

Sermon Title: What Is Necessary For Salvation?
Scripture Text: Acts 15:1-5 (Acts #34)

Speaker: Jim Harris
Date: 2-11-24

Now today, we get to return to the Book of Acts. Chapters-wise, we have reached the halfway point; there are 28 chapters in Acts, and we have finished the first 14. And we come to something that is—well, *every* chapter of the Bible is unique, but this one has something, how do you say, *extra* unique. If you are "unique," you are one of a kind.

In the early centuries of the church, there were several occasions when theologians, authors, pastors from far and wide gathered together to study and discuss and debate major theological issues. Primarily, those early councils of the church were regarding the nature of Jesus Christ and His salvific work.

There were seven such councils in the first seven centuries that most church historians would recognize as being the most significant ones. There were other ones and there were lesser ones, but they make for interesting—and I have to admit, sometimes tedious—reading, but they help you understand how "the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints"—as Jude describes it (Jude 3)—was put to the test, studied, explained, and *summarized*, if you will, so that it would be understood within the universal church. That is where we came up with these marvelous, precise definitions of the humanity of Christ, the deity of Christ, the nature of the Trinity, the canon of the Bible—which books had come to be recognized as the ones that God had given.

And it is very important to recognize that *none* of those councils *ever* "made up" a doctrine; they did not *invent* anything. They hammered out the best ways to gather together *all* that the Bible says on those subjects, summarize it, and explain it (Is. 8:20). And those councils were convened because someone came along propagating *errant* doctrine (see Jer. 14:14; Acts 20:29-30; 2 Cor. 11:13-15; Titus 1:10; 2 Jn. 7); and it needed to be addressed, and it needed to be corrected (1 Tim. 1:3).

Starting today, we are going to study the *first* such gathering—the *only* one that happened before the close of the New Testament, so this is the only one that we have a truly inspired summary of. But this one took place less than 20 years after Jesus ascended, because some people came along with an aberration that needed to be addressed, and it was addressed in what came to be known as "The Jerusalem Council."

There is a background here, and I think you have already forgiven me for giving you an *entire chapter* of Acts last week. I have gotten over that, too—and it is not going to happen again, at least not for the next few weeks. Today, *five* verses is all that we are going to get, because you need to know the setting of this to understand what's going on.

You know that as Jesus promised, once the Holy Spirit was sent to indwell all believers—that is recorded in Acts Chapter 2—the Gospel began to spread dramatically, and it began in Jerusalem; and before long, there were over 10,000 Christians in and around Jerusalem among the Jews.

And soon, the Gospel—just as Jesus promised—made a leap over the firebreak to the Samaritans; and then not long after that, we have the record of the first *Gentile* convert. "Gentile"—one who was not born as a Jew. That was a man from Ethiopia. And then in Chapter 10 of Acts, we have the *major* jump of the *biggest* firebreak when God brought

Sermon Title: What Is Necessary For Salvation?
Scripture Text: Acts 15:1-5 (Acts #34)

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Date: 2-11-24

the first group of Gentiles to faith in Christ. There had been that individual from Ethiopia, but then Peter was the key man at the house of Cornelius. You remember that: He had been on the rooftop in Joppa; he had the vision about clean and unclean animals and foods; and then he preached the Gospel, and a group of Gentiles came to Christ.

And then, if you will fast-forward to Chapter 13 of Acts: That is where we read about the Gentile church—there were Jews there, too, but the predominantly Gentile church in the city of Antioch of Syria—they launched the Apostle Paul and Barnabas on what was referred to as the First Missionary Journey of Paul. It was the first of three such trips which we have recorded for us in the Book of Acts. There were actually *four* journeys of Paul, if you want to include the trip when he went to Rome as a prisoner.

Paul and Barnabas took off on this trip. They took "Barnabas's cousin Mark" (Col. 4:10)—also called "John Mark" (Acts 12:12, 25)—with them. There were others on the team, but their names are not given. We know that they left Antioch and went to the nearest seaport, which is called "Seleucia"; and then from there, across a little narrow part of the Mediterranean Sea to the island of "Cyprus." That was a great place to start because Barnabas was a Cypriot—that is where he was from (Acts 4:36); he was one of the Hellenized Jews from Cyprus.

They preached their way from east to west through Cyprus. Many were saved. Churches were planted. When they got to the city of "Paphos," on the far west end of Cyprus, they then left from there and sailed across a little larger corner of the Mediterranean Sea and landed at the port of "Attalia."

Then they went to the nearest big city, which was called "Perga." The Gospel continued to take root. There was some significant excitement in Perga when they were dealing with "a Jewish false prophet whose name was Bar-Jesus" (Acts 13:6). And as Paul and Barnabas and their other companions then continued with the plan, they were going to go from Perga inland—north on the map—up into the regions of "Pamphylia" and "Galatia."

But as they began to leave Perga, John Mark *abandoned* the enterprise, and he turned back and headed back, not just to Antioch—he went back to Jerusalem. Save *that* little tidbit, because that will become *very* important when we get to the end of Chapter 15.

Through Chapters 13 and 14, we have seen how they preached the Gospel and planted churches in and around Perga, another city called "Antioch"—Antioch of Pisidia—"Iconium," "Lystra," and "Derbe."

Then they retraced their steps, visited all the people who had come to Christ along the way, got back to the seaport of Attalia; and from there, they sailed back to Antioch. All in all, about a year and a half transpired for that journey.

They got back to Antioch. They reported there all that God had done, and how now the Gentiles had come to faith in significant numbers. And they were hanging out with the disciples there. It says, literally, "they spent *not a little time* with the disciples" (14:28).

Sermon Title: What Is Necessary For Salvation?
Scripture Text: Acts 15:1-5 (Acts #34)

Speaker: Jim Harris
Date: 2-11-24

And that brings us to Chapter 15. Beyond the chronology of the ministry of Paul and Barnabas, I want to take a few minutes today to understand the background of this chapter so we can understand who says what, why they say it, and why it is so important.

That evangelistic church-planting journey was a *fantastic* success! Many were saved, new churches were launched in a number of places, and *all* of those churches were comprised of Jews and Gentiles *together* "in Christ" (Gal. 3:28). It is hard to help you grasp *just how big of a deal that was!* Jews and Gentiles, who had *nothing* to do with each other (Lk. 9:52-53; Jn. 4:9), now *united* in Christ (see Is. 49:6; Eph. 2:11-22; 3:6; Col. 3:11).

Now, as you recall, Paul and Barnabas joyfully returned to Antioch; they reported there; they "spent not a little time" there. So it was after some time—the journey had taken place, they had come back, they had reported, they spent "not a little time" there; and then this problem rose to the surface.

There was this sweet fellowship going on, there was this rejoicing in the church in Antioch. And I personally suspect Paul was probably already talking about returning to visit the churches that had been planted, and then taking the Gospel even farther into Gentile territory—that's the way his plan was all along, and we will see that unfold in coming chapters of Acts.

But I want you to look with me today at just the beginning of our chapter. The *crucial issue* is: What Is Necessary For Salvation? What do you need to know, what do you need to do, what do you need to believe to be saved?

So, five verses in Acts 15:

Verse 1: Problem Erupts
Verse 2: Debate Begins
Verse 3: Call For Backup
Verse 4: Report Given
Verse 5: Dissent Repeated

We are just going to get a running start at this today; and then, Lord willing, next time we visit Acts, we will be looking at what the actual discussions of the Council were all about.

But, the Problem Erupted.

How long after they got back? Well, I told you: "not a little time." Weeks, months—it was a little while, but then we read this in Acts 15:1—"Some men came down from Judea..." Now, if you are really clever looking at maps, you are saying, "What do you mean, 'came *down* from Judea'? Antioch is almost straight *up* on the map from Judea!" But they are speaking *topographically*. Jerusalem was on a plateau; *everything* was "down" from Jerusalem. So, "Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.' " (NASB-1995—and throughout, unless otherwise noted)

Sermon Title: What Is Necessary For Salvation?
Scripture Text: Acts 15:1-5 (Acts #34)

Speaker: Jim Harris
Date: 2-11-24

Now, that verse tells you a little more than you might think at first glance. It was about 300 miles from Jerusalem to Antioch. It's not as if these guys just decided to stop off at the church on their way to the grocery store! It took a lot of planning and effort to go that far. And it was a *group* that came. It would be like us saying, "You know, we have heard about a problem of a church in Pocatello, so we are all going to get together and we are going to walk over there and talk to them." That's a perspective for you.

It is clear that they came for a specific purpose of "teaching the brethren." That is also something that you don't just *happen* to do in passing. These men who came from Jerusalem to Antioch believed that something of *tremendous* importance *needed* to be confronted: An *error* needed to be straightened out; a wrong needed to be righted; an error needed to be dealt with, with the truth—so they thought. Those who came to Antioch—they did not beat around the bush; they came right out and, at every opportunity when they could gain a hearing, they were in essence saying that Paul and Barnabas had taken the *wrong* trip with the *wrong* message to the *wrong* people, and done the *wrong* thing. They said nothing less than that: that Paul and Barnabas had *misrepresented the Gospel* when they had gone to the Gentiles. It's right there: "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, *you cannot be saved.*" That was their message.

Now, remember: Many of the earliest Gentiles who came to Christ were the ones called the "God-fearers" (e.g., Acts 10:22; 17:4, 17). They were Gentiles who had not gone through the full proselyte process to become converts to Judaism; they had not been circumcised yet, but they had abandoned their idolatry and their immorality from their former lives, and they had begun to worship the one true God, Yahweh, and they hung around the synagogue. But the message of these guys is: *None of them can possibly be saved* because they have not gone all the way through the proselyte process before believing in Jesus.

Now, *that* is the essence of why these false teachers have come to be called "Judaizers." They said you have to become a Jew in order to be a Christian, and there is *no other way*. The word "Judaizer" I don't think is used in the Bible, but it has been coined appropriately. They claimed that Jesus was the Messiah—that's good. They claimed that He is the only Savior—that's good. But they *added* the belief that you could not belong to Him as Lord and Savior *unless* you first "became a Jew" (Est. 8:17). It was *odious* to these guys to think that Gentiles could just *breeze* into eternal life without *first* bringing sacrifices to the priests, without going through all the rituals that the Pharisees had come up with (e.g., Mk. 7:3-13). So, their message was: Salvation by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ, *plus* keeping the Law of Moses.

You see, this first theological attack on the Gospel was almost exactly the *opposite* of most of the attacks on the Gospel today. The Gospel is very clear: "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures...He was buried...He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3-4). "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 2:38). You come to Him, you turn to Him, you put your faith in Him, you make a public declaration of your faith—it's actually pretty straightforward (e.g., Acts 8:12; 18:8).

Sermon Title: What Is Necessary For Salvation?
Scripture Text: Acts 15:1-5 (Acts #34)

Speaker: Jim Harris
Date: 2-11-24

But, *nowadays*, it's: "Well, are you kinda depressed? Are you having trouble? Do you have too much month left at the end of the paycheck? Well, come put your faith in Jesus—He's a really nice guy; 'He gets us'—and everything will be better for you."

That is not the Gospel! The Gospel is: You are "alienated" from God because of your *sin* (Col. 1:21; cf. Is. 59:2), and *you cannot fix that* (Prov. 20:9; Jer. 13:23), so He "sent His Son" to make the sacrifice necessary so that you can come to Him (1 Jn. 4:10).

So, in *those days*, they were not trying to make the Gospel *easier*; the Judaizers were trying to make it *infinitely* harder (Matt. 23:4; Acts 15:10; Col. 2:20-23).

Now, remember way back—some of you are old enough that I don't think you will be too surprised by this: It was two weeks ago that I shared with you, in the context of things that are going wonky in our society, some illustrations about how the meaning of words is important—you know, like people calling it "book bans" when you don't want certain pornographic literature to be in your children's school library. There is no such thing as a "book ban" going on today! A "book ban" is when it is illegal to publish and distribute and read a book. There is no such thing as a "book ban"! We are talking about curating the books that are going to be on the reading list in your kids' library. *But*, if you *call* it a "book ban"—even though it is *not* a "book ban"—you can make a whole lot more political hay! So, let's just twist words a little bit.

I made fun of an acronym: "PZEV"—remember that one?—which is on the back of some cars; it stands for "Partial Zero Emissions Vehicle." I didn't really explain all of this to you, but in order to qualify to have that label on your car, the emissions system of the vehicle has to be *very* sophisticated: It has to be such that it produces *no evaporative emissions*. "Evaporative emissions" are emissions that evaporate, as opposed to the emissions from combustion—the particulates there.

Now, it is not a *bad* thing to have no evaporative emission. *That's good!* I grew up in the greater Los Angeles area in the days of photochemical smog; they would make it in downtown LA, and then as it drifted east over toward where I went to school, it would get worse and worse as the sun shone on it. I would come back from cross country practice sometimes and just throw myself on my bed flat on my back to wheeze for a half hour until I could get my breath. If you ran too far in those things, you had to stop and chew every once in a while, after you inhaled.

It is a *good thing* not to have pollution. What is a *bad* thing is to *twist words!* You know, a "PZEV" car still produces emissions; it just doesn't produce *one class* of emissions, but it *does* produce emissions. So, why not be accurate? Instead of a "PZEV," why not call it a "MEV"—a "Minimal Emissions Vehicle"; or a "REV"—that would work on a car: a "Reduced Emissions Vehicle." *But it is not "zero"!* "Zero" is *quite a precise word!* I know *nothing* about it, but it is a very precision-word: "zero"—"nothing"!

How thin do you slice a "zero" to make it a "*partial zero*"? You see, you cannot take words, *twist* them into nonsense, and show how smart you are! It doesn't work that way!

Sermon Title: What Is Necessary For Salvation?
Scripture Text: Acts 15:1-5 (Acts #34)

Speaker: Jim Harris
Date: 2-11-24

There is no such thing as "partial zero," but "PZEV" scores points with people who want to reduce pollution and show how *conscientious* they are about our world and about the environment.

I used that illustration, and some others, to point out how you can make falsehood sound believable, just by twisting words. And that stuff is *rampant* in our world, but you know what? It is *exactly* what the Judaizers did in the first century!

These men who came to Antioch—and they are soon going to say the same thing in Jerusalem, before we leave out passage today—they were *twisting* the meaning of words. They said Jesus was the Savior—right and good. They said you could be saved by God's grace—right and good—by believing in Jesus. But when *they* said "believe in Jesus," they *added* something to the definition of what it means to believe. *They* said salvation came by believing in Jesus, *plus—or, including*, I should say, maybe more than "plus"—*including* keeping the Law of Moses and all the rituals prescribed by the Pharisees.

And by the way: We are going to learn that the ones who came there and *said* that they came "from James" (Gal. 2:12)—he was the de facto leader of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 12:17; 21:18; Gal. 2:9, 12), Jesus' half-brother "James" (Matt. 13:55; Gal. 1:19)—they said they came "from James" and that they came from the church in Jerusalem; they really didn't. As we get into our chapter a little bit further—down to Verses 23 and 24, after the decision has been rendered, it says "they sent this letter by them," and they said: "The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings. Since we have heard that some of our number *to whom we gave no instruction* have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls..." So, it was people who hung around with the Christians, twisted the words, and tried to lead people astray (cf. Acts 20:29-30).

Salvation is—salvation always *has* been—by "grace" alone (Rom. 3:24), through "faith" alone (Rom. 4:5, 16), in Christ alone (Jn. 14:6; Acts 4:12), as defined by Scripture alone (2 Tim. 3:15). Paul eventually wrote it down. He would have let with this in the Jerusalem Council, if only he had written it yet: Ephesians 2:8-9—"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast."

That's where we get those famous "Five Solas"—or, the "Five Onlys"—of the Reformation: By grace *alone*, through faith *alone*, in Christ *alone*, on the authority of Scripture *alone*, [to the glory of God *alone*].

Well, these guys who came in to undermine the message that had been taken to those Gentiles said, "Hey, you have to *believe*—but you have to know what we mean by 'believe'! You have to *include* keeping everything of the *Old Covenant* when you celebrate the *New Covenant*!" They did not take it as a *New Covenant*; they took it as an *expanded Old Covenant*—so, Christ *plus* keeping the Law.

I think you already know what the decision of the Council is going to be. If you don't, just keep coming; we will get there, Lord willing, in the next few Sundays.

Sermon Title: What Is Necessary For Salvation?
Scripture Text: Acts 15:1-5 (Acts #34)

Speaker: Jim Harris
Date: 2-11-24

But I want you to realize that Satan has continued to spread *the same error* again and again, just by twisting the meaning of "grace" or by adding to what we mean by the word "faith." He has many different ways to package it. You are going to see the first one here in the Jerusalem Council; but do you realize: Within miles of *here*, some of the largest and flashiest churches in our region do many things that attract a lot of people: They make people feel good about their style of worship; they help people to probably live more productive lives; they do, indeed, do some good works; and they do involve some who are trusting in Christ alone by faith alone, and standing in His grace.

But these churches *don't tell you* that what they believe is: You must be baptized, not *because* you are saved—you must be baptized *in order* to be saved. And that is problematic! The poor thief on the cross (Lk. 23:39-43)—what did he think when he got to Heaven? "How can I get back and be baptized?" It is a subtle, but it is an eternally *crucial* distinction: If you are saved, you should be baptized. Jesus gave us the instructions: "Go...make disciples...teach them...baptize" the ones who believe (Matt. 28:19-20), because baptism is how you *symbolize* the work that has been done to transform you and to grant you eternal life (see Rom. 6:3-7). But you do not *achieve* transformation, you don't *gain* eternal life by meeting the condition of being baptized. You are to "hear" the Gospel (Rom. 10:17), "believe" the Gospel (Rom. 10:9), "repent" (Acts 17:30)—change your mind (Jn. 8:24), turn away from the old things (1 Thess. 1:9), turn to Christ (Acts 26:18). So, you "hear" and then you "believe" and you are saved (Rom. 10:14; Eph. 1:13), and *then* you are "baptized" (Acts 8:12; 16:33-34; 18:8).

There is another wrinkle on that: There are other churches around that teach that you do not receive the Holy Spirit until you are baptized. That is another way of saying you are not saved until you are baptized, because there is no such thing as a saved person without the Holy Spirit, according to Romans Chapter 8 (vs.9).

There are others who say that you need to believe that Christ died for your sins, but you are not actually saved and you don't receive the Holy Spirit until you speak in tongues—another *package* with the same poison inside (see 1 Cor. 12:30).

You can also find the ones who say you need to believe that Christ died for your sins; but *if you do* actually believe that, *you will keep the Saturday Sabbath* (see Rom. 14:5; Col. 2:16-17).

There is another fairly recent movement—and it has affected our part of the country—that seeks to teach Christians that if you really are saved, you will start keeping *all* of the Jewish feasts through the year. In other words: Jesus *plus*—Jesus *including*—the Law.

The point is that preaching "salvation by grace though faith, plus *nothing*" is the right message. If you teach anything else—if you *add* to the definition of "faith," if you *add* to the meaning of "believe," if you *add* to "grace"—you *negate* grace (Rom. 4:4-5; 11:6). "Eternal life," according to Romans 6:23, is a "free gift." If you try to do something to *pay* for the "free gift," you *insult* God's grace, who says He gives it to you at *His* expense (Jn. 3:16; Rom. 3:24-25; 1 Jn. 4:10); and He says, "*You cannot do anything to accomplish what I can give you*" (see Rom. 5:6; Eph. 2:12).

Sermon Title: What Is Necessary For Salvation?
Scripture Text: Acts 15:1-5 (Acts #34)

Speaker: Jim Harris
Date: 2-11-24

Now, that does not mean—here is the other end of the spectrum—it *does not mean* that you can just say magic words: "I believe Jesus died for my sins." I have a book in my library that I *will not* lend to you, because I don't want you to read it; but it says that if anybody at any point in time, for any period of time, believes that Christ died for their sins, they are saved—and it doesn't matter how they live (contra Matt. 7:21; 1 Jn. 2:4). And even if they eventually deny Christ, they are still saved because *at some point in time*, they believed (contra Heb. 3:14; 1 Jn. 2:19; Rev. 14:12). That is *just* as wrong as: "You have to become a Jew to become a Christian."

But those men who came to Antioch to crash this party of rejoicing over the salvation of the Gentiles—they were stating it quite clearly: According to *their definition* of the Gospel, those Gentiles that everybody in Antioch was rejoicing over *were not saved* because they had not become Jews. They wanted to *bury* the New Covenant under the Old Covenant, in the form that they had twisted the Old Covenant (contra Heb. 8:13).

So, "Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.'" That was the Eruption of a Problem.

So, Secondly: The Debate Begins. Verse 2—"And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue." This was a *big deal!*

"Debate" and "dissension" translate two words that describe, not a debate over who is going to win the Super Bowl, not a matter of opinion, but genuine, profound disagreement on things of substance.

"Great," by the way—here is another occurrence of that phrase like we saw at the end of Chapter 14: "not a little." They had "*not a little* debate and dissension." This was *not* a friendly discussion. They locked horns about nothing less than the meaning of the Gospel.

There was *then* some great concern in Antioch, and there was great wisdom among the believers in Antioch. It was the first significant predominantly Gentile church in the world, and they were humble, and they were wise to realize the magnitude of this matter; they wanted to make *sure* that what they were doing was in complete harmony with the ministry of the Apostles, with the message of Jesus. So they made that decision: "We're going to send 'Paul and Barnabas and some others' with them 'up' there 'to Jerusalem.' *This must be dealt with!*"

Thirdly: It was, in essence, a Call For Backup.

Verse 3—"Therefore, being sent on their way by the church..." That is just as it was when they sent them out to the Gentiles, it was just as official of a church action as it was launching them into the First Missionary Journey. After they "sent" them "on their way..." they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren."

Sermon Title: What Is Necessary For Salvation?
Scripture Text: Acts 15:1-5 (Acts #34)

Speaker: Jim Harris
Date: 2-11-24

If you look carefully at your map, you will discover that you can't get from Antioch to Jerusalem without going through "Phoenicia and Samaria" as the roads were in those days. And there were believers in Samaria, there were believers in Phoenicia; wherever they passed through, they had fellowship, and they "were bringing great joy to all the brethren" over "the conversion of the Gentiles."

"Conversion" translates a word that means "changing one's way of thinking and changing one's direction" (e.g., Prov. 9:6; Is. 55:7; 59:20; Ezek. 33:11; Acts 3:26; 1 Thess. 1:9). So, they were happy to hear of the changed lives of these people. And the Judaizers were saying, "No conversion! Incomplete! Not done! You have led them all astray in what you have done."

So, they came and they brought "great joy to all the brethren." Isn't that interesting? All the *Christians* are rejoicing (cf. Acts 11:18), and the Judaizers are over there saying, "Poo on you! You're *wrong*! You're *hurting* people!" And they were *adamant* about it.

So, Number 4: The Report Given

Three hundred miles elapsed between Verse 3 and Verse 4—"When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them."

This is to emphasize that Paul and Barnabas—and the church in Antioch, for that matter—they had not gone *rogue*. There was *great interest* from the Apostles and the elders. We'll talk more about the distinction between Apostles and elders next time. But these missionaries were *happy* to "report all that God had done with them." So they "reported," and they honestly explained everything that had happened. And that didn't solve it; they didn't just need to *hear* what had happened, then needed to *resolve* this conflict.

So, Number 5: The Dissent was Repeated.

Verse 5 of Chapter 15—"But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, 'It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.' "

So this came from—and this is an interesting description: "some of the sect of the Pharisees"—we know who "the Pharisees" are; Paul had been a Pharisee—"some" from that group called "the Pharisees *who had believed...*" What does *that* mean? They are telling people, "You are preaching the wrong Gospel," but they say they "believed." Well, they believed that Jesus was the Messiah. They believed that He was the Savior. So, yes, they were saying, "We believe in *Jesus*," but they were *changing* the words, changing the meaning of the words (see Gal. 1:6-9). They *were not* saying, "For by grace you have been saved through faith." And that is a perfect tense, by the way: "have been saved." You once were lost, now you're found. That would make a good line in a song, wouldn't it? You "were dead," and now you are "made alive" (Eph. 2:5, cf. Jn. 5:24). "You have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph. 2:8-9; cf. Rom. 3:27-28).

Sermon Title: What Is Necessary For Salvation?
Scripture Text: Acts 15:1-5 (Acts #34)

Speaker: Jim Harris
Date: 2-11-24

And Romans 6:23, as I said. Now, Paul did not quote Romans 6:23 and he didn't quote Ephesians 2 because he had not written them yet, but we have them. We know that in Romans 6:23, "eternal life" is called "the free gift of God in Christ Jesus."

So we ask the question: What Is Necessary For Salvation?

It is a "free gift." In one sense, [the answer] is: *Nothing* is required (Rom. 3:24, 28; Is. 55:1; Rev. 21:6; 22:17). You cannot *contribute* to what *gains* you salvation; but what is required is: You receive the "free gift." I could give you a gift for your birthday, wrap it up real pretty, put it on the table, put your name on it; and you could say, "Oh, thanks!" and go about your way and *never touch it*. I still gave it to you, but *you* didn't do anything about it.

So the question is: Have you *appropriated* the "free gift"? It comes not by a ceremony. It does not come through a sacrament or a group of sacraments. It does not come by baptism. It is not mediated by "communion"—you did not "receive Christ" when we came around the Lord's Table today. It cannot be done by proxy; you can't do it for anyone else. No one comes on anybody else's coattails (Prov. 9:12). Your kids are not saved because you are saved; they need to repent and come to Christ. It is *only* "by grace"; it's *only* by "faith"; it is *not* by "works"—and *that* was under attack.

I can't wait to come back and see *how* they worked through this, and what led them to their glorious conclusion. I'll tell you what, I will make you a deal: It's okay with me if you go ahead and reread Acts 15 over and over until we get back to it as a group.

Let's pray:

Our Father, thank You for Your great "free gift" of "eternal life." Thank You that it is in Christ, and in Christ alone. It is in Your grace that we stand. Father, if there is even one heart here today in which a battle is going on, or there is the conviction of sin—there is the awareness that You sent a Savior, but they haven't yet received the "free gift," oh, please, bring them over that edge, we pray; bring new life in Christ. Please, as we leave this place, put the message on our lips, and grant us opportunities to pass along the great good news "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures." That is our prayer, and it is in Jesus' name. Amen.