

Acts 15:1-21

“Setting The Record Straight”

One of the core values of CCJ is “Excellence in ministry”. We say, “Good enough is never good enough. We always put our best foot forward for the glory of God. If we’re not willing to do our best, than we’re not willing to do it. Excellence honors God & inspires people.” Paul the apostle would say that like this; *“And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ.”¹*

In other words; it’s not only *what* we do that’s important, *why* we do it is even *more* important. & When we set out to do something, we go all in (not so that we’re praised for being diligent, or hard working, or thorough in our efforts) for the glory of God because we serve the Lord Christ.

I say that to say this: Ch’s 13-14 of the book of Acts are an “all in for the glory of God” kind of missionary journey, embarked upon by Paul & Barnabas whereby these guys did what they did “heartily, as to the Lord” & a great work was completed. The gospel was taken into previously uncharted territories, & though it wasn’t w/out trials/tribulations, afflictions & persecutions, the ultimate result was that multitudes were saved, disciples were made, leadership was established & churches were planted.

Ch 14 comes to a close w/them making their way back to their home church at Antioch in Syria & giving them the report of all the things that had taken place throughout that 1 ½, perhaps 2 yr period that they were away.

& If in your mind, you’d say with me, “Praise be to God. People were coming to Christ, turning from sin, I couldn’t care less if they were Jewish, if they were Gentiles, the important thing is that they were coming to Jesus!” That would be a correct attitude/outlook to adopt. But you need to understand that not everyone (in this transitional time period coming out of the dispensation of law & under the new dispensation of grace) saw it that way.

Now; we can be hard on these groups of guys who held tightly to the law. Who said, “Jesus is fine, but we can’t forsake Moses.” But we need to show a little grace ourselves. Romans hadn’t been written, Galatians hadn’t been written, Hebrews hadn’t been written. & Change is hard on anybody. The question is, “Am I teachable?” Let’s look together.

¹ *The New King James Version*. (1982). [Col 3:23-24]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Vs1

Ladies and Gentlemen, we can't just skirt past this, we've got to stop right here! Did you see why? Because what these "certain men" taught was not a small or inconsequential matter that people could simply "agree to disagree" upon. This wasn't a side issue at all! It pertained to the necessary elements of salvation itself! They "taught" (& btw this word "taught" is in the "imperfect tense" which points to an ongoing action in the past). In other words, they weren't content to share what they thought & move along. They were actively, persistently, authoritatively instructing & persuading people that, "Yes, we need to believe in Jesus, but the way the sacrifice of Jesus takes effect in our lives is through the law of Moses!" They would want you to believe that the way you come to Jesus is *through* Moses.

(Side note, do you remember that during their missionary journey, Paul & Barnabas made their way into the region of Galatia; Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe? If you want a little more insight into this situation you can read Paul's letter to the Galatians, he speaks of this very event in the 2nd Ch of that letter... We find out Peter was here in Antioch at that point, it got real tense, he rebuked Peter for being persuaded in some part, falling back into previous patterns of separating himself from Gentile believers at dinner time when these Jewish guys were around, Barnabas was impacted by it, it got real weird & Paul set it straight).

But we read here why these guys were able to cause such a stir. It wasn't like they were just some Johnny come lately from somewhere else, easily set straight being confused themselves. They came down from *Judea*, (Galatians tells us that they were from James). In other words, they were from the HQ in Jerusalem... Now they weren't authorized *by* the church, but they were associated *w/the* church so their words carried weight.

& What they taught cut to the core of Christianity. Because we either need to be under the law or we don't. Circumcision (the covenant sign) is either an essential aspect of justification or it's not. & When it comes to salvation, we can't have some cloud of confusion over the matter, it needs to be clear! (& I'm certain they were quoting scripture, perhaps Gen 17:14, maybe Ex 12:48-49).

But family here's the deal. If in Christ, we were being brought under the law, than this would be true. What they were failing to understand is what the Holy Spirit would later clarify through the apostle Paul & that is this;

*"For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes."*² What we have to come to grips with is the fact that we can either make every effort to be righteous *on our own* before God through the keeping of the law. *Or*, we can receive the righteousness that *God provides* for us through believing in the finished work of J.C. upon the cross by faith... But we can't mix & mingle the 2. It's one or the other.

The problem is that by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified in the sight of God. Because it's not righteousness that the law provides, what the law provides is the knowledge of sin. One might ask, if the law can't make me righteous does that mean something is wrong w/the law? The answer is, no. There's something wrong w/*you*. (& W/me). We can't keep the law. (Again, I'm deviating a bit here into Romans/Galatians, but this is important stuff).

These guys come down to Antioch & start saying that Jesus is good, but it's through the law of Moses we find justification. Paul & Barnabas had just spent the better part of 2 yrs promoting *this* message; *"...and by Him [Jesus] everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses."*³

These guys are basically saying, "Jesus saves *after* we've done everything we can to keep the law of Moses." Paul & Barnabas are saying, "No, we're saved by grace through faith in what God has done through J.C. *alone!*"

Now I realize I'm lingering on this but here's why; the essence of their message was "Believing in Jesus is good, but it's not enough, there's something more you need to do." This still happens today. Some may say, "Believing in Jesus is good, but unless you're apart of *this* church, you're not saved." "Believing in Jesus is good, but unless you're baptized, you're not saved." *It could any # of things. & People may be sincere (even as these "certain men" were), but they can be sincerely wrong! Because if at the end of the day what I believe leads me to the conclusion that the cross of J.C. isn't quite enough, that I need to "do" something (anything) to "seal the deal" than what I believe is destructive & wrong... Because it leads me to trust in the efforts of my flesh rather than the work of the cross...*

Now; for Paul & Barnabas, it was telling them that they'd spent the last 2 yrs of their life in a worthless endeavor, because none of those people were truly saved! How do you think they're going to respond to that? (Vs 2)

² *The New King James Version*. (1982). (Ro 10:4). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

³ *The New King James Version*. (1982). (Ac 13:39). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Vs 2-4

I love the gracious way in which Luke reports the situation, don't you? "Therefore, when Paul & Barnabas had *no small dissension & dispute w/them...*" You know what that means? It means it was full on superheated, radically tense fight (is what it was)!

Paul wasn't having it (& neither was Barnabas for that matter), not even for a minute! Again, because at the core is, "What do I need to do to be saved?"

So they decided, "You know what, you're coming down here from Jerusalem, why don't we just go to Jerusalem & settle this once & for all." & It wasn't that they were being subjected to some kind of denominational hierarchy. It was that these guys were saying one thing (being from Jerusalem) & Paul was saying, "No way". So lest there be any hearsay or confusion, they just air the matter out before the other apostles & then it's clear. (No, "he said, she said" kind of stuff).

Btw, Luke is also wanting us to know that most Christians rejoiced at the work of God among the Gentiles. These guys & some others not so much, but the churches in Phoenicia & Samaria were stoked to hear about it. You know, some people bring joy wherever they go... Others bring joy *whenever* they go!

Don't be laying weird trips on people. Just rejoice & spread the joy that your sins are forgiven in Christ, the price has been paid, the work is complete, now go love God w/all that you are...

Vs 5

Ok. Couple of things here. Many times when we think of Pharisees (in the bible) we think of the bad guys who were constantly running interference w/Jesus (& in that context that would be accurate). But let's remember that the Pharisees were strict, orthodox, bible believing individuals. **They believed in miracles, they believed in angels, they believed in the resurrection...** So, what we discover is that *after* Jesus rose from the dead, *many* Pharisees came to believe in Jesus as the Messiah (such as we're reading here).

As far as that's concerned, Paul himself was a Pharisee (you can read his take on righteousness by the law in Phil 3.)

But as a general rule, Pharisees placed an exceedingly high priority on keeping every detail of the law. Which is what is coming out here. The problem is that if you insist on keeping the "circumcision aspect" of the law. You have to insist on keeping *every* aspect of the law. You can't pick & choose.

Again, to the Galatians Paul wrote, *“Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law.”*⁴ The law isn’t a buffet of spiritual options or suggestions. You take it all, or not at all... (Including sacrificial elements, feast days, festivals, every ritual, dietary elements... all of it).

Ladies and Gentlemen: this falls 2 ways. In Lystra, Paul essentially said, “You can’t just *add* Jesus to your pantheon of gods. You have to turn from these *worthless* things to the *Living God*.” Someone is a real reprobate, they’ve got to turn from that sin, & trust in Jesus. That’s easy to see. On the other hand you have someone who’s super religious, they don’t smoke, don’t chew, don’t run w/those who do, they go to church every Sunday & they think that because they were baptized & are a part of the church they’re right w/God. Listen, you can’t just add Jesus to your religion!! “Jesus helps me justify myself. I do all I can & Jesus takes it from there!” No, no, 1,000xs NO! You’ve just as equally got to turn from your *religion* & trust in the risen Christ!

Anytime you add anything to the gospel, you no longer have the gospel! You have religion. Listen, as much as we can make a biblical case for baptism, going to church, tithing, receiving communion... They’re all good, they’re all appropriate, none of them save you! When you stand before God, His question won’t be, “Did you read your bible everyday?” (As much as we should). It will be, “What did you do w/My Son J.C.?” You’ve either trusted in Him completely, or you have not... That’s the end of it!

Vs 6-11

Here’s what we need to know. Are Christians made right w/God through faith alone? Or is a combination of faith & obedience to the law necessary to be saved? Is the work of Jesus enough, or is it not?

“And when there had been much dispute...” Family, this was heated! & When they’d debated back & forth for awhile; Peter finally stood up & said, “Guys, listen.” & He recounted the events of Acts Ch 10 when God received Cornelius (A Roman Centurion) & his family & friends even though he’d never been circumcised, through the means (not of the law) of faith. They *believed* in Jesus & it became evident that God honored that (& accepted them fully/completely) by the fact that He gave them the Holy Spirit no different than He did the Jews on the Day of Pentecost.

⁴ *The New King James Version*. (1982). (Ga 5:2-3). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

In other words, what made the Gentiles “clean” in the sight of God, wasn’t submission to the law of Moses, the ritual of circumcision, or any of that. It was faith in the Person/work of J.C. (His death/resurrection) being the payment for our sin!

Peter says, “They heard the word of the gospel & believed.” So God (notice) “who knows the heart, *acknowledged* them (bore witness to their righteousness in His sight) by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us...” The idea is that God’s not going to give His Holy Spirit to an unsaved, unclean individual. Yet they didn’t receive the Spirit through keeping the law, but by believing the message of the gospel.

Remember Peter’s message to them? *“To Him [Jesus] all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins.”*⁵ & That’s exactly what happened. God purified their hearts, not through circumcision, ceremony or any work of their own, but by faith.

& Guess what, you can’t improve upon that. You can’t be purified by faith but then “super purified” through baptism, or reading your bible, or prayer, or any work of your own. You are either right in the sight of God, or you’re not. Believe on the Lord J.C. & you will be saved! (Isn’t that glorious?) ☺

Vs 10

This is Peter’s description of the law. It wasn’t a blessing, it was a burden. Why? Because we can’t keep it! Peter’s getting real w/them! Even at the birth of the law at Mt Sinai, they broke it by worshiping the golden calf before Moses ever even returned w/the tablets! *They were constantly falling into idolatry (historically), they broke the law concerning the Sabbath, intermarrying w/pagan people... From the beginning to the end, the law didn’t bring justification to Israel, it brought condemnation (again, not because the law isn’t righteous, but because we aren’t righteous.)*

But they were romanticizing the law, look back through the eyes of nostalgia, not reality. The reality was that *they* couldn’t keep it, therefore it was wrong for them to impose it upon anyone else as if *they* should keep it.

& We love Vs 11. Peter says, “& You better be grateful that we can be saved (by faith) just like them...” Wow. “They’re not hung up on law, they got it right. We need to be unhinged from it because we’re going to be saved just like them...”

⁵ *The New King James Version*. (1982). [Ac 10:43]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

So in this “hearing”, Peter presents Exhibit A, “The Revelation”. God gave the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles no different than He did the Jews though they had no relationship whatsoever to the law, He purified their hearts by faith.

Allow me to underscore it one more time... “...*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.*”⁶

Vs 12

What a beautiful thing. Even though there had been much dispute, these were men of honorable hearts. They were willing to hold silent, listen, & be persuaded if they were wrong. They were teachable. Able to have passionate feelings toward their position, but open to the word of God & the teaching of the Holy Spirit.

Stubbornness can be good, if you’re resolved in the right direction. Pride (on the other hand) is something altogether different.

Peter presented the past (Exhibit A, God’s Revelation). Paul & Barnabas speak of the present (Exhibit B, God’s Confirmation, signs & wonders affirming His approval of the message they were bringing).

Vs 13-21

James brings the final word, Exhibit C, God’s Illumination/Validation through the word of God. Peter pointed to the past, Paul/Barnabas to the present, James focused on the future going forward.

Again I point out, they became silent, they were willing to be persuaded. What are we to do when 2 or more sincere believers disagree about a matter? Sit down & see what the word has to say. God’s word is the final authority. It’s a lamp unto our feet, a light unto our path. As Paul told Timothy, “*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.*”⁷ These guys came together to look to the word for direction.

& Essentially James showed them that the word of God agrees w/what was taking place. That God has always had it in His heart to call out a people for His name from the Gentiles.

⁶ *The New King James Version*. (1982). [Ga 2:16]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

⁷ *The New King James Version*. (1982). [2 Ti 3:16-17]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

God said that He would do it, why then are we acting shocked that He's doing it? So what's the conclusion of it all? Don't trouble people who are turning from their sin & trusting in J.C. "But..."

Vs 20-21

What's going on w/these things? We'll save our thoughts for the conclusion of the Ch next time. * Suffice it to say for now that just because we're not to be placed under the law of Moses, that doesn't mean there's no practical instruction or wisdom that we shouldn't adhere to. Ultimately though we're not bound under the law of Moses, we are *all* bound under the law of love.

So love the Lord your God w/all your heart, w/all your soul, w/all your strength & all your mind. & Love your neighbor as yourself & you will do well. Amen?

Prayer Points:

God thank You for setting the record straight once again today. That by grace we have been saved, through faith. That You have a wonderful way of purifying our hearts by the cleansing flow of the blood of J.C. through faith. Forgive us when we get caught up in religious effort & lose sight of the sufficiency of the cross. Thank You for Your word, for Your love & for Your mercy...

This is the word of God's grace, that whoever believes in Jesus will receive the remission, the forgiveness of sin. Of course I can't turn *to* Jesus w/out turning *from* my sin. That's why repentance & belief are really 2 sides of the same coin. There's nothing you can do; just believe in what God has done *for* you in the Person of J.C.