

Guarding the Gospel (Acts 15:1-11)^a

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Context

1. **Paul and Barnabas have just returned to Antioch in Syria ending the 1st Missionary Journey**
2. **Paul had focused on convincing Jews that Jesus was the promised Messiah of the Old Testament**
3. **Although some Jews believed, many did not**
4. **Surprisingly, many Gentiles responded in faith**
5. **Acts chapter 14 ends: *Now when they had come and gathered the church together, they reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. So they stayed there a long time with the disciples (Acts 14:27-28)***

Passage (Acts 15:1-11)

[1] And certain [men] came down from Judea and taught the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” [2] Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question. [3] So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren. [4] And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them. [5] But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command [them] to keep the law of Moses.” [6] Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. [7] And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: “Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. [8] So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as [He did] to us, [9] and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. [10] Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? [11] But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ

we shall be saved in the same manner as they.”¹

The problem

1. **Men from Judea - believing Jews**
2. **v2 - *Unless . . . you cannot be saved***²
3. **Not something *recommended* or *allowed*, but required in order to be saved**

How important is this?

1. **v2 - In Antioch: “Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them”**
2. **v7 - In Jerusalem: “And when there had been much dispute”**
 - A. The Greek word for “dispute” (ζητέσεως [zēteseōs]) includes the idea of *argument, debate, and controversy*
 - B. Many Christians today discourage spirited disagreements over doctrine—which are seen as ungodly, irreverent, or even worse: irrelevant
 - C. Yet, guarding doctrinal purity has always been an important function—if not a priority—of the Church
 - D. If Paul was as *laissez faire* as many Christians today, I doubt we would have much of the New Testament—as his writings were often motivated out of a concern for doctrinal truth (and its proper application)
3. **Why was this “detail” such a big deal?**
4. **Because it isn’t a detail: it concerns the very heart of the gospel!**
5. **It was this very issue which prompted Paul to write his first letter in A.D. 49, the Book of Galatians.**
 - A. The Book of Galatians was written to churches—in Galatia—the same churches Paul and Barnabas had just established on their first missionary journey
 - B. Centuries later, Galatians would play such a key role in the Reformation that

it would be called “the cornerstone of the Protestant Reformation”⁴

C. Luther was so attached to the Book of Galatians that he actually referred to it as his “wife”

D. Galatians has been referred to as “The Magna Charta of Christian Liberty”

6. The disagreement resulted in an appeal to higher authorities: the apostles and elders in Jerusalem — an event now referred to as “The Jerusalem Council.”

A. (In so doing, those opposing Paul added insult to injury by rejected his apostolic authority.)

What is the gospel?

1. **Greek term: εὐαγγέλιον [euangelion] = “good message”**

2. **What makes it a “good message”, why is it “good news”?**

3. **The gospel is good news because it provides the remedy to from some very bad news**

A. The bad news: man is unable to live righteously, unable to keep God’s commandments in a manner which satisfies God’s righteous requirements

I. The Bible makes this plain in a multitude of passages, from which I will now cite a tiny fraction:

a. *In [God’s] sight no one living is righteous (Ps. 143:2)*

b. *For there is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin (Ecc. 7:20)*

c. *No one is good but One, that is, God (Luke 18:19)*

d. *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23)*

II. Not only is this truth Biblical, it is is self-evident, both in our own lives and as testified by the news

III. Even a secular observer, writing a history of world war 2, observed: “. . .

tragically it seems that human nature is such that every society has enough misfits, fanatics, sadists and murderers to run concentration camps.”⁵

B. Without God’s intervention, every one of us is qualified and bound for hell

4. How important is it to clearly communicate this good news?

A. If the gospel is perverted, the way of salvation is distorted

B. If the way of salvation is distorted, men and women may not be able to enter by the narrow gate (Mat. [7:13](#); Luke [13:24](#))

C. The eternal destiny of men and women hangs in the balance!

Peter’s pronouncement

1. How was it that Peter seems so responsive and clear on this issue?

A. He had already been rebuked publicly by Paul while visiting the church at Antioch when he withdraw from the Gentiles (Gal. [2:11-14](#))

B. Peter addresses three issues

1. How are Gentiles saved?
2. How are Jews saved?
3. How does the law relate to salvation?

2. #1 - How are Gentiles saved?

A. v7 - . . . *by my mouth the Gentiles [heard] the word of the gospel and [believed]*

I. When was this? About ten years earlier, in A.D. 39, at the house of Cornelius in Acts chapter 10.

B. v8 - *God . . . acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit*

I. How did Peter know this?

a. *And those of the circumcision [Jews] who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. For they*

heard them speak with tongues and magnify God. . . . (Acts 10:45-46)

II. At what moment did this happen?

- a. Peter was in the midst of presenting the message of salvation, and had just reached the critical part concerning Jesus
- b. *“To Him [Jesus] all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins.” While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word* (Acts 10:43-44)

III. What did the Gentiles *do* which elicited God’s response: giving them the Holy Spirit?

- a. They *believed in Him*, they placed their trust in Jesus
- b. Period! Nothing more!
- c. The equation of salvation is extremely simple: belief = salvation
 - i. *whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins* (Acts 10:43)
 - ii. *whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life* (John 3:16)
 - iii. *And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day* (John 6:40)
- d. What is the single requirement for salvation: BELIEF - placing one’s trust in Jesus, what He has done on the cross which atones for our sin

3. #2 - How are Jews saved?

- A. vv. 8-9, . . . just as He did to us, and making no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith
- B. v. 15, through the grace of if the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they

I. Turns the question on its head!

II. Can Gentiles be saved? If so, how? What must they do?

III. As a Jew, we expect Peter to say, “they (the Gentiles) are saved like we Jews”

IV. Instead, he says, “we Jews shall be saved in the same manner as those (previously second-class) Gentiles!”

C. Purifying their hearts by faith

4. #3 - How does the law relate to salvation?

A. v. 10, *Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?*

I. The Jews were never able to keep the law

II. If the law had been the means of salvation, then no Jews were ever saved

a. Paul observed, *We who are Jews . . . [know] that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, . . . that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified (Gal. 2:15-16)*

B. Why? Because keeping God’s commands is an all-or-nothing proposition

I. *And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law* (Gal. 5:3)

a. Not just the “big ten” - the Ten Commandments

b. All the other 603 “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not”

c. Perfectly, continuously, without fail: from conception to death

II. Picking some favorite element of the law to “keep” doesn’t cut the mustard!

a. Circumcision

b. Sabbath

c. Feasts

III. Those who attempt to be justified in God's sight through their own efforts fail to appreciate the weight of the law

a. As Paul said, *Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law?* (Gal. 4:21)

IV. Worse: any attempt to earn standing before God through works is a denial of the work of Christ

a. Denies the need of the cross

i. *And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross (Col. 2:13-14)*

- Jesus has taken the law, the need to keep all the rules to be saved, out of the way!
- Yet there are believers who seem continually bent on retrieving the law from the cross and applying this or that aspect as some form of performance in their walk.

ii. Paul wrote: *I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness [comes] through the law, then Christ died in vain.* (Gal. 2:21)

b. Worse, results in alienation from Christ

i. *You have become estranged from Christ, you who [attempt to] be justified by law; you have fallen from grace* (Gal. 5:4)

Guarding the gospel

1. Faith+: adding to faith, how much is enough?

A. Men from Judea at Antioch: requirement is circumcision

B. Pharisees at Jerusalem: requirement is circumcision *and* keep the law of Moses

I. To their benefit, they understood the all-or-nothing requirement of keeping the law (Gal. 5:3)

C. A creeping legalism - all perversions of the gospel add something, thereby destroying the very essence of the gospel — by attempting to mix works with grace

I. Circumcision

II. Law of Moses

III. Attending Mass

IV. Baptism

V. Membership in a certain church or denomination (e.g., Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic)

VI. Avoidance of certain sins (e.g., “mortal sins”)

VII. Keeping rules

a. How long is the list?

b. How perfectly must they be kept?

2. If Faith+ is makes life so difficult, why is it so popular, so prevalent?

A. Appeals to the flesh: feeds our sense of self-righteousness

I. In any system of works, redemption depends upon man’s merit rather than God’s unmerited grace

II. Jews, seeking to be self righteous, miss God’s righteousness

a. *For they [the Jews] being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. For Christ [is] the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Rom. 10:3-4)*

B. Avoids the “offense of the cross” (1Cor. 1:23; Gal. 5:11; 6:12; Heb. 13:13)

C. A handy tool for manipulating people

I. You *must* join our church, be baptized, tithe, be at every service, etc.

- II. A pot-load of monkeys suitable for casting on the backs of unknowledgeable Christians, often by Church leadership
- D. A tool of Satan to undermine the gospel
- E. Grace scuttles works — the two are mutually exclusive
 - I. *Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness (Rom. 4:4-5)*
 - II. Grace is absolutely pure “whiteness”
 - III. A work, however minor, is as a dollop of black
 - IV. Mixing works into grace results in grey—however subtle the resulting color may appear, it is no longer pure white

Separates Christianity from all other religions

1. **If anyone had reason to trust in religious performance, it was the Apostle Paul**
2. **Hear Paul’s conclusion: . . . *If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, [of] the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ (Php. 3:4-7)***
3. **How will your life be evaluated by God? By your own feeble and imperfect works? Or by His abundant and perfect grace?**

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Endnotes:

1. [Acts 15:1-11](#), NKJV
 2. Their view may have been influenced by passages such as [Gen. 17:14](#); [Ex. 12:48-49](#).
 3. [Ref-0038](#), 2:587
 4. "In the early church, as the separation between Judaism and Christianity was taking place, the letter to the Galatians no doubt helped clarify that cleavage. Centuries later it played such a key role in the Reformation that it was called "the cornerstone of the Protestant Reformation."³
 5. [Ref-1296](#), 82
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Sources:

- Acts 15:1-11** Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture references are from the *New King James Version*, copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
- Ref-0038** John Walvoord and Roy. B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: SP Publications, 1983).
- Ref-1296** Andrew Roberts, *The Storm of War* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2011). ISBN:[978-0-06-122859-9](#)^d.
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Links Mentioned Above

- a - See http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Acts_by_Tony_Garland/50_Acts_15_1-11/index.htm.
- b - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/tg.htm>.
- c - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org>.
- d - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/isbn.htm?978-0-06-122859-9>.