

ACTS 15:1-21

INTRODUCTION

- I have a friend who is terrible at letting me pay for lunch.
 - You know the type.
 - The bill comes... and it's a race.
 - He's grabbing for it.
 - I'm grabbing for it.
 - The server's just standing there looking at us like a couple of idiots.
- And if I do manage to get there first—he hates it.
 - It makes him uncomfortable.
 - He'll mumble: “You didn't have to do that,” or “I'll get the next one.”
- At this point:
 - I do it just to make him squirm.
 - The least generous kind of generosity imaginable.
- But it's interesting, isn't it?
 - Sometimes we find it hard to simply receive.
 - We prefer to earn... contribute... do our part.
- And it turns out, that instinct doesn't just show up at lunch tables—it also shows up in church.
 - Because when grace is really offered—free... undeserved... nothing to add—it can make people uncomfortable.
 - That's exactly what happens in our passage.
 - And it leads us to a **question**, an **answer**, and a **response**...
 - All of which we must get our minds and hearts around if we're to be the church at its best.

[Transition]: So, let's start with the question.

1. THE QUESTION—IS GRACE ENOUGH?

- At this point in Acts, the mission of God is in full swing.
 - Jews—people from Israel—are coming to faith.
 - Gentiles—people from every other nation—are also coming to faith.
 - The gospel is expanding and God is at work.
- But now, at this moment of momentum and progress, a question emerges.
 - A group within the church starts to teach that, **V1: Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.**

- For centuries the Jewish people had followed the Old Testament law, the defining marker of which was that every male had to be circumcised.
 - It's so ingrained in them that they can't believe it's no longer necessary.
 - So they argue that along with faith in Jesus, all the men must still be circumcised to be saved.
- It might sound strange to our ears, but here's what's happening.
 - They're not saying Jesus isn't necessary—they're saying he's not enough.
 - They are not rejecting grace—they're just adding to it.
- But here's the problem:
 - Grace is unmerited favor—a blessing you can't earn or repay.
 - So the moment you add to it, by definition you lose it.
 - Grace plus anything is no longer grace.

[Illustrate]

- It's like baking something that's already perfect—say brownies.
- You follow the recipe exactly... and they're great.
 - But then you think, "You know what this needs? A little extra."
 - So you add... garlic.
 - Nobody in their right mind would say, "That took it to another level."
 - No—by adding you've made it worse.
- Grace is like that. The moment you try to add to it, you ruin it.

[Transition]

- We're at a very important moment in the history of the church—what looks like a small addition could actually derail the entire mission.
- So to address it, a council of leaders convenes in Jerusalem to answer this question: What actually saves a person—Is the grace of Jesus enough?
- Here's their answer—in a word, yes.

2. THE ANSWER—YES: GRACE IS ENOUGH.

- The leaders gather. There is much debate. And then Peter stands up.
 - **V7:** God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.
 - **V8:** And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us.
 - **V9:** He made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.
- Notice the emphasis.
 - **God** made a choice. **God** gave. **God** made no distinction. **God** cleansed.
 - Salvation is the story of what God has done—not of what we must do.

- Peter continues:
 - **V10: Why, therefore, 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?**
 - Traditionally, Jewish teachers counted 613 laws in the Old Testament.
 - And Peter says: We couldn't keep these laws, and our forefathers weren't able to keep these laws, so why are you trying to make people carry something no one has ever been able to carry?
 - Instead, he provides a perfect summary of the gospel in **V11: We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.**
 - Everyone is saved the same way—through the grace of the Lord Jesus.
 - Grace isn't part of the answer—it is the answer.
- At this, the room goes quiet in **V12**—it's a lot to take in.
- As they're processing, Paul and Barnabas describe what they've seen God do among the Gentiles, before James brings it to a conclusion in **V19: We should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God.**
 - That's it: Do not make it difficult for those who are turning to God.
 - Circumcision is no longer required—not because it never mattered, but because it's been fulfilled by Christ.
- Let's dig a little deeper on that thought for a moment:
 - Circumcision was a sign that pointed beyond itself.
 - A sign of **blessing**—it marked you as belonging to the people of God.
 - And a sign of a **curse**—cutting and the shedding of blood pointed to the judgment that would fall on any who didn't belong to God.
 - But now Jesus has fulfilled both—the horror and beauty of the cross.
 - He was cut off. He shed his blood. He bore the curse for his people.
 - So eternal blessing can be found in him.
 - The sign was no longer needed because the fulfillment of the sign had come.

[Illustrate]: N. T. Wright pictures it this way:

- *“Imagine a mother seeing her child at the other side of the street, about to cross a busy road. ‘Stand still!’ she shouts urgently. Then, a minute later, seeing that the traffic has come to a stop at the light, she shouts again, ‘Walk across!’ She hasn't contradicted herself. The initial command was the right one for the time. Indeed it is because she wanted the child to walk across in the end that she told him to stand still for the moment. If he hadn't, he wouldn't have made it across at all.”¹*
- This is the kind of shift that's happening here in Acts 15.
The old commands have done their job—Now the grace of Jesus is enough.

[Transition]

- The Question: Is grace alone enough?
- The Answer: Yes.
- But how should that answer change us?
- Let me suggest two things we can do in response.

3. THE RESPONSE—GRACE CHANGES US.

First: Don't Add to the Gospel: As we said earlier, all this talk about the necessity of circumcision might seem strange to our ears—but the instinct to add is still there.

- **For ourselves:**
 - We might think: I have to get my life together, clean myself up, be more like those church people before I could become a Christian.
 - But the gospel says all you have to do is stop trying—and accept grace.
 - That's the gospel:
 - Not: Grace plus effort.
 - But: Grace alone.
 - If you're not a Christian yet—or have forgotten the good news—hear this: God loves you as you are.
 - Which means we can all be Christians today—that's grace.
 - Today's a great day to receive it.
- Then, as we don't add to the gospel **for ourselves**, let's be careful that we don't add to it **for others**.
 - Don't you love **V19: We should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God.**
 - In other words, make it easy to come to Christ.
 - Don't add expectations that are just part of our culture.
 - We might not do this with circumcision...
 - But there are other ways we might do the same thing.
 - Here are some classic examples:²

[Alcohol]

- Some of us grew up in contexts where alcohol was completely off-limits—and there are good reasons for that.
 - The Bible repeatedly warns about the dangers of drunkenness.
 - We all know the damage alcohol can do—addiction, broken homes, real suffering—we've experienced this in our own family.
 - So for many, abstaining is a wise, even loving response.
- But others will say:
 - The Bible doesn't prohibit alcohol.
 - I think I can enjoy it wisely to God's glory.
- Both instincts are trying to take Scripture seriously.
 - The question is: what do we do with that tension?
 - That's where Acts 15 helps us.
 - Don't turn a secondary matter into a requirement for being a Christian—"All Christians must agree with me."
 - Instead, leave room for wisdom and conscience.

[Appearance]

- Some of us grew up in churches where there were clear expectations:
 - Dress a certain way.
 - Don't dress another way.
 - And never get piercings or tattoos.
- Again, there can be good instincts behind that.
 - A desire for modesty.
 - A desire to honor God with your body.
 - A desire to be distinct from the world.
- But here's the question: Should those instincts become requirements?
 - When we do that, we make our preferences the rule for all.
 - And that's where we need to be careful.
- So what do we do?
 - Don't turn a secondary matter into a requirement for being a Christian—"All Christians must agree with me."
 - Leave room for wisdom and conscience instead.

[Politics]

- Some of us have strong political convictions.
 - And there are good reasons for that.
 - The Bible speaks to justice, care for the poor, and the value of life.
- But we also need to recognize that faithful Christians will disagree on how those principles should be applied.
- The question is: What do we do with that tension?
 - And again, Acts 15 helps.
 - We don't turn political views into a requirement for being a Christian—"How can you be a Christian if you don't vote like me?"
 - Instead, we leave space for wisdom and conscience.
 - If we don't do that—we might end up putting up barriers that keep people from Christ.

These things can be difficult bc we all tend to make our preferences universal norms.

- I recently discussed this with a friend who pastors a black church here in Knoxville.
 - Our services run just over an hour—his run nearer three.
 - Who's "right"?
- It would be easy for us to judge each other:
 - I could say: Why don't you work a little harder and tighten up that sermon?
 - He could say: Why aren't you spending longer in the word?
- Or we could both say: What you're doing serves your people well.
- Let's be wise:
 - There are some clear biblical teachings on which all Christians should agree.
 - But let's not allow our preferences on secondary matters to become primary.

Don't Add to the Gospel.

A second response: Let's look for opportunities to—Surprise Others with Grace.

- This whole passage is surprising—no added burden, no extra hoops, just grace.
- And then there's another surprise at the end.
 - Did you catch it in **V20**?
 - James says: **We should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God**—they don't have to keep all the OT rituals and laws.
 - But then adds: **Write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood.**
 - At first, this seems like a super random list.
 - But there's a logic behind it.
 - Yes—abstain from sexual immorality:
 - That's part of God's moral law that applies in both Testaments.
 - Likely highlighted here because it was so common—and so accepted—in the pagan world.
 - He's saying: There are some ways your life should be different now.
 - But what about the rest—meat with blood, strangled animals, food associated with idols?
 - Well, these were the kind of foods that were offensive to Jews and stopped them from sharing meals with Gentiles.
 - So, James says to the Gentiles:
 - You're free to do eat things...
 - But you're also free to give them up so you can fellowship with your new brothers and sisters.
 - In other words—you're free:
 - But don't use your freedom to insist on your own rights.
 - Use it to love others—even if that means giving something up.
Use your freedom to surprise them with grace.

[THE CLOSE]: What might it look like to love someone with surprising grace this week?

- In **marriage**—you're free to be angry when they've done wrong, but you're also free to surprise them with forgiveness they don't deserve.
- In **parenting**—you're free to ground your kids when they mess up, but you're also free to surprise them with patient advice over a milkshake.
- With a **friend**—you're free to drink alcohol, but you're also free not to if it will cause them to stumble.
- At **work**—you're free to highlight a coworker's mistake, but you're also free to surprise them by offering help.
- In **church**—you're free to ignore the person who walks in late, but you're also free to surprise them by giving them your seat.

I love the idea of us being a people who surprise others with grace.

CONCLUSION

- The Question: Is grace enough?
- The Answer: Yes.
- The Response: Don't add to the gospel, and surprise others with grace.

Is there someone you could do that for this week?

- Not in the mischievous way I try to buy lunch for my friend.
- But in a way that reflects the way we've been loved by Christ.
- His grace really is enough—and those most surprised by it should be the most generous with it.

That's the church at its best.

RESOURCES AND ENDNOTES

Resources

This list contains some of the resources that were used to prepare this sermon series. Check them out if you want to dig a little deeper.

- John Calvin, *Commentary Upon the Acts of the Apostles*.
- Ray Cortese, *The Mission: Clarified, Mobilized, Empowered*.
- Dennis E. Johnson, *The Message of Acts in the History of Redemption*.
- Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Acts*.
- Alan Thompson, *Acts: A Commentary*.
- N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone—Part 1*.

Endnotes

¹ N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone—Part 1*, 163.

² I owe this section to J. D. Greear, *When Drinking, Politics, Cussing, and Circumcision Divide a Church: Acts 15:1-32*, accessed [here](#) 3/19/26.