

ACTS CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Read vs. 1-5

1. Vs. 1 and 5 describe a doctrinal difference that arose in the church. Explain what the problem was.
2. When the argument couldn't be settled, they decided to _____.
Verse 2

This was no small issue. The point was that either we are saved by grace or we're not. Consider Eph. 2: 8 & 9. Anything we DO is a work – that includes circumcision, baptism, church membership or anything else.

The whole gospel is in danger. Paul had been preaching and people were seemingly saved, but if these teachers were correct, then they weren't really quite saved! Paul would have to return to each of those new converts and explain to them that they had only completed the first part of being saved. Now they must also learn all of the Jewish laws, rituals, holidays, food prohibitions. The men would all have to be circumcised. The gospel of grace is under attack.

Paul and Barnabas very wisely decided to return to Jerusalem and to meet with the church's founding fathers. He had respect for Peter, James, Judas, Silas and the other leaders who assembled. Peter stands up to give his testimony. He reminded them of what happened when he first went and shared the gospel with Gentiles. Then Paul and Barnabas tell about the miracles and signs that God had used to confirm their message of grace. James stands and quotes a passage from the book of Amos about Gentiles bearing the name of the Lord.

These godly men, guided by the Holy Spirit, carefully considered what they had seen and heard and read and they write their conclusions. That document not only brought great joy to the Gentile believers, it is still a bedrock doctrinal statement for us today. Truly we are saved by grace and grace alone. God's new covenant was not something added to the old covenant....it was a replacement for it. Please consider Hebrews chapter 8:6-13.

I would also like to consider this passage of this in terms of losing our salvation. The same principle applies. Either we are saved by God's grace or we are not. If we are saved by grace and then lose our salvation, then God's grace has failed. If we are saved initially by grace but dependent on our good works to keep us saved, then God's grace is insufficient. That's the issue in this passage. Do these Gentile believers have to DO something other than believe to be saved? Paul says in Gal. 5:13 that if a person is going to be circumcised to assure their salvation, then they might as well try to keep the whole law. It's an all or

nothing situation.

Consider John 10:27-30. Here we have a picture of Christ holding onto us. God has given believers to His Son as a gift and Christ is not letting go of them. It is not that we are holding onto Him. If that were the case, then yes, our salvation would constantly be at risk. But Christ is holding us and He is holding on forever!

Contemplate Gal 3:1-5. Paul asks the believers if they are so foolish as to think that the salvation they obtained by grace now has to be secured by good works. Isn't God's grace, that was sufficient to save us, also sufficient to keep us saved?

John 3:36 reminds us that if we have the Son, we have eternal life. Notice that it does not say that we will have eternal life, but that we do have it. Our eternal life starts at the very moment that we accept Christ. If we have eternal life and then lose it, was it ever eternal?

Read vs. 6-12

3. *Who is still in a leadership position in the church in Jerusalem? vs. 7*

This is the first we've heard about Peter in about six years.

4. *In vs. 7-9, Peter says he knows from personal experience that the Gentiles were being saved. What instance might he have been referring to? (see Acts 10:34-35 and 44-46)*

Once again we see God's wisdom in confirming the Gentile's salvation with the speaking in tongues. Peter could always think back to that experience and find reassurance that he rightly understood God's acceptance of Gentiles into His fold. God had given him the vision of the unclean animals and then he had seen Cornelius and his friends become Christians. They had received the Holy Spirit just like the Jews did at Pentecost. God had emphasized the point that there was no difference between the Gentiles becoming believers and the Jews becoming believers. Both had received the Holy Spirit in just the same way and both had manifested that event by speaking in tongues. Peter had witnessed it firsthand and now he is able to remind this council of that event. God had totally accepted Gentiles into His sheepfold without any conditions. Jesus had tried to explain this to His apostles in John 10:16. Now, as they are forced to think about this issue again, the light begins to dawn in their understanding. Now they are totally convinced in their own minds that this is truth.

5. *What was the proof that God had accepted the Gentiles? (vs.15:8)*

6. *The Gentiles had their hearts purified by _____ (vs.9)*

Everyone - Jew & Gentile was being saved by _____ vs. 11

They were not saved by doing good works or by keeping the law. If they weren't saved by these things, then why should they think that those things could keep them saved?

Even today we often insinuate to others that there are additional things that they must do before Godand other believers.....can fully accept them into the family of God. Standards for conduct, clothing, leisure time, church attendance, child rearing, etc. are elevated to an equal par with Scripture. God, who draws people to Himself, convicts them and saves them, is certainly up to the task of teaching them how to live godly lives also. We should never try to be the Holy Spirit in someone else's life. Let God continue His work of grace in their lives. It would be wise of us to follow James's advice in Acts 15:19 and not make it difficult for others to come to Christ.

7. *Peter describes the keeping of the law like a yoke on the neck. Who couldn't keep the law?*

Review Gal. 3:24 & 25. The law was meant to lead the Jews to Christ. It was to show them how a righteous life is lived. Those who realized they couldn't lead that righteous life perfectly, came to God for help and received his mercy and grace by their faith. Those who refused to admit that they were failing, became more and more self-righteous. Admitting that we are sinners and that we are not able to attain God's righteous standard has always been the first step in salvation.

It is easier to make corrections when you are headed down the right path to start with. That path was the law. The Jews mistakenly thought the path itself brought righteousness. They failed to find Christ at the end of it.

Read vs. 13-29

8. *In vs. 13-18, James quotes from Amos 9:11-12. He points out in vs. 17 that God had told the Jews previously that _____.*

The Jews were taught from childhood that they were God's chosen people. They interpreted that to mean that anyone who wasn't Jewish was sub-human. Gentiles weren't fit company. It was forbidden for a Jew to enter the house of a Gentile. If a Jew married a Gentile, that person was no longer considered part of the family. Sometimes even a funeral would be held for them.

With that in mind, we can see what a huge step this was for the Jews to accept that Gentiles could now be a part of God's family, just like them. It was only those Jews who were also believers who could have grace and love toward Gentile believers. Self-righteous Jews who were counting on their heritage to get them into heaven were not going to accept this new thought. They will continue to cause trouble all through the rest of the book of Acts.

9. *In vs. 19-21, James shares his best judgment that the Gentiles shouldn't be burdened with the law except for a few things that would be particularly offensive to their Jewish neighbors. What were those things?*

See Gen. 9:4. God had given instruction about not eating blood before the law was ever

given. Blood represents life which is always sacred to God.

Idolatry and fornication were moral issues that all people should observe. It was a very big issue in those days because believers were steeped in those traditions. Can you see this today also? Sexual sin is so accepted today that young people don't even consider that it might be sin.....it is just what everyone does and how everyone lives.

10. The council agreed with James' insight and decided to _____
(vs. 22 & 23)

11. Paul & Barnabas were particularly respected because: _____.

12. Judas & Silas were sent to verify the letter by: _____.
(vs. 27)

The four men were dispatched with a letter to explain the council's decision. Paul and Barnabas would go, of course, but Judas and Silas were also sent as special representatives of the council in Jerusalem. This was a monumental, game changing decision. The council would send enough authority with the letter that no misunderstanding would be made. Praise God today for the freedom that you enjoy through the grace of God!

Read vs. 30-41

13. How was the letter received in Antioch? (vs. 31)

They now had freedom in Christ. They were free to follow the Spirit's guiding in their lives without worrying about the Jewish laws. Do you experience this freedom in your own life or are you burdened with unwritten laws of "Christianity" that have been placed on you throughout your life by other well-intentioned people? God wants you to experience His freedom and His joy. You will know how to live for God because the Spirit will guide you and you will respond out of thankfulness for all that God has done for you. Please read and carefully consider Heb. 8:10 and Gal. 5:16.

14. Who stayed in Antioch to build up the church? (vs. 34 & 35)

Notice the two things that were done to help strengthen and build up the church: they taught and preached the word of the Lord. Many other ideas and programs draw leaders away from this truth, but it is as true today and it was in Paul's day. Spiritual growth occurs when the word of God is taught and preached. Paul and Barnabas no doubt enjoyed this time of respite back in Antioch, but they are soon anxious to get back to their missionary lives.

15. What is Paul's idea in vs. 36?

They had great love and concern for all of the new believers and the new churches that they had established. They were constantly in prayer for them. Paul wrote them letters of

encouragement and instruction, but his heart ached to see them and talk to them again in person.

16. *Barnabas wanted to take John Mark with them. Why didn't Paul think it was a good idea? (vs. 38 and also 13:13)*

17. *What was the relationship between Barnabas and John Mark? (Col 4:10)*

Barnabas was always the encourager. He was the compassionate one who was willing to help people and to give them support. Remember that it was Barnabas who first trusted Paul and believed that he was truly saved. It was Barnabas who helped Paul get established and accepted. (Acts 9:26 & 27) The leaders sent Barnabas to Antioch to help those new believers get established. It was Barnabas who saw this as an opportunity to help Paul get involved. (Acts 11:22-26)

Paul was the student of the scriptures. He was the one who would teach the great doctrines of the faith. He took his work extremely seriously. He held himself and others to a high degree of accountability. He and Barnabas made a great team. They complimented each other's strengths. Too often we fail to see that as an advantage and let our differences become a point of contention instead.

18. *How did Paul later feel about John Mark? (2 Tim. 4:11)*

What does this tell you about John Mark?

What does this tell you about Paul?

I am thankful for these later references to Paul wanting to have John Mark with him. Apparently John Mark had matured, both physically and spiritually. He had won over the confidence of Paul. I'm also thankful for this example that we have in Paul's life. He didn't hold a grudge. He gave John Mark another opportunity and they served together as brothers in Christ.

19. *What was the result of Paul and Barnabas' disagreement? (vs. 39-41)*

How is this an illustration of Romans 8:28?

We'll never know who was more in the right about John Mark. But we do see that God's promise to turn things around for good was at work. God can take even things that seem to be bad and turn them into a blessing. It wasn't good for Paul and Barnabas to have such a sharp disagreement. We wish that scripture had recorded that they prayed together and worked things out! But God records things as they really happened. God used both men to lead missionary trips and eventually they both agreed about John Mark. We can praise God for His patience with us and for the promise of Romans 8:28.