

## Acts 15 Growing pains

We have been going through the Book of Acts for a number of weeks now and I want to play a video so that if this is your first morning with us, I don't want you to feel like you're an hour late to the movie, wondering who is who.

### Video Acts summary

So that's just a brief overview of where we've been and what we've covered on the kind of historical timeline of what we're covering. The series is called a church on a mission and in Chapter 15 we come across what could have been a huge stumbling block, this could have sabotaged the whole mission.

If you have your Bible, turn to chapter 15, we're just going to walk through it line by line and talk about it.

I don't know what it is but there seems to be something with human nature that makes us take what is good news and, either out of fear or a sense of control, add to it. And in adding to that good news, we twist it until it becomes useless news and not good news at all.

There have been several situations over the last 20 odd years of ministry where I've been listening to someone or reading something and I've gone, "ah, I'm not so sure about this." I understand it, but it's just doesn't seem right. One that came to mind was years ago and was part of what was called a True Love Waits. It was a campaign that promoted keeping yourself pure until your wedding night. What it was trying to do was good. One of the teaching illustrations given for leaders to use was to pull out a rose and talk about how pretty it was and smelling it

You then pass it out into the crowd, and give a bunch of statistics on sexual diseases and the dangers of sex outside of marriage. You encourage the youth to smell the rose. See how soft the petals are and get a good whiff of it. All the statistics given etc were fear based. It was "These are the bad things that can happen to you, STDs etc. Do you know what it's like having a kid when you're a teenager? Imagine this..."

Then about 10-15 minutes into the message, you ask, "Now where's the rose?" Some poor kid brings up this completely mutilated rose, and you hold it up and ask "Now who would want this?" implying this is what happens to young people if they allow themselves to be sexually active outside of marriage.

Now let's be fair. The motivation that led to this was a desire for our youth to live a morally healthy life, that is a wonderful motivation. And at that stage I had three young daughters, and a good wholesome godly life was my desire for them. The desire for moral purity is a good thing. It's a good thing to want that for our children.

Where the illustration goes wrong is the loss of confidence in the gospel message, and its ability to shape and mould the souls of young men and young women. Instead of letting the love of God transform peoples lives, we want to attach to the greatest news in the universe; fear, control, and shame. And for anyone, whose rose had already been smelt or touched in the crowd, that's devastating news.

Another thing that gets me, partially because this is really my story as well is hearing testimonies, often at baptisms, where they say "I grew up in church my whole life, went to Sunday school and youth group, and until recently, I had never understood the true gospel message."

It's sad when people who grow up in the church say that? How could anyone spend their whole life in church...How could you go from Sunday school to youth group to wherever...? How could you spend all that time in the church and say, 'I never heard the gospel'?

So the question is - what did they hear? What did I hear when I was younger?

'Don't drink, don't go to parties, don't watch rated-R movies, don't listen to this kind of music, do this, don't do this, go here, don't go here.' It's what is now called 'moralistic deism'. It was all, 'This is how you must behave.'"

If this is the message that was being given, it begins to make sense why we have hundreds, if not thousands, of young adults in their 20's -30's, whose testimony is, "Yeah, I tried Jesus, but He didn't work."

"No. You never tried Jesus. You tried to be good, and the Bible says we stink at being good. It shouldn't surprise us that we can't do it. The Bible says from the beginning, we stink at being good, and even if you're good at being good, you'll just become an annoying, self-righteous, self-absorbed, worthless piece of (insert whatever word your conscience will allow).

Let's get to the passage Acts 15. So right in the middle of Paul's first missionary journey... David covered that last week, you had Paul and Barnabas released as missos by the church at Antioch. They travelled some 800 km and every city

they stopped in, they preached the gospel. Men and women were being saved, exciting stuff. They established churches, and they moved on. They got about 800 km away, and then looped back to Antioch. When they get to back, a disagreement had broken out, so let's pick it up in verse 1 of Acts 15.

**15** *While Paul and Barnabas were at Antioch of Syria, some men from Judea arrived and began to teach the believers: "Unless you are circumcised as required by the law of Moses, you cannot be saved."<sup>2</sup> Paul and Barnabas disagreed with them, arguing vehemently. Finally, the church decided to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem, accompanied by some local believers, to talk to the apostles and elders about this question. <sup>3</sup>The church sent the delegates to Jerusalem, and they stopped along the way in Phoenicia and Samaria to visit the believers. They told them—much to everyone's joy—that the Gentiles, too, were being converted.*

*<sup>4</sup>When they arrived in Jerusalem, Barnabas and Paul were welcomed by the whole church, including the apostles and elders. They reported everything God had done through them. <sup>5</sup>But then some of the believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and insisted, "The Gentile converts must be circumcised and required to follow the law of Moses."*

So here's the question that is being asked as the gospel makes its way out of strict Judaism, to among the Gentiles. **What does it take to be saved?** For the Jew, their understanding was that they were 'the called', appointed, the covenant community of faith. That point of view was correct. They were called. God comes to Abram and says, "I will create a people of my own possession. I'm calling you out and you will be my people."

And Gentiles who wanted to worship the one true God would go through the process of complete obedience to the moral and ritual law of Moses, which meant that they were to obey all of the moral laws, and the ritual laws including being physically circumcised as adults (all men cross your legs now).

So for moral law, think Ten Commandments.

Ritual law... there were number of specific areas.

- Yes there was a physical circumcision,

- there were very rigid, rigorous purity laws. You had to wash a certain way and a certain amount of time before you ate, before you went in to worship.
- There were laws around what foods were clean and unclean,
- and there was a total abstaining from anything with blood in it.

The argument that was being made at Antioch, a church that is primarily made up of Gentiles, was that these Gentiles were actually not saved, because in order to become Christians they must first become Jews.

Paul and Barnabas were not happy about this teaching that had arrived since their departure. They argued and debated, and that leads to what in Christian history is called the Jerusalem Council. This was probably one of the most significant church meetings in history.

So Paul and Barnabas head back to Jerusalem. Remember we're in Antioch. They meet with the apostles and the elders, and they're wrestling with this huge question...

1. Is there anything additional we must do for salvation on top of faith and grace alone? Is there anything we need to add to what Christ has already done for us in order to be saved? Do the Gentiles have to first become Jews? Do they have to obey the moral and ritual law?
2. The second question that has to be answered is...If the Gentiles don't have to become ritualistically Jews, then how are we supposed to 'fellowship' with one another?

The moral law wasn't up for debate; it was the ritual law. "Do these men have to be circumcised? Do they have to stop eating their steak medium rare? And do they have to get the bacon out of the house?" That's the question. "And if they don't, how are we supposed to fellowship together? How are we supposed to do life together?" Those are the questions at stake. From there, we go to the debate. Let's pick it up in verse 6.

*<sup>6</sup>So the apostles and elders met together to resolve this issue. <sup>7</sup>At the meeting, after a long discussion, Peter stood and addressed them as follows: "Brothers, you all know that God chose me from among you some time ago to preach to the Gentiles so that they could hear the Good News and believe. <sup>8</sup>God knows people's hearts, and he confirmed that he accepts Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. <sup>9</sup>He made no distinction between us and them, for he cleansed their hearts through faith.*

*<sup>10</sup>So why are you now challenging God by burdening the Gentile believers with a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear? <sup>11</sup>We believe that we are all saved the same way, by the undeserved grace of the Lord Jesus."*

1. Peter's first argument is Cornelius, back in Acts, chapter 10. Remember Peter goes to Cornelius' house. Cornelius is a commanding officer in the Italian Army. Peter goes and preaches the gospel, and the Holy Spirit does his thing, and they were saved.

Peter's argument was, "Hey, there wasn't anything ritualistic going on at Cornelius' house when the Holy Spirit came and saved them. Peter didn't go and say, 'All right, Cornelius. Here's what you have to do. You have to be circumcised. You have to get that bacon out of the burger. And, from now on, that steak had better be well done or there's no part for you in the kingdom.'

Peter simply preached Jesus crucified. The Holy Spirit came, looked upon Cornelius' heart, and through faith in grace Cornelius was saved."

2. Peter's second argument was, "Ok, do we really want to ask these Gentiles to do what we Jews have not been able to do?" We haven't been able to keep this law. Our fathers weren't able to keep this law, why would we expect the Gentiles to?"

This is Peter's reality check. He knows there isn't salvation through the law. Let's do a reality check ourselves.

- WE Christians like to think we are honest – but we are all liars. That's not up for debate. You lie, I lie, we are all liars. Hopefully less now than we used to but we find ourselves lying for the most stupid things to save face, to save money, to save a relationship, we can even try to make our lies sound righteous.
- We all covet. There have been times that bad things have happened to people and I thought, good job, they deserved it. That's coveting. There are times that good things have happened to people that I didn't think deserved it and I thought, whaaaat? That's coveting. That's telling God that he is doing a useless job and that he doesn't know what's best for them or for me. It's me trying to be God.
- I've never murdered anyone, but I know I have the potential. Don't judge me, but if some sleaze ball touches my wife, kids or grandchildren..."
- I've never cheated on my wife, but I have to guard my eyes and thoughts. Do I need to keep going?

In the test around the moral law we all fail, and we fail because it's designed for us to fail. It was never meant that by them we might be saved but rather that by them we would understand we need to be saved.

The ritual law is no different. It's too strict. We can't win. Without Christ that is.

So Peter's argument is, "Hey listen, our fathers couldn't do this. We haven't been able to do this. The point of the gospel message is that God has done it for us in Christ."

That was Peter, and now Barnabas and Paul join in with the argument, starting in verse 12.

*<sup>12</sup>Everyone listened quietly as Barnabas and Paul told about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.*

So Paul and Barnabas begin to tell their story of all of the cities they've been to, of all of these men and women who have come to know Jesus Christ, of all of them who have been converted, all of these churches that have been established.

We know they've been saved. We watched the power of God working in them, flowing through them. They're the ones sharing the gospel now, and other people are coming to know Christ through their testimony. God is so at work in this group that this very question is nonsense.

Then James chimes in. Verse 13:

*<sup>13</sup>When they had finished, James stood and said, "Brothers, listen to me. <sup>14</sup>Peter has told you about the time God first visited the Gentiles to take from them a people for himself. <sup>15</sup>And this conversion of Gentiles is exactly what the prophets predicted. As it is written:*

*<sup>16</sup>'Afterward I will return and restore the fallen house of David.*

*I will rebuild its ruins and restore it,*

*<sup>17</sup>so that the rest of humanity might seek the LORD,*

*including the Gentiles—all those I have called to be mine.*

*The LORD has spoken—*

*<sup>18</sup> he who made these things known so long ago.'*

*<sup>19</sup>"And so my judgment is that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.*

James' arguments are a bit different than Peter's, Paul's, and Barnabas'. His argument is, "God has told us from day one this is what he's doing," and he quotes Amos and Jeremiah to prove his point.

So "Yay! Well done, we will not ask the Gentiles to become Jews."

But there's another problem. How are we then to fellowship with one another? Hanging out with one another was huge in the early church. And that wasn't just a cup of tea after church. They broke bread together, and it wasn't just a communion type thing we are going to do shortly, it's an extended dinner with good food and great conversation. If you've ever had the privilege of being at someone place, where four or five hours spent with one another, laughing, enjoying good food, good company... If that felt holy to you, it's because it is. They fellowshiped with one another.

But what if around the table one person's freedom is viewed as wrong and disgusting? I was trying to think what a similar situation would be for today, back a few years, in Baptist circles it may have been consuming alcohol. One thing that might bring up a similar discomfort is if you are visiting overseas, maybe somewhere in Asia, and invited to eat with a family and 'dog' is dished up.

The Jews viewed blood as a defilement. They viewed certain aspects of sexual immorality that were prevalent among the Gentiles, as defiling. So not only did they think it was wrong or defiling, but for them to be around it was also defiling. How are we going to solve that issue? Let's look at what he says. Look at verse 19 again.

*<sup>19</sup>"And so my judgment is that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. <sup>20</sup>Instead, we should write and tell them to abstain from eating food offered to idols, from sexual immorality, from eating the meat of strangled animals, and from consuming blood. <sup>21</sup>For these laws of Moses have been preached in Jewish synagogues in every city on every Sabbath for many generations."*

Now hang on a minute. James just said, "We're not going to impose on them the rituals of the Jews, except for nearly all of them!!" Now I reckon the Gentile Christians still breathed a sigh of relief, there is nothing recorded but I have this hunch that circumcision might have been the issue of the moment.

But seriously what happened here is actually a picture of what Christian community should look like, where my rights are gladly laid down for your good.

James isn't trying to lay ritualistic law down. He's saying, "Consider your brothers and sisters when you walk with one another. Consider your church community at the table. Don't do anything that would rob them from being able to enjoy the company and enjoy the Lord."

It's not about conformity, obeying the rules or rituals; it's about transformation of our attitudes, loving God and loving each other. The person whose knuckles are white from trying to modify his/her behaviour in order to please God is not free. Of course there are seasons of our lives where we're going to have to white-knuckle some things, for the sake of others? But the gospel, the good news is about forgiveness of sins, setting captives free, releasing the burdened, giving peace to those in turmoil, If that isn't happening in general, it's time to ask the question, have we added something to the gospel?

Communion - brings us back to the basic Gospel