

Saved by grace, living by grace \* Acts 15

June 28, 2020 \* Langford Community Church \* Graham Gladstone

Billy Graham used to tell this story of a time when he was speaking in a small town and wanted to mail a letter. He ran into one of the neighbourhood kids and asked him where the post office was. When the boy told him, Billy Graham thanked him and added – ‘If you come to church tonight, I’ll tell you how you can get to heaven’ – to which the boy responded – ‘How are you going to tell me how to get to Heaven; you don’t even know how to get to the post office!’

That story raises the question at the heart of today’s passage – how do we get to Heaven? How are we saved? I know in my own life I wrestled with his for a long time; I got the idea that we had to earn God’s favour by being good and then we would ‘go to heaven’, but that just left me wondering ‘how good is good enough?’

The passage that we’re going to look at today answers that question, and takes it one step further – What does it look like when we’re saved? So we’re going to take on some very important questions today – ‘How are we saved?’ And ‘What does it look like when we’re saved?’

Important questions and we are going to get the answers from a very important event in the life of the Church. If there was a test, this would DEFINITELY be on the test, so turn with me in your Bible to Acts 15, an event that’s sometimes called ‘The Jerusalem Council’ – Acts 15 in your Bible.

See, just prior to this, something very important to the faith and very important to US happened: God started to bring Gentiles into His family. God started to bring non-Jewish people like us into His family. For generations, God had talked about Israel as His very own chosen people, and since the earliest Christians were in fact Jewish, they just assumed (some at least) that the fulfillment of God’s promises to Israel would be for Israel.

But then non-Israelite people – Gentiles like us – started believing. God poured out His Spirit on Cornelius in Acts 10 while Peter was there and then in Acts 14, the Jews turned their back on Paul and so he began preaching to the Gentiles – and they believed in droves.

Which then led to the important question – can Gentiles truly be saved? And if they can, do they have to conform to Jewish law and tradition?

Well, to answer these questions, the Church gathered together in Jerusalem, to seek God’s will and figure out how exactly we are saved. Verse 6 says - 6 The apostles and elders met to consider this question.

7 After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe.

8 God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us.

9 He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.

10 Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?

11 No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

Peter appeals to two things there – first - to his own experience – he saw firsthand the Gentile Cornelius receiving the Spirit– and second - to the reality that even their Jewish forefathers couldn't keep the Law. Generations of Jewish people showed that it was impossible to keep the Law without God's intervention. And so he concludes with a very important statement – verse 11 - 11 No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are." That's a crucial statement. "Jew, Gentile, doesn't matter - we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus."

Then Paul and Barnabas get up to share the ways that God worked through them to reach the Gentiles and then finally James, Jesus' brother, gets up to weigh in.

He points out that God Himself said in the OT that He would bring Gentiles into His family (15-18) and then concludes – verse 19 -

19 "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. 'We should not pile on extra restrictions because God had made no restrictions.'

This is a crucial moment in the history of Christianity – James seconds Peter's statement that we are all saved by grace through faith – not by works, not by law – but by turning from sin and trusting the Saviour Jesus – by receiving the grace of God. Grace is God's free gift to us.

However, James says, being saved should make a difference in your life. We don't do good deeds to earn God's favour; He gives it freely to us. But when we receive it, we don't just keep on living for ourselves, the way we always did; we give ourselves to living in light of that grace. And so he says, verse 20 -

20 Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.

Really, he's saying – don't go back to the sins from before - the idolatry and immorality. They're old news. They belong to the past. God has made you new by grace, so leave behind your pagan idols and sacrifices. Not to BE saved, but because you ARE saved.

And so they write this all down and send it off with Paul and Barnabas to circulate throughout the Mediterranean world.

Now, what does this mean for us? Well, I'd put it like this –

We are saved by grace to live grace-filled lives. We are saved by Jesus' grace to live gracious lives.

Let me explain –

We are saved by grace. This is absolutely fundamental. We are saved by grace, through faith, not by works or the things we do, but by the lavish generosity of God. It doesn't matter who you are; it doesn't matter what you've done. You could be the worst of sinners, and yet when you receive God's grace, it's wiped away and you can know beyond the shadow that you are a treasure to God. All by grace.

And this grace is available to us as Gentiles. We're so used to thinking of Christianity as a non-Jewish thing that we forget that our ability to be saved was not a foregone conclusion.

I think that when you read the OT you DO realize that God had a plan to bless the nations – I mean that goes back all the way to Abraham – I will bless the nations through you – but praise God for the Jerusalem council for realizing it.

They confirmed what God was already doing – saving people of all ethnic backgrounds by grace. Saving us all by grace. We don't have to be circumcised. We don't have to keep the Jewish law. We don't have to make up for our past sins to prove that you are worthy of salvation. We simply receive and believe. That's grace.

But... we are saved by grace TO LIVE GRACE-FILLED LIVES. The saving grace of God should make a difference in our live; it should make us want to become more and more like the gracious God who saved us. The Jerusalem council pointed to idolatry and immorality as things to stay away from because they are inconsistent with the grace of God and we need to do that too. Obviously, strangled animals and temple prostitutes are not going to be an issue for us, but idolatry and immorality have their own expressions in our age too. Selfishness, power, pornography, pride – all of these things are inconsistent with the grace of God and so we leave them behind to live in light of grace. Are you intentionally living out the saving grace of God?

All in all – I hope that you take three things away from this message –

First – the importance of the Jerusalem council in Acts 15. We're here because they wisely affirmed what God was doing, freely saving people like us.

Second – God freely saves sinners. "It is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved."

And third – we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus to live gracious lives, reflecting the goodness of God back into the world.

We are saved by Jesus' grace to live grace-filled lives.

#### BENEDICTION

2 Cor. 13:14 - The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.