



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Acts 15:1-35

Acts

"Grace Alone"

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] Our text this morning is Acts 15:1-35. I don't think it's necessary to read all 35 verses, so I am going to read verses 1-21. If you're visiting, we finished last week, as you can imagine, Acts 14, which concludes Paul's first missionary journey, and as Paul concluded that journey, he had a rather rough experience. He was stoned in Lystra and left for dead. He continued on and then returned to those cities that he had been in - Antioch and Lystra did and Derbe and the others. And coming back through, he made the statement to them, "Encourage the brother," and then said in verse 22, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." And we put some stress on that, that the Christian life is not always an easy life. In fact, it's never an easy life. It's a life that's rather demanding.

But it's not just that. It's not just a life of tribulation. God does give us rest. He gives us times of refreshment. He's very good and generous about that, and we come to the end of the chapter and Paul and Barnabas have returned to Antioch and Syria and they have reported to the church on their mission. And then we read in verse 28, "And they spent a long time with the disciples," perhaps a year there in Antioch, teaching, and it was a time of refreshment. It was not of time of trial and tribulation.

But that did not go on without interruption. In fact, it comes to an end when we come to verse 1 of chapter 15, where we read, "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.' 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. Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, 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. 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. 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.'

"The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, 'brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.'

"All the people kept silent, and were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

"After they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, 'brethren, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. With this the words of the Prophets again, just as it is written,

"'Aft these things I will return/And I will rebuild the tabernacle of David which as fallen/And I will rebuild its ruins/And I will restore it/So that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord/And all the Gentiles

who are called by My name'/Says the Lord, who makes these things known from long ago.

"Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, but that we writ to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood." That's a reference to food with blood in it, prohibited in the Law of Moses.

Verse 21, "For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

May the Lord bless this reading of His word. Let's bow together in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, it is a privilege to gather together in this place this morning to read together your inherent word and then to spend time in some detailed study of it. We pray, Lord, that you would bless us as we do that, that you would teach us and instruct us and build us up in the faith.

We are well equipped, Father, to be built up in the faith, because not only is every believer in Jesus Christ a new creature in Christ, we have new faculties. We have a new heart. We have hearts that are receptive to your truth. But we have hearts that have been sealed with the Spirit of God. He dwells within us, and the Holy Spirit not only protects us from the evil one, not only keeps us in Christ, not only is the means by which Christ's life is communicated to us, but He is also our guide and He is our teacher, and we pray for that teaching ministry this morning. May we not harden our hearts to it. May we be receptive to that which You have spoken of in Your word. May we receive it and may it be applied properly to our lives.

It is a blessing beyond estimation, Father, that we possess the third person of the Trinity, that He literally dwells within us, because He changes us. He does teach us and He makes us new creatures increasingly like Jesus Christ. And we pray for that this morning.

Bless us spiritually. Bless us physically, materially as well. We think of the sick. We think of those who are recovering from surgeries. We pray that You would bless them and give them continued recovery. Restore them to our fellowship soon, and we pray for others who may be undergoing various trials, trials that we may not even be aware of, but are struggling with financial difficulties or emotional struggles. We pray that You'd give encouragement and correction, restoration.

We pray for this land. We pray for our nation. We pray for our government. We pray that You'd bless those in authority over us. You have placed them there, Father. It's Your sovereign hand that raises up men and women to rule in government, and we acknowledge that and pray for those who govern over us. Bless this nation as we approach days of decision, when we will be choosing new government officials. May we have wisdom to choose those which would please You.

Bless our time together this evening as we gather together again this evening to celebrate the Lord's supper. May our hearts be well prepared. And bless all those who participate and Christ would be exalted. We thank You that He has come and that He laid down His life for us. and we thank You that He's coming again. May we live for that day, Father. We pray these things in Christ name. Amen.

[Message] The other day, I picked up Harry Ironside's commentary on the book of Acts and read his statement that one of the hardest things for these minds of ours to grasp is the freeness of God's salvation. That's a good statement, and it goes to the very heart of our passage. People can grasp the gospel in that they can understand our meaning that salvation is free, apart from works, and due to no merit of our own.

But they can't grasp it, they can't accept it as true. They can't trust in it. That is the hardest idea for people to believe. People want to add something of their own to the work of God - their good deeds, or maybe just one deed, like baptism or taking the sacraments or church membership. Men love to speak of their accomplishments. It's

been that way since Cain brought an offering to God of the fruit he had grown from the ground he had cultivated. It was the labor of his hands, what he produced by the sweat of his brow, which he laid at the altar with pride and which God rejected.

Salvation is God's gift, not man's work. Three of the slogans of the Reformation express that as clearly, I think, as it can be expressed: grace alone, faith alone, and Christ alone. That was the point that Martin Luther made when he translated the New Testament into German. In Romans 3:28, Paul wrote, "We maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the Law."

But when Luther came to that verse, he added one word: alone. He translated it, "A person is justified without works of the Law through faith alone." He was severely criticized for that, because the word "alone" is not found in the Greek text. Luther knew that, of course, but he defended his addition on the grounds that it preserves the sense of the text and Luther was right.

That is the sense of the text. That is the teaching of the Bible. Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. That's the good news. That's the best news. And yet it is news that must be defended in each generation, because man naturally a religion in which he can boast, in which he can parade his accomplishments, and so people are always trying to turn Christianity into that kind of religion.

It happened in the first generation of the church. It happened in the city of Antioch in the church that was there. And events there led to a meeting in Jerusalem what many have called the Jerusalem counsel. Luke lays a great deal of stress on that. He saw that as very important. He gives almost an entire church of his book to these events - 35 verses. It was a watershed moment that determined, humanly speaking, the whole course of the church, whether it would remain the church or become another Jewish sect.

Well, as I said, events began in Antioch. Paul and Barnabas had returned from the first missionary journey and they had reported all

that God had done, how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. Gentiles were streaming into the church. And while that caused the Christians in Antioch to rejoice, it troubled many of the conservative Jewish believers in Jerusalem. They had accepted Gentile salvation with the salvation of Cornelius and those in his household. In fact, the Old Testament had predicted that, all the way from the time when Abraham was given his first promise back in chapter 12 of Genesis. He would be a blessing to the nations.

But if they had forgotten those promises in the Old Testament, they certainly were made aware of them and aware of the fact of Gentile salvation with the conversion that took place down in Caesarea in Cornelius' household. It had been accompanied by indisputable evidence from God of His approval of them and their salvation when He gave to them the gift of the Holy Spirit.

That should have settled the matter. But at that time there were few Gentile believers. It was mainly a Jewish church and everyone was respecting the Law of Moses. But with the increasing influx of Gentile converts from paganism, some Jewish believers were afraid that the moral condition of the church might be weakened and Jewish customs ignored and even forgotten. They thought the Gentiles needed to be brought under the Law. And since Antioch was a church filled with Gentiles, and in fact the center of Gentile missions, some men came down from Judea to set things right.

We read in verse 1 that they began teaching, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." They knew that Paul had gone out preaching a gospel of faith alone, of conversion without circumcision, and that Gentile converts had remained uncircumcised, and so they came down to correct that.

The issue was not the fact of Gentile salvation. These Jewish men accepted that, ever since the events in Cornelius' household. That was not the issue here. The issue here is now the method by which Gentiles are saved. They didn't question the necessity of faith. They didn't deny the object of faith. They accepted the deity of Christ. They

believed that Jesus is the Messiah and the Savior. In regard to that, in regard to who Christ is and what He has done, they were orthodox. They didn't come questioning the person at work of Christ. But they were not orthodox completely. There was one point in which they differed. What they said was all of that's important, all of that's necessary. It is essential that you believe, but faith in Christ is not enough. In addition to believing, a person must keep the Law and be circumcised.

That wasn't what Paul or Barnabas had taught. These men had introduced a different gospel to the church, and Luke writes in verse 2 that it resulted in a "great dissension and debate." Paul has given a fuller account of these events in Galatians 2:11-21. Tells us there that Peter was in town. He was visiting the church in Antioch and freely associating with the Gentile believers there. He was sharing meals with them, enjoying his children liberty, until certain men from James paid them a visit. These were the men who had come down from Judea. It's not clear whether they were actually sent by James or they only claimed his authority, but they carried a lot of weight, because when they arrived, Peter backed away from the Gentiles. He quit eating with them. Paul said he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. Even Barnabas, who had preached the gospel with Paul all through Asia Minor, who knew better, even Barnabas, he says, was carried by their hypocrisy.

So these were men of some weight, of some authority. Some of these were former Pharisees. We know that from what Luke tells us later in 15:5. They were legalists. They had a zeal for the Law of Moses. They had a concern to preserve their Jewish heritage. Now, we can understand that somewhat. The book of Acts is a book of transition and these men had grown up in families where the Law of Moses was practiced, and legitimately, because they began under the old covenant. And they practiced rules and regulations that had been practiced since the Law of Moses had been given 1,500 years before. Infact, circumcision had been given 2,000 years before. And they're

just now learning that these things have come to an end. This was part of the old covenant and now they were under the new covenant, and learning life under the new covenant did not come quickly, did not come easily. This is a period of transition.

But still, what they were advocating threatened the gospel, because as Paul explains in Galatians 5:3, 4, once a person chooses the legal road for salvation, even when it is involving the addition of only ceremony, one act like circumcision, Paul says that person is then obligated to the whole Law, not just that one act, not just circumcision, but if you take one part of the Law, you take the whole Law and you must be obedient to that without flaw, and that is impossible.

But these men had done that, because they had misunderstood the purpose and the value of circumcision. They had made it into a means or an instrument of righteousness. It'd never been given for that purpose. Circumcision was simply a sign of God's covenant with Abraham and the promises that He had made to him and it was an outward symbol that a person was a member of that Abrahamic community. It was a sign that that person was a citizen of Israel. In fact, it was meaningless if a person didn't have the saving faith that Abraham had.

But these were persuasive people. These were men who had been trained in the word of God. They knew the Scriptures. They could cite verses from the Bible to show the importance of circumcision. They could point to those verses that commanded circumcision. They could cite verses that said if a man was not circumcised, he was to be cut off from the community of Israel. They even might have cited the fact that Jesus Himself was circumcised. They argued persuasively. That's the nature of error, at least when it's effective. It is clothed in a lot of truth.

In the 2nd century, Irenaeus, one of the church fathers, wrote a work entitled *Against Heresies*. And in it he made an insightful statement. He said that error never appears in its natural deformity,

but decks itself out in an attractive dress so that the inexperienced will think that it is more true than truth itself.

Well, many there in Antioch had come under the spell of these men, these legalists, even Peter and Barnabas, though they knew better. Well, when Paul saw what was happening, saw how this church was being swept away by this error, he put a stop to it, put a stop to it in a rather dramatic way. He tells us how he rebuked Peter to his face, rebuked him publicly. He obviously dealt with Barnabas as well, because Luke tells us in our passage, in verse 2 that both he and Barnabas engaged these legalists in a hot debate. He doesn't give us an account of the discussion, but it's very likely that it followed the same line of reasoning given in Romans chapter 4, where Paul recorded the chronology of Abraham's experience, when he believed, and when he was circumcised. Abraham was saved long before the sign of circumcision was given to him. He was justified in Genesis 15.

And there we read in verse 6, "He believed in the Lord and He," that is, the Lord, "reckoned it to him as righteousness." That's when he was saved. That's when he became a justified man, a man righteous in the sight of God. It was not until chapter 17 that God gave Abraham the rite of circumcision. That was years later. He was already saved. That rite of circumcision added nothing to his righteousness, added nothing to his salvation. He was declared righteous when he was an uncircumcised man. In fact, Paul calls circumcision in Romans 4:11 "a seal of the righteousness of faith," because it signified the faith that saves. Circumcision is God's seal of approval on that faith that Abraham already had.

The act itself with the cutting away of the flesh indicated the inability of the flesh to save, the inability of the flesh to gain righteousness. We cannot do that in our own strength. That righteousness is received through faith alone, just as Abraham had received it. To add anything to faith, even a ceremony that is done only once, is to reinvent the gospel and nullify grace. Paul says in Galatians chapter 1 that that is another gospel which is not really

another gospel. It is a false gospel. Justification is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. That is the gospel the apostle Paul preached. That is what he argued in Antioch.

The debate though was evidently inconclusive, and so it was referred to a higher court. 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. So they went. And as they traveled south, along the Mediterranean coast through Phoenicia and then inland through Samaria, Luke writes that they told the saints there about the conversion of the Gentiles and he says that they were bringing great joy to all the brethren. They loved to hear about the salvation of the Gentiles.

Great joy in Phoenicia, great joy in Samaria, but when they arrived in Jerusalem, the reception was not as enthusiastic. Some of the believers who had been Pharisees formerly expressed disapproval of what Paul had preached. They stood up and said it is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses. Now, these men understood correctly that if a person is circumcised, if a person is going to begin obeying the Law at least in part, then that person is obligated to keep the whole Law and that's what they were advocating, that they observe the Law of Moses.

So the apostles and elders came together and looked into the matter, and again a dispute broke out just as it had in Antioch. Paul and Antioch must have led the debate here, the debate for a Law-free gospel. They would not compromise the truth, even for the sake of unity. They didn't believe in a big tent in which all kinds of ideas can exist and be tolerated together. They weren't men for unity at the expense of truth. Unity over error is worthless. They understood that and so they stood their ground. They debated long and hard. In fact, Luke tells us that it was after there had been much debate that Peter stood up and spoke.

The man who had compromised the gospel in Antioch now took a clear stand on the gospel. He spoke decisively for grace. He begins

by reminding his audience of the incident with Cornelius and the Gentiles that is recorded in chapter 10, how he preached the gospel to them and they believed. "And God," he says in verse 8, "who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did us; and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith." Not by circumcision. He didn't cleanse their hearts by baptism, but by faith alone.

Paul could have mentioned baptism if it were necessary for salvation. He did baptize Cornelius, but he did that after Cornelius and the Gentiles had already received the Spirit, after they had been saved, after they had been justified and sealed for salvation. Baptism is just a sign, like circumcision. It is necessary for every believer to be baptized. It is a public profession of faith. We are commanded to do that, but it adds nothing to salvation. And in fact it is worthless if a person has not believed. The water of baptism cannot wash away sin any more than the knife of circumcision can cut it away. Only the blood of Christ cleanses from sin and we receive its cleansing by faith.

It was faith that God approved in Cornelius and the others. He saw their hearts. He knew their faith was genuine. He gave them the Holy Spirit. He gave them new hearts and new standing before Him. Through faith we are clean in God's sight. Not morally perfect. Nowhere does the New Testament teach that the believer in Jesus Christ ever reaches a station, a level in this life where he or she is perfect. Saints continue to be sinners, all the way to the end.

But based on what Christ has done, God declares believer righteous and He treats us that way, even though we sin. He accepts us as righteous in His sight. We can think of justification in terms of being clothed in new, clean, white garments. That's the righteousness of Christ. Through faith we receive what Christ has already accomplished for us on the cross. The payment for our sins and His own righteousness, it is all imputed to the believer at the moment of faith. At that moment we are placed in Christ. We are joined to His

righteousness and to His life. We have the righteousness of Christ. We also have the very life of Jesus Christ that transforms us and is the means by which we are sanctified. God sees us in Him, in His Son. We are adopted in into His family forever, fully accepted by Him.

I don't know that there's any more practical doctrine in Scripture than that. All scripture, all doctrine, rather, is practical and I wouldn't want to put a level or try to put degrees of importance on it, but that is essential in our practical walk with the Lord to understand the nature of justification, that we can never be more accepted by God, and we will never be less accepted by God than we are or than we were when we were first accepted by Him at the moment of faith.

We are absolutely and completely accepted by God from the very beginning. That means the Christian does not have to strive to gain God's approval or to maintain God's acceptance. We don't have to wait to the end in order to learn the final verdict on our salvation. The believer is completely accepted by God. We have that assurance. We can live with that assurance. It was all settled at the moment of faith, because Christ's work of salvation is complete. It's finished. That's what He declared from the cross. It is finished. There's nothing that you and I can do to add to it. There's nothing incomplete about it. He finished the work on the cross; now we are free from the Law, free from effort to obtain God's approval, and we can rest in Christ. That's good news. That's the greatest new. That's real freedom.

Now, having said that, that doesn't that we rest and we don't strive to live a life that pleases God, that we don't strive for obedience, that we don't pursue after holiness. We certainly do. In fact, only now can we do that, now that we have been placed in Jesus Christ, now that we have a life of Christ, now that we have a righteous, acceptable standing with God. Because in Him we are new creatures. We have new capabilities. We have new faculties. We have new hearts. We are people who are guided and governed by the person of the Holy Spirit who lives within us. And so as a result of all of that, as a result of who we are and the knowledge of what we've

received from God, the knowledge of grace, we can do that. we can pursue righteousness, not out of a sense of obligation, not out of a sense of desperation, but out of a sense of deep gratitude for what He's done.

We have ability to do that, that the Law could never give. The Law cannot give life. The Law can condemn, but that's all that it can do. And so in verse 10, Peter asks his Jewish brothers why they want to bring these Gentiles under the Law, why they themselves, for that matter, want to be under the Law. It is, he says, "a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear." And you can imagine an ox with its neck bent low under the weight of a heavy yoke. That's the Law.

Now, Peter doesn't describe it in that way, in a disparaging sense. He's not against the Law. The Law's intended to be that. The Law's intended to be a heavy yoke. It was intended to be a burden. It was intended to show us our sin and our inability. It was given, as Paul says in Galatians 3, as a schoolmaster to lead the Jew to Christ. But having done that, they were now free from it. And so Peter concludes in verse 11 that "we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus in the same way they also are. Cornelius' house, the Gentiles were saved by faith apart from Lawkeeping. Peter says that we could not keep that Law. Our fathers could not keep that Law. No one can keep that Law. The Gentiles were saved not by Law, but by faith alone, when they were uncircumcised, just as Abraham was, and Jews are saved in the same way. Haven't we proven to ourselves and hasn't it been proven throughout the ages that we can't be saved by keeping the Law? It's impossible. There's only one way of salvation and that is through faith in Christ alone.

With that defense of the gospel, Peter disappears from the book of Acts. This is his last appearance in this book. It was a decisive appearance, and we could even call it perhaps Peter's finest hour. There was a period of silence, then Paul and Barnabas reinforced Peter's testimony, telling how God confirmed Gentile conversions on

their recent mission with signs and wonders. It remained for one last person to speak, and so when the discussion stopped, all eyes turned to James, the Lord's brother, who commanded great respect in the church.

He said, "Listen to me." They all did. Then he summarized Peter's speech in verse 14 in what can be described as God's plan of the ages, what good is doing in the present and what He will do in the future. It's obvious from what Peter said, what Paul and Barnabas had said, that in the present God is saving Gentile. He has, as James goes on to say, taken from among the Gentiles a people for His name. These are those of whom the Lord spoke in John chapter 10, when He said, "I have other sheep which are not of this fold." That is, not of the fold of Israel. "I must bring them also," and God was doing that. He was doing that through the salvation of the Gentiles. Peter and Paul and Barnabas all affirmed that.

And James says in verse 15 that the prophets agree. He could have quoted a number of prophets to support that statement, but he quotes one in part. He quotes the prophet Amos, who foretold a day of worldwide salvation and future glory for Israel. The whole book of Amos is about God's judgment on Israel. But in chapter 9, the final chapter of the book, Amos told of judgment that would come on Israel for its unbelief and its rebellion. The nation, the people, would be scattered among the Gentiles, scattered among the nations.

But that was not the end. Amos ends his prophecy with hope. He ends with a promise of blessing. There would be restoration. In that day, Amos wrote, "I will raise up," and here he's quoting the Lord God, "I will raise up the fallen booth of David and wall up his breaches. I will also raise up its ruins and rebuilt it as in the days of old." That's Amos 9:11. That is what James quotes in verse 16, but with a significant difference.

In both the Hebrew text and in the Greek translation of the Hebrew text, the Septuagint, the verse is "In that day I will raise up the fallen booth of David." But James says "After these things I will

return and I will rebuild the tabernacle of David which is fallen." His meaning is after this time of disciplinary judgment on the nation, there will be glory and restoration. But James recognized that the nation was presently in that time of discipline and it would remain in that period for a long time. That accounted for what was happening.

The nation had rejected the Lord. It had rejected its Messiah and so salvation was now going out to the Gentiles. This is what Paul develops in Romans 11 with the analogy of an olive tree. He speaks of the natural branches being broken off, the Jewish people being broken off of their olive tree. And wild branches from a wild olive tree being grafted in to Israel's olive tree. The wild branches are the Gentiles. And that describes Gentile salvation. That is what is going on today, going on in James' day, Paul's day. It's going on in the present day. This is a day of great Gentile salvation and it will continue, Paul says, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.

Then a change will occur and all Israel will be saved. that is Israel's future. God is not finished with the Jewish people, and James indicates that by saying "after these things." After this period of discipline, after this age of calling out the Gentiles, God will return, Christ will return and rebuild the tabernacle of David which is fallen.

Well, what is the tabernacle of David? It is a reference to David's household, the House of David, and to the promises made to David in 2 Samuel 7, the promise of an eternal kingdom, the promise that one of David's descendants, one of his line would sit on the throne, on David's throne, and rule over the earth. That promise is fulfilled in Christ, David's greatest descendant, David's Lord, and it will occur when the Lord returns and establishes His kingdom on the earth and reigns upon the earth for a thousand years. It'll be a time of great salvation.

That's the purpose of Israel's restoration and kingdom. That's what James indicates or is indicated in verse 17, "So that," for this purpose, "the rest of mankind may seek the Lord/And all the Gentiles who are called by My name." So it will be a time of Gentile, as well as

Jewish, salvation. It will be a time of worldwide salvation. The other prophets spoke of this as well. Isaiah did. In Isaiah 2, he spoke of a golden age, a time of peace when all the nations will come up to Jerusalem and they will learn God's ways and they will walk in His paths. It's never happened before. It's not happening today. That's a future hope. That is a golden age to come. The nations will be saved, but they will still have their national identities. All the nations, Isaiah said. And Amos made the same point. He spoke of all the Gentiles who bear God's name. They will be saved, but they will still be Gentiles. In other words, in the future Gentiles will be saved as Gentiles. They won't be saved by becoming Jews.

And James seizes on that point. He sees the significance of that. And in the present, it follows that the same is true. If Gentiles will not be saved by becoming Jews in the future, but will be saved as Gentiles and maintain their national identities, then it follows, does it not, that in the present Gentiles are being saved in the same way without becoming Jews? They don't need to adopt the Law. They don't need to become Jews in order to be saved. Based on that, James renders his decision in verse 19. He said that in his judgment they should stop troubling the Gentiles, meaning stop demanding circumcision. These people, they are saved through faith alone.

He refused to side with the party of the circumcision, but still, James was very sensitive to Jewish concerns and didn't want Gentiles to offend them, and so in verse 20 he recommended that a letter be written to the Gentiles with some guidelines of behavior. He urged that they abstain from four things: "From things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood." That is, meat that still has blood in it - non-kosher food.

Well, three of the four have to do with ceremonial regulations of the Law of Moses. The prohibition on fornication is probably not a reference to sexual promiscuity in general, though the Gentiles were notorious for that and there would have been legitimate reason to warn about that, but this is a letter written to Gentile Christians and they

already had that prohibition. They didn't need that. More likely, it has to do with the irregular marriages in Leviticus 18, such as marriages between blood relatives, which Gentiles practiced.

So this list of rules, of four rules, is given and the reason for them is given in verse 21. They were to guide Gentile liberty from offending Jewish sensitivities. There were synagogues in every city. This was the age of the Diaspora. There were Jewish communities all Gentile lands; in all major cities there synagogues. And so as a matter of being a good witness to the Jewish people and as a matter of not offending weaker Jewish people who had come to believe in Jesus Christ, who were Christians, they were to abstain from these things.

And there's a lesson in that from us. Freedom from the Law doesn't mean that liberty can be flaunted. You don't need to exercise your liberty to enjoy it. We are free not to use our liberty. In fact, we shouldn't use it when our liberty would cause a weaker brother or sister to stumble. In Mark 7:19, Christ declared all foods clean. We can eat anything. It's not sinful to eat pork. But we don't have to eat everything and we don't have to drink everything. What we do have to do is abstain from what would cause a brother or a sister to stumble. That's Christian love, which is the guiding principle of the Christian life, putting others ahead of ourselves, putting the gospel of Christ ahead of our own liberties.

So this was James' counsel, and the council there in Jerusalem accepted his judgment on grace and Law and agreed with his recommendation about a letter. It was draw up and it was sent to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, who were accompanied by two others, "Judas, called Barsabbas. And Silas, leading man among the brethren." The letter they carried back is recorded in verses 23-29. We won't read it. It's not necessary. But in it, the apostles and the elders of Jerusalem disassociated themselves from the party of the circumcision and they identified with Paul and Barnabas, whom they praised as men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, and then are listed those four prohibitions.

Well, the letter was well received in Antioch and the congregation rejoiced because of encouragement it gave, Luke tells us, and they were encouraged by that because they were accepted by the Jewish Christians as fellow believers, equal brothers and sisters in Christ and accepted by them without being placed under obligation to the Law of Moses.

And so after much trouble, the church in Antioch was again at peace and Paul and Barnabas resumed their ministry. Verse 35, they "stayed in Antioch teaching and preaching with many others also, the word of the Lord." It's because Paul knew the word of the Lord and because Barnabas knew the word of the Lord, and because they defended the truth of Scripture, because they defended the purity of the gospel, that the church in Antioch had peace and that the church of Antioch had joy and that the church of Antioch was encouraged. And it is the same with us. We will have joy in the Christian life. We will have peace in the Christian life because of the word of God and the truth of it and our obedience and our faithfulness to it.

And we are reminded from this that we must be prepared to defend the gospel of God's free grace now and always, because it is always under attack. Men are always wanting to change it into a religion or a gospel in which they can parade their accomplishments. And yet that's not the gospel. The gospel is the gospel of free grace. Augustus Toplady put it very well in his hymn "Rock of Ages." "Not the labors of my hands/Can fulfill Thy law's demands." And then the next stanza, "Nothing in my hand I bring/Simply to Thy cross I cling."

Are you clinging to the cross of Christ alone? Or are you trusting in something else? Baptism, perhaps; good deeds. Salvation has nothing to do with what we have done. It has everything to do with Christ and what He has done. Anything else, any addition to that is another gospel. It is a false gospel. Christ died for sinners. He paid the penalty in full. His death of the price of our salvation, and to have, a person can only receive it as a free gift and receive it through faith.

If you're here without Christ, if you've not believed in Him, know that you are a sinner in need of salvation. You can't produce that salvation. You can do nothing to gain that salvation. You can only receive by faith what Christ has done. And so do that. Look to Jesus Christ, trust in Him. The moment you do that, you will receive the full forgiveness of sin and life everlasting. May God help you to do that and help all of us to rejoice in the grace of God and the life that He has given us. Let's pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank You for Your goodness and Your grace. We thank You for all that Your Son has done for us. We're reminded of that from our text and reminded of how often men would turn us away from that. In fact, to be honest with ourselves and before You. That is our heart as well. That's the heart of man. And even though we have new hearts, we have lives that are filled with sin. We still struggle with that, the law of sin and our members, as Paul said in Romans 7.

And that sinful tendency within us, the flesh that wars against the Spirit would draw us away from the truth and would draw us into a work salvation in which we in our pride can boast in what we've done and parade our accomplishments. We'd be no different, Father, apart from the ministry of the Spirit of God, apart from Your grace. So keep us, Father, firm in the truth and make us valiant for truth, men and women who know it, understand it, and defend it.

It is for lack of knowledge that my people are destroyed. May we not fall into that error. Give us a clear knowledge of Your truth and the desire to live according to it. Thank you for it. Thank you for Your grace and the salvation we have in Your Son. And it's in His name we pray. Amen.