

The Acts of the Apostles

Sermon Number: 23

Acts 15:1 – 21

November 6, 2011

No Distinction

My title for this message is “**No Distinction**” and my desire is to show you from the word of God that in the matter of justification God did not make His sovereign choice in the election of grace based on anyone’s ethnicity, or as Mr. Charles Alexander so aptly said, “God never saved anyone based on their birth certificate.”

From time to time I think it is necessary to point out that when I explain some of the most basic matters of doctrine [teaching] that I do not mean to insult anyone’s intelligence. Someone may say, “Oh, get on with it Jim, everybody knows that.”

In any given audience there may be a new Christian who is just beginning to read and study the Bible; there may be some young people who will hear something for the first time. And there may be someone who has heard a truth many times but it has never registered in their thinking.

Let me give you an example.

One Wednesday night I explained that when Jesus said to the Pharisees:

“Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.”

John 8:56 ESV

Jesus was referring to the time when Abraham was about to offer his son Isaac and God stopped him and there was a ram caught in the thicket that would serve as the sacrifice in the place of Isaac. Abraham saw the truth of Substitution.

Well, this dear lady said, “That’s the first time I ever heard that.” My point is that I know for a fact that she had heard that explained by me in a previous study, but she had never really “heard” it.

So indulge me and consider those who are not as well-instructed as you are.

Now the word “justified.”

To be justified is to be declared “not guilty” by an act of our sovereign God.

Most of the time I will use “saved” to mean “justified.”

“Saved” can be used in three senses.

- 1) I have been saved i.e. Justified; a one-time act of God.
- 2) I am being saved. The on-going process of personal sanctification; becoming more holy each day until I am;
- 3) finally saved in glorification.

The word “saved” in our text today has to do with the act of justification.

If you can understand what this passage of Scripture teaches you will know more about the grace of God; it will instruct your soteriology [the doctrine of salvation]; it will instruct your eschatology [the doctrine of last things]; and you will see the necessity of preaching the Gospel to every creature.

In our text we have the Judaizers that followed Paul from place to place who insisted that a Gentile [a non-Jew] must become a Jewish proselyte before God would save them. They wrongfully believed that as Jews they were exempt from the wrath of God and that God would only save a Jew.

A great many well-meaning Christians in our day, are following the same teaching of the Jewish rabbis, and believe that God justified the Jews in the days of the Old Testament because they were His “chosen people,” and that God will yet save a vast number of Jews in a future millennium because they are Jews.

God in His sovereign mercy may save many Jews, but it will not be based on any OT prophecy. If God saves [justifies] anyone it will be by grace through faith alone in the righteousness of Jesus Christ

So the truly great Apostle Paul had to unlearn his Jewish prejudice that he had learned as Saul the Pharisee, and that he and Peter and James came to understand that God saves [justifies] individuals regardless of their ethnicity or their proselytism into Judaism.

Every case of justification is an act of God.

And you, my fellow sinner, are not in control of that act of God’s grace.

God justifies the ungodly. [Romans 4:5]

Please follow me in your Bible as I read Acts 14:24 to 15:21 and notice how Luke, the writer, refers to the Gentiles.

24 Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. **25** And when they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia, **26** and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled. **27** And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. **28** And they remained no little time with the disciples.

15 But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." **2** And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. **3** So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers.

4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. **5** But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses."

6 The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. **7** And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. **8** And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, **9** and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. **10** Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? **11** But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

12 And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. **13** After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brothers, listen to me. **14** Simeon* has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. **15** And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written,

16 "After this I will return,
and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen;
I will rebuild its ruins,
and I will restore it,
17 that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord,
and all the Gentiles who are called by my name,
says the Lord, who makes these things **18** known from of old."

19 Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, **20** but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. **21** For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues."

* 15:14 Simeon is Hebrew and Simon is Greek for Peter. [Cf. Matthew 4:18]

The Issue

Acts 15:1-5

The issue that troubled the early church was would God justify anyone who was not a Jew. The Judaizers insisted that it was necessary in the case of males that they be circumcised according to the Law of Moses. And until Paul was instructed by divine revelation from the Holy Spirit he would have agreed with the Judaizers.

The church at Antioch in Pisidia had sent out Paul and Barnabus as missionaries. Everywhere they went they formed a group of believers – a local church – that included Jews and Gentiles. After two years the missionaries returned to Antioch to report on how God was working among the Gentiles [14:27].

In this region of Asia Minor the population was mostly Gentiles. The Gospel was being preached and many Gentiles were being saved. The question of circumcision was not an issue and is not mentioned in the preceding chapters of Acts, 11-14.

But “false brethren” [Cf. Galatians 2:4] came down from Judea and insisted that Gentiles could not be saved without becoming proselytes to Judaism; they must be circumcised according to the Law of Moses!

Paul and Barnabus had spent two years witnessing first hand how God was saving the Gentiles and here they stand up to the Judaizers in a heated dispute. The issue is the very essence of the Gospel. Is justification by grace through faith alone, or must there be added some component of human merit?

If you think this issue, **justification by grace through faith alone**, was settled in the First Century just go visit a couple of local church about a mile from this building. One will preach that you must be baptized in order to be saved and the other will preach that justification depends on your “free-will” decision. In both cases they preach that a matter of human merit is the cause of your being saved.

Circumcision, or baptism, or decisionism is still **legalism!**

In all cases; circumcision, or baptism, or decisionism, as being necessary in order to be saved, is a denial of the Gospel and the sufficiency of the Person and work of Jesus Christ.

Since the legalistic Judaizers said they were representatives of the church in Jerusalem it was necessary that this “mother church” be a part of this crucial debate. Paul and Barnabus and some of the others were appointed by the church in Antioch to go to Jerusalem to deal with this question of circumcision.

Along the way to Jerusalem they visited churches in Phoenicia and Samaria and described in detail how the Gentiles were being saved and these churches rejoiced to hear about Gentiles coming to faith in Jesus. These churches had not been troubled by the Judaizers and were content to believe the Gospel as it is in Christ.

When Paul and Barnabus arrive in Jerusalem they give the same report.

But at Jerusalem there were false brethren who were former Pharisees and being legalistic in their thinking they could not give up the Law of Moses. Paul had to learn the essence of the Gospel, himself a Pharisee, and it must be very hard to throw off a lifetime of religious rules.

No, it isn't hard it is impossible without the grace of God.

We are all like Brother Gables says about himself, that he is a “recovering Pharisee.” It surely takes grace to put your entire trust in Jesus and in Him alone!

Subject: A Happily Recovering Pharisee!

We tend to assume that in order for God to approve of us—*really* approve of us—we need to qualify. And at that moment, the gospel has shifted out of the burning fireplace of our heart and into the cold and dusty attic of self-contribution.

A Christian is not someone who has been enrolled in the moral hall of fame. A Christian is a happily recovering Pharisee.—Dane Ortlund, *Defiant Grace*

The Council at Jerusalem

Acts 15:6

This council [c – o – u – n – c – i – l] was a one-time meeting called for a specific purpose. It is not a model for a continuing presbytery to decide spiritual matters for a group of local churches.

How important is one word? The great John Gill confused “counsel” which means “wisdom” with “council” which means a conference and out of that confusion we have the error of eternal justification. If you believe that souls are justified in eternity then there is no need to preach the Gospel to the lost.

“The apostles and elders were gathered together to consider this matter.”

The apostles were there in Jerusalem to submit to Christ and to the Holy Spirit for discernment. The elders were there to represent the various local churches.

The outcome of this meeting would determine the future of the church.

Again, the issue to be decided is whether a Gentile must become a Jewish proselyte and submit to circumcision in order to become a Christian or be saved.

This was a watershed moment for the young church. If the Judaizers had been successful, Christianity would have collapsed into just another Jewish sect. They would have continued making up rules and gone to hell for their trouble.

The Debate Acts 15:7-11

There was a discussion of all the viewpoints. The Greek indicates that the debate involved, “not a little discord and questioning.”

Peter stood up and said to them, “Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.” The ESV says “in the early days....”

I especially love the KJV translation of “a good while ago ...”

See the irony in the words of Peter: “a good while ago ...”

According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, ... Eph 1:4

That is surely “a good while ago.”

But to be chosen is not to be justified.

As Brother E. W. Johnson said, “Justification waits on faith.”

Peter reminds the church what they already knew; that God originated the outreach of the gospel to the Gentiles. Go back to Acts 10 and read about Cornelius and Peter’s vision and God’s command for Peter to “kill and eat!”

Acts 10:9-16

⁹The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. ¹⁰And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance ¹¹and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. ¹²In it were all kinds of animals and

reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³ And there came a voice to him: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." ¹⁴ But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." ¹⁵ And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has made clean, do not call common." ¹⁶ This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven. ESV

Peter's vision was not about dietary rules; it was the very essence of the Gospel.

God makes no distinction between Jews and non-Jews in the matter of justification; He never did and He never will! Vs. 9

Peter says, by imposing the Law of Moses on the Gentiles you show your ignorance of your own past.

¹⁰ Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?

If lifelong Jews have found the Law to be an impossible burden, how can you expect the Gentiles to bear it?

¹¹ But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

This is the very first verse that I have underlined and highlighted in my new Bible.

Notice the most remarkable way that Peter turns this issue completely around.

It is not that Gentiles must be saved like the Jews are saved; but the Jews must be saved like the Gentiles! Dear ones there is not a plan for the Jews and a plan for the Gentiles. There is one God, and one way to be saved.

And how is that salvation accomplished?

Through the grace of the Lord Jesus!

Confirmation

Acts 15:12

After this masterful putdown of the Judaizers, the assembly fell silent.

Barnabus and Paul confirm the work of the Holy Spirit among the Gentiles.

¹² And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

The Conclusion

Acts 15:13

¹³ After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brothers, listen to me...."

After all of the discussion and arguments, James, the highly respected leader of the Jerusalem church, summarizes what has been discussed and issues a decision. This decision is based on the OT Scriptures and is binding on the church.

The Final Word

Acts 15:14-18

As I said, this passage [15:11] will instruct your soteriology; God saves individuals by grace through faith alone. Now let the Word of God instruct your eschatology.

James clearly understands the importance of this decision and is convinced that the council had reached the correct conclusion based on two things.

1) ¹⁴ Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name.

The Gentiles have always been included in God's purpose in election and if anyone makes a distinction between a people in the matter of justification they are simply denying God's Word.

2) James, a New Testament, apostle, inspired by the Holy Spirit, interprets the Old Testament prophets. Note carefully that while James specifically quotes Amos he says that all the prophets agree. Because:

For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy. Rev 19:10

15 And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written,

16 "After this I will return,
and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen;
I will rebuild its ruins,
and I will restore it,

17 that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord,
and all the Gentiles who are called by my name,
says the Lord, who makes these things 18 known from of old.'

The words "tent," "tabernacle," and "booth" all mean the same thing, a temporary dwelling place.

James quotes Amos 9:11-12

11 "In that day I will raise up
the booth of David that is fallen
and repair its breaches,
and raise up its ruins
and rebuild it as in the days of old,
12 that they may possess the remnant of Edom
and all the nations who are called by my name,"
declares the LORD who does this.

But what is this business of the "tent of David" and all the "Gentiles who are called by My name." What is the "booth of David?" David's "tent" is not a physical tent.

David's tent is spiritually the people of God that include, "Gentiles who are called by My name".

* * *

Arthur Pink writes:

"In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof; and I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old: That they may possess the remnant of Edom, and of all the heathen, which are called by My name, saith the LORD that doeth this" (Amos 9:11, 12). We are not left to guess at the meaning of this prophecy, for its terms are infallibly explained to us in the New Testament. After Peter had related to the church at Jerusalem how that the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon the household of Cornelius, James affirmed, "Simon hath declared how God at the first did visit *the Gentiles*, to take out of them a people for His name. *And to this agree* the words of the prophets; as it is written, After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom My name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things" (Acts 15:14-17).

“David’s tabernacle was to be rebuilt, and his kingdom restored by the Messiah, but in a *spiritual* way, for the ‘tabernacle of David’ designs the spiritual kingdom or church of Christ . . . ‘And I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up,’ which has been done by breaking down the middle wall of partition between Jew and Gentile, and letting in the latter into the Gospel church with the former. . . .’ That the residue of men might seek after the Lord,’ the Builder and Proprietor of this tabernacle, and who dwells in it; that is, attend His worship, pray unto Him, and seek unto Him for life and salvation. In Amos those are called ‘the remnant of Edom,’ and design the remnant according to the election of grace among the Gentiles-the Jews generally call all other nations, and especially the Roman Empire, Edom” (John Gill).

Now listen carefully. If you did not have the NT to interpret the prophet Amos you could only conclude that Amos is prophesying about the restoration of national Israel. And that may well be what Amos thought it meant.

But when James under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit interprets Amos as referring to the Gentiles being in the Church along with the Jews then that is what it means. It does not matter what you think it means; if you disagree with the inspired apostle you are wrong!

It is most likely that James understood Amos to mean the restoration of national Israel UNTIL the Holy Spirit spoke through him. It is also important to see that James does not try to explain what Amos thought it meant because now that does not matter at all. But that principle is what many of the popular preachers insist upon.

How can Jews and Gentiles worship and Fellowship Together? Acts 15:19-21

19 Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, **20** but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. **21** For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues."

James, now with a clear understanding of the OT Scripture, summarizes the decision of the Jerusalem Council.

- 1) The Jewish leaders of the church should not make it difficult for Gentiles to be saved.
- 2) Gentile believers should be considerate of their Jewish brethren in the matter of eating certain things that while indifferent in and of themselves, would offend the Jews' conscience. Meat offered to idols and things strangled [unbled] were especially odious to the Jews.
- 3) The Gentiles should abstain from sexual immorality. It is not that the Jews were chaste; it was that the Jews had the Word of God and the Gentiles were just learning what the Scriptures teach about sexual activity. The Jews heard the words of Moses every Sabbath in the synagogues.

In conclusion, we have presented God's way of saving sinners; by grace through faith alone in the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

And we must see that God saves individuals apart from any distinction in the person.

As we observe the Lord's Supper we have the blessing to remember Jesus Christ, who alone is the Savior of sinners and we wait for His soon return at the end of this present age.

Rev 22:20-21

20 He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen.

Come, Lord Jesus!

21 The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all. Amen.