in Galatia), "Dude, seriously?" It's right there in your Bible. "Dude....." (Laughing) "Seriously." He said, "If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of

Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?" (Galatians 2:14) "You can't do it. You can't save yourself. Why would you play both sides of the fence?" And Peter was put in his place, but it was over this incident in this place at this time - and that's the letter that Paul wrote. So you'll have a pretty good background now if you're reading through your New Testament and get to the book of Galatians.

So, they had pretended to have been sent by Paul, like I said, and to do follow up. They were divisive. They had come, and they began to speak to the church. I doubt if they did it in Paul's presence, but they began to cause quite a scene. It was tumultuous. There was a lot of pushing and shoving. The divisiveness was bad enough to where they determined they couldn't get rid of these guys, so they would just go to the leadership, to the apostles, which were clearly the leaders - still at this time. "Let them tell us what to do." Paul did confrontation. I don't think he'd keep his mouth closed, but he was willing to take it to the leadership, if you will.

Many of these cultic kind of rabble-rousers find their way into churches. We've had guys come in here who, unbeknownst to us, began to work their way through the people and do their little deal and tell their little baloney. And when we catch up with them, we tell them to take a hike. But sometimes they escape you for a little while. They come in to try to preach to Christians. Now that's one of the problems with cults. They don't have a message for the world; they have a message for the church. There are certainly folks that run around that tell you you can't be saved unless you speak in tongues, and they have their own church. And you can't be saved unless you're baptized, and they have their own church. And you can't be saved if God hasn't called you - the five-point Calvinists who tell you the Lord hasn't chosen everyone, just the elect. But you see, all of those messages can only be delivered to the church because the world doesn't give a rat about those. They don't care. They want you on their side. That's the issue. That's what these guys were doin'. The world only needs to hear this - sin, man; salvation, the cross! You need to be born again! We have a message for the world. These guys, and most of these little cultic kinds of outgrowths, are all in a position where their ideas cannot be preached to the world; they can only be preached to the church. And their hope is very simple - win you to my side of the argument. That's all they care about. And we still have a lot of that going on today. They have no concern for the lost. They're concerned about their legalities. And they're a source of real trouble in the church.

So here the debate was not only fierce, it was consequential. Because if they're right, man, we've got to rethink this whole Jesus thing. And if they're wrong, they ought to be snuffed out in terms of allowing them to speak.

Well, finally, like I said, the debate was bad enough to where they decided to send a delegation directly to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem to have a hearing about this issue of grace. I don't think Paul looked forward to going here. They weren't very friendly to him the last time he was there. Jerusalem was very sympathetic between mixing Judaism and Christianity. He trusted the Lord to make the way clear. He took Barnabas with him, the guy that had traveled with him for two years. They took several of the elders from the church at Antioch. You can read some of the elders' names in chapter 13:1 of the book of Acts. And when they get to Jerusalem, Peter (who we said kind of good-bye to a couple chapters ago) will reemerge for one last time (before kind of disappearing from the scene) to give his testimony about what happened to him as well.

We read, in verse 3, "So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren." I love the verse. They traveled the coastal route. You can see your map - around the horn there and down. And they came, if you will, through Caesarea, through Phoenicia, through Samaria up to the north, and they met with the scattered saints who were living in all of these little places, and they began to tell them about how the Lord was saving Gentiles. And everyone who heard it - the believers - were thrilled; they left joy in every city. Everyone was happy because the truth sets free. And Paul's confirmation of what he had seen and the message he delivered - it just brought everyone joy. I thought about that today. The legalists will always bring heaviness with them. Will they not? But the truth of God will bring joy. Grace brings joy wherever it goes; the law whenever it goes. When it goes out, when that works thing goes away, then there's joy. And here's the good news for you and me - we have the privilege of telling people that their sins have completely been paid for by Jesus, that salvation is a free gift. Not something to be earned, not something to be rated for or something to be approved in. It is freely given. It is freely received. And every place that these men, traveling these 300 miles, stopped for the night, stayed with the church, they told that story. And every saint could not have been happier, and I'm sure that Paul must have been beaming as he bragged about the Lord's work. Right? Verified and seen. And I'm sure that it must have thrilled his heart.

Verse 4 says, "And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them." Now it says "received." From everything we read, it doesn't necessarily mean they were received warmly. It does appear that they had a private meeting with Paul and Barnabas and company. And, in the hearing, they got an earful. Can you see Paul saying, "Well, we were in Syria, we were over in Cyprus, we went over to Galatia"? And Peter, "I went to Caesarea. Maybe we could bring Cornelius in, and he could tell you." And they were all just shouting out and witnessing to the grace of God to save Gentiles, the guys who used to worship the weirdest gods in the worst ways, and yet one turn of their life to Christ, and they were saved. I think that, like I said, Paul must have just been able to look at these men and say, "Hey, boys. Hey, James. Can I bring my guys up here? They can tell you everything they saw. I'll step out of the room. They can just tell you what they experienced. Even in our church in Antioch and what the Lord is doing there."

Verse 5 tells us, "But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed" (again, believers, Judaizers, if you will, not yet free from those bonds) "rose up, saying, 'It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.' " And the fight started all over again. Believing Pharisees. They voice the same stale, blasphemous lie: it is necessary, it is absolutely essential that if Gentiles are going to be saved, they're going to have to become Jews first. You've never heard people say, "Hey, unless you join our denomination, you're not going to be saved?" Or whatever it might be, they put restrictions on your faith. I had a guy, when I got saved - and I went to his church for the first time in shorts and those huarache sandals (those were what we were wearing in those days) - and I had really long hair, and the dude said, "Look, you can't be saved. Look at your hair!" I said, "What does my hair have to do with it?" He said, "Well, you want to come to church here, you'll cut your hair, and then you'll be right with Jesus." And it made me so mad. Then a woman in the front row.....well, I told you that story already. She cut my hair. (Laughing) Then she died. I tried to please her, and then she died. It's okay. It's my loss. So, this is a big fight, right? And Paul will write to the Romans. Read the last five verses, Romans 2, when Paul writes about circumcision and how that doesn't do you a bit of good if your heart's not right with God; and if your heart's right with God, that doesn't do you any good either (to be circumcised); the cutting away of the flesh that speaks of a life lived in the Spirit. But anyway, they just began to argue. Notice, in verse 4, they seemed to have had a welcome and a meeting. In the meeting, though, it went from good to bad rather quickly.

And so, in verse 6, "Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. And when there had been much dispute," (again, these guys were just at each other's throats over this one issue) "Peter rose up and said to them: 'Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago' " (yeah, it's been several years ago now) " 'God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.' " So, the open forum did not seem to solve the problem. Back and forth. "Here's what I think." "Well, here's what I think." "Well, who do you think you are?" Peter finally stands up with the authority of being an apostle, an O.G. apostle, and he's especially the one who God had chosen, and everyone was aware of it, to preach the first sermon to the Jews; also to take the gospel to the Gentiles in the form of going to Cornelius' house. And Peter first to take the floor, officially, at this hearing. He seems to have sat back and let it go for a while, but now he's asserting himself into this debate with great power. No one would have had more authority to speak on this topic than he. I mean, he had been the one God miraculously led over to Cornelius' house after Peter officially brought the first message, if you will, to the Gentiles. Like I said, it happened at the same time as what was happening in Antioch 300 miles north. (You can read about that in chapter 11:19-26 where that report is taking place at the same time.) Peter was known, according to the Bible, in that day as the apostle to the Jews; Paul will call him that as well, refer to him like that, in Galatians 2:7. I don't doubt, and I'll just read to you what I see in here, that Paul was absolutely fidgety when Peter got up. "Oh, this is gonna be great." He's recently had a run-in with him. Peter seemed a bit wishy-washy to a guy named Paul. Paul didn't put up with Barnabas' quitting. I don't think he tolerated Peter's sittin' on both sides of the dinner bench. And now he's standing up before this official council, where they have to get this thing resolved, and Peter is seen by Paul as easily intimidated. He was certainly doing that in Antioch. He wants to keep everyone happy. This is not going to go well. This is going to stink. "I want to just pull him off the stage." But Peter's up.

Peter begins by telling them of the authority that he has been given by the Lord and had gone to Cornelius' house and how he had been brought there and what had happened when he was there. You can read chapter 10:44, "While Peter was still speaking these words," you remember, "the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the Word. And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter." They couldn't believe that this is how God saved; not at all about circumcision. It just went straight through, and Peter (in chapter 11) would be called on the carpet by these same men, and he had all the answers ready. "Well, here's what I did, and here's how it worked, and here're six guys I took with

me because I knew you were gonna get me on this." So he had people to testify before them. Well, he has gone through all that already, up to this point. So, he stands up to speak. He establishes his authority by saying, "You know that God called me. Everyone was aware of it." But his point, as he began, was, "Look, I was there because God led me there. That wasn't my doing; that was His doing. And He's the One who saved virtually everyone in that house without asking for the necessities that these Judaizers are asking of every Gentile. He just saved them. They were listenin'. I was tellin' them about Jesus, and they were fallin' over right and left with new life. If that is God's will, as you say it is now, why wasn't it His will then? I saw them saved before my eyes. So I'm the one that God sent."

Second of all, verse 8, " 'So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.' " "God knows their hearts" is what Peter says. Right? His argument to them is pretty straightforward, to these Judaizers. "Look, God knows the heart. He knew that they were believing in Him, that faith was the issue. And in their faith, He responded by pouring the Holy Spirit out upon them as He had poured out the Holy Spirit upon us. Their salvation was like our salvation. We believed, they believed. It had nothing to do with us being Jews at that point. We were sinners." All those with Peter were equally astonished as Peter was when God did that work, but they acknowledged it. And he says (Peter does) to this bunch of influential overseers, "God acknowledged them. He received their faith. And we know He gave them the Holy Spirit." The Holy Spirit is not given to unbelievers. He is given to believers. "If you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, the Spirit of God dwells in you. If you have not the Spirit of Christ, you don't belong to Him." That's what Paul will write in Romans 8:9. "As many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. By His Spirit, we cry out, 'Abba, Father' " (Romans 8:14-15). "So look, guys, I went led by the Spirit of God. God called me. You know it. I showed up. I told you what happened. Let me tell you again what happened. God knew their hearts. They acknowledged, in faith, His Son. The response was what Jesus promised - to give His Spirit to those who believe in Him. He gave Him to them as He gave Him to us. He didn't ask them, at that meeting at Cornelius', to become a Jew first. He responded to their believing, to their hearing of the gospel. What we have shared, and what we shared there, you can go back and look at it - very simple, very straightforward - the message is much shorter than what I've said to you tonight, and it is all that it took." Now, I think, and again I'm reading into this text (so I don't want to teach my beliefs as Bible), but I have a feeling that Paul, at this point, sat back and

breathed a very large sigh of relief and maybe a "Thank You, Lord" under his breath. "All right. Maybe he had a weak moment there in Antioch, but man, he's bold tonight. He's doin' it! Go, Peter, go."

Peter goes on, there in verse 9, and he said " 'God purified their hearts by faith.' " "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace," Paul would write to the Ephesians in chapter 1:7. Forgiveness isn't earned; it is freely given. We don't need more rules to reform our lives. We need to be born again. And Peter was very clear about that. "Look, that's not our experience at all! And as an apostle, let me tell you what I have seen."

Verse 10, " 'Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?' " What a great word. "Because of this, therefore, as a result of what we said - why would you now go back to challenge God?" The word "test" is really the word for challenging God's positions. "Why would you go back and try to add to the salvation of God, which He has given to us freely by His grace, a yoke, a burden that you and I as Jews could never measure up to? We can't keep the law. It was there to drive us to Jesus. Now you want to drive them back to the law? What's wrong with you? We can't do it; why would you ask them to do it? We need grace; they need grace. Let's just leave it at that. And God gives grace to all. You are seeking to put a yoke upon them that our fathers couldn't bear. We haven't been able to bear it. In fact, we were not free until we met Jesus." The law is a yoke; not a joke, a yoke. James 2:10, "For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all" because the law is not intended to make you righteous. So, Jesus has a better yoke. What did He say in Matthew 11:28? "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke" (again, no joke) "upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." Because it's salvation that is freely-given. That's what takes the burden off of me. Look, I spent years of my Christian life thinking when things went well, it was because I had earned it because I was good that week. And when things went bad, "Oh, man, Lord. What did I do wrong this week?" It's the Job counselors' stupidity, and I ran with it for a long time. But they're attacking the basics of salvation here, and that's what people go after. I have no shame saying to people, "I don't care what you've done. If you repent of your sins, you can go to heaven because Jesus' blood is sufficient for all." "Oh, you don't know what I've done." And I don't want to know because I

probably won't like you as well as I do now. (Laughing) I don't want to know anything you've done. But I know what He did, and I'm pretty sure He'll get the stain out, man. He'll clean you up no matter where you've gone or what you've done. So, it's a serious matter to challenge God's way, and that's what Peter boldly says to this room full of very influential Jewish Christians, led by James at the time, "How dare you challenge God? It's a serious matter to call God into question." Revelation 22, Deuteronomy 4 as well, there are those two warnings which say if we try to add anything to God's plan or take anything away, we're gonna be in trouble with God. He doesn't like for you to do a rewrite. He likes to write it as it is. "Here, run with this." "Yeah, could I add a couple of words?" "No." "Could I take away a few?" "No. You just give it like it is. This is the promise of God." We don't earn God's favor. He gives it to us freely. We've all failed the law's requirements. We aren't rich in spiritual blessings because we're spiritual; we're rich because God loves us and has given us His grace.

So, here's what Peter concludes with, verse 11, " 'But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they.' " I love the way he puts this. He doesn't say, "They'll be saved in the same manner as we." He turns it around and says, "We're gonna have to come to the Lord like they've come to the Lord. Their grace and their faith is what will save us as well." He doesn't put himself in the higher position, "They've got to check to be with us." He says, "No, no. We've got to be like them because they don't know all this stuff you're tryin' to sell 'em. They just believe and know that God's plan and God's way relies upon God's grace. The law will load us down because we failed, but God's grace will load Him down, and He hasn't failed. We like them, not they like us."

Now how does that apply? Well, some believe that without lots of rules, young Christians would run wild. I don't believe that. People go, "Hey, you gotta tell 'em not to do this and not to do that." I'm thinkin' I just gotta tell 'em to know the Lord and get into His Word. He'll guide the rest. I was young when I got saved, and I did a lot of drugs, and we ran around with a lot of weird people. But I'll tell you what - when I got saved, my love for Jesus changed me. Not rules. I didn't have any rules. My parents were as liberal as parents could be. They'd made all of the wrong choices, and I enjoyed every one of them. (Laughing) But when I got saved, I wanted to do the right thing because of what Jesus had done for me. I'll give you the best example. When I was a kid, my dad used to make me (for allowance) wash the car, and they had these big station wagons. And I hated it. And I did it poorly, and I did it quickly, and I would yell as quickly as I could,

"Finished!" and hope he wouldn't come out, and he'd just say, "All right. You can go play" or whatever I was doin'. And I didn't want him to come out and check because then I wasn't finished. And years later, when I got my first car and started dating, I washed every inch of that car. I did it out of love. Stuff shined, and it was beautiful. It was a '59 Impala. Oxidation blue. If you leaned on it, your clothes turned the same color. (Laughing) The three-on-the-tree thing. The bench seat that you could sit 18 people on. (Laughing) It was my car! I washed it because I loved it! Completely different. You can give me all the rules you like, but until you meet Jesus, the rules won't help. The law doesn't work. But when you meet Him, there's the law in itself. Isn't it? You have *God's Word* in your life. Love is the ultimate source of spiritual pursuit and commitment. So trying to put yokes on people - like the law itself - telling them to love *God*, it doesn't work. It doesn't work. It is love that drives the relationship; always has and it always will. Paul wrote in chapter 2:4 of the book of Romans, "Isn't it the goodness of *God* that will lead you to repentance?" Right? "His riches, His forbearance, His goodness, His longsuffering - isn't it the riches of *God*?" That'll get you right. I want to please the Lord. I'm His workmanship. Works won't save me, but He has.

So, look at verse 12, and we'll end. It says, "Then all the multitude kept silent." If you go back to verse 4 and verse 5, it seems everybody had a big mouth. Peter gets up, six verses, shuts the whole place down, and then everyone turns to listen "to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders *God* had worked through them among the *Gentiles*." We will start there next week. I want you to think about this - Peter gets all this press. We read every chapter of Paul's trips, and when Paul gets this verse, verse 12, it's just kind of like, "Yeah, then they heard about Paul and Barnabas." Peter got the floor because Peter was in there. Paul, "Yeah, whatever, we've got to put up with him because he's everywhere," but he doesn't seem to get the same consideration; at least not early on. But he will tell what the Lord had done with him as well. And so next week, we want to look at the testimony of Paul and of Barnabas and of James, of the council's decision, and who was going to be sent with Paul and Barnabas - not only back to Antioch but who's going to hang out there and how are they going to get the word out to all of these other churches that the decision in Jerusalem is, "We believe in salvation only by grace. No works at all." So they're going to ask of the church consideration for Jews who are weak in the faith; do some things that will make them happy. "It doesn't matter, but we want to love them, but let's not lose the fact that the truth is here. Salvation comes only by faith." And then we'll go out

onto the road with Paul (in verse 36) for seven years. You ready? Pack your bags,
and off we'll go.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson

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