

The Jerusalem Council  
Acts 15

Hebrews 3

Luke 12:1-12

Responsive Psalm 84

As we have been going through this book of Acts, there has been a building, an intensifying not only of the Gospel message, but also of the opposition to it. At this point that we are at this morning starting out in chapter 15, there has already been a lot that has happened. We have seen the fulfillment of what Jesus told his Disciples back in Chapter 1 verse 8, when he tells them, "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, Samaria, and to the end of the earth. At this point we have seen how the gospel has spread throughout Israel, but it didn't stop there but instead has reached into the far corners of the world through the Ethiopian Eunuch, through Cornelius the Roman Centurion, and what we read last week in Posidian Antioch where Paul and Barnabas brought the gospel to the pagan Gentiles there, it is says that many believed.

But along with the success of the gospel mission reaching far into the corners of the world as Jesus had foretold, also along with it came persecution and opposition even to the point like we saw in our text in chapter 14, that there were some men from Jerusalem who had come and stirred up dissension in the crowd causing this very same crowd who believed Paul and Barnabas to be Gods, to instead turn against them and seek to stone and kill them. I find it interesting, that the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem had their own missionary outreach...but it seems in their case the purpose was to sow seeds to dissension, and to bring strife and persecution to those who were sent out to spread the gospel message of Christ. A sorta anti-missionary who instead of going out to preach and teach appear to have the express purpose of stirring up persecution to those who follow Jesus, or at the very least as we see in Galatians, sorta sow in seeds of doubt, and to attempt to bring back those who God has saved by grace back into the bondage of the law, teaching that it is the following of the law, and the practicing their traditions that justified one before God, seeking to bring them all again under the authority of the Sanhedrin, and the Jewish leaders.

That being said, the opposition that we will see in our text today is different, for it arises from inside the brethren, a controversy arises among the believers to a point where it can no longer be ignored and must be addressed. This chapter is called by many as the turning-point, or the center-piece of Luke's writing, in this chapter is the the resolution of the issue that has arisen after Peter's preaching to Cornelius, and the result of the growing church in Antioch in Syria, and Paul and Barnabas missionary journey. Gentiles have now entered into the fold, are now gathering with the Jewish believers to worship God which arose a conflict between the two. These issues has to be resolved before Paul could continue his work and continue to take the gospel to the Gentiles. So let us go ahead and read out passage this morning, Again we are going to take the entire chapter this morning since it is basically one event which plays out over the course of the chapter. So starting in verse 1, let us read Acts chapter 15.

So as we see this dispute that has arisen with this flood of Gentile believers now being brought into the fold there becomes this idea, and desire that they, that is the Gentile believers must take upon them selves the sign of the covenant made with Abraham, that is circumcision. Therefore in a sense becoming ceremonial Jews and as we see so much emphasis is put upon this practice that there was some who were saying that one can not even be saved without it. So as you can see, this is no small matter that has come up, and it isn't difficult to see what Paul believes that this must be resolved before there can be much further outreach to the Gentiles.

This issue came from Judea, as we see in verse 1 it says, that certain men came from Judea and had become to teach this idea that circumcision was needed for salvation, and we see that Paul and Barnabas are appointed to return back to Jerusalem in an attempt to set this straight, Jerusalem was initially the source of this problem as we have seen that the Jewish leaders there had been sending out their own missionaries to go into the cities where the gospel has been preached in an attempt to bring those who believe under the authority of the Jewish counsel and beliefs. But Jerusalem is also the location in which this issue is resolved, for it is not only the central location to the Jewish faith, it is also the central location of the Christian faith for it is there where the Apostles ministered, and it was there that the church was first established with the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the people at Pentecost. So it is only fitting that it is in Jerusalem that a council would be formed to resolve this issue of the Mosaic law and its requirements and whether or not the now believing Gentiles should be brought under it.

It was widely accepted that Gentiles could become proselytes of Judaism, and by doing so would therefore share in the blessings promised to Israel. In Genesis when the sign of the circumcision was given to Abraham he was told that all the men in his household was to be circumcised, not just his offspring, even those who were servants. So it was understood that one does not need to be a physical descendant of Abraham alone, but can make a vow to uphold the law given to Moses, but to do so one must first be circumcised. Male converts to Judaism would be circumcised, and the whole family would then strive to live in obedience to the law. But the one thing that these Judaisers who were encouraging, or rather commanding that those who follow Christ must also be circumcised failed to grasp the radical change in God's dealing with nations brought about by the coming of Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit. It would seem that initially this debate was resolved back with the account of Cornelious, seeing that God had granted the Gentiles repentance and that the Holy Spirit came upon them as well, and all while not becoming Jewish proselytes first.

But it is apparent, especially by our text this morning that there were many among them who did not agree and were yet persuaded that circumcision and the keeping of the Mosaic law was still necessary for eternal salvation. This debate is rather an important one, it is not merely a debate of what constitutes the proper conduct of a believer, but it goes to the heart of the matter and asks the question, what constitutes a true conversion? Is a Gentile truly saved apart from the law? Is a Jew? What role does the law now play in this post resurrection era now with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. These are all questions that we here can answer, for we find the answers later in Paul's writing, and in the writing of James and the other Apostles. That is, the law was a tutor...it was given to point to something greater, not to of itself offer salvation but rather expose the fact that there is no power within man to which can bring justification of oneself before God. Even given clearly the righteous requirements only shows that one can not of himself keep it. But now Christ has come, surely with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit one can keep the law right?

This was likely the thinking of the Judiasing Christians, they did not see Christ as the fulfillment, but rather as an enabler. In their minds, Christ has now enabled the Gentiles to keep the law properly, he has merely opened the door for more to enter in and to be under the Mosaic Law. But to do so is to discount the work of Christ. For he did not come to merely make us able to now keep the law, but he himself fulfilled it taking its righteous punishment for those who break it upon himself. Which is... spoiler alert....everyone, for that was the point of the sermon on the mount, that there is no one who can keep it except the Son of God, therefore we need one who could keep it, and take the punishment of our failure upon himself.

Now that transaction is done, there is no need to be focused upon the Mosaic law, not even the 10 commandments themselves, for they have all been established and fulfilled in Christ, and the punishment, and curse of the law has been paid in full upon the cross. The reality is, to go back to the law is at one level a rejection of the work of Christ, it is in essence to say that the salvation that Christ has purchased is not enough, but that we must also do these works. This really is a rather important issue that has arisen, for it directly correlates to the gospel itself, how it is shared, and how it is administered. Looking at verse 2, it says, "Therefore when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them" This was a serious issue, worthy of serious debate, and upon seeing how these men came down from Judea to bring about this false teaching and seeing the effect it was having upon the Gentiles at Antioch, they also became concerned for the other churches that were established on their missionary journey that they had recently completed.

So, I say that they were determined that Paul and Barnabas and others should return to Jerusalem to set this controversy straight. It is important to note here I think that this was not Paul and Barnabas acting on their own, but rather it was in one accord with the local church in Antioch, and with other apostles and elders who were all seeing the importance of resolving this issue. In the following verses as it says they journeyed back to Jerusalem and on the way told of how the Gentiles had come to also believe is setting forth sort of the direction of this narrative, that the Gentiles had come to faith, apart from the law. Their faith was established without the law, deeming such practices not only unnecessary but false. The conclusion of the argument is that God had been saving the Gentiles on the same basis as the Jews, namely through faith in Jesus as the crucified and resurrected Messiah. Such reports of Paul and Barnabas mission bringing the gospel to the Gentiles was received and largely celebrated by many as we see in verse 3, as they brought this news to the churches as they journeyed through it says that it caused great joy to all the brethren.

Only the Apostles and Elders are mentioned in verse 6, as forming this sort of council to deal with this issue, but as we can see by the approving praise of many of these churches, and the concern of the Church at Antioch to send them to Jerusalem to resolve this issue it was not merely the Apostles acting on their own, but with the support from a majority of the churches. Ben Witherington notes, that the way to solve conflict in those days was to call a meeting of the assembly of the people and listen to consider speeches, following by conversations of deliberative rhetoric with the aim to overcome conflict and produce unity. And it is on this basis that we see this speech from Peter, in verse 7-11. This latter portion of chapter 15 is this discourse, the apostles, and disciples putting forth their argument to the people of the Jerusalem church that since salvation has come to the Gentiles apart from the law, that there is as Peter says in verse 10, "Why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we are able to bear? "

Salvation is by faith, not by works which man can not and never has been able to attain. As we have seen in all of these accounts with the belief comes the Holy Spirit, and with the Holy Spirit a change of heart. It is not by some adherence to laws or traditions that has brought salvation to the Gentiles, but it was merely by the preaching of the gospel, the hearing of the word, and the faith that was given for belief. Now that the Holy Spirit has come, and is indwelling in all those who believe, not just the Jews, but the Gentiles as well...there is now a supernatural working with the hearts of God's people to will and to do all things according to his good pleasure.

There is now one greater than the law who has established this new law upon our hearts, that is Jesus Christ himself. For if he indeed has established your faith, and if he indeed has given a heart able to believe and trust him, then rest assured he is also working in your will conviction to abstain from sin, but not only that, this new found love for our savior which springs up from within is also the driving force of our good works.

Looking at this letter that they then wrote after coming to an agreement about this debate they establish that circumcision and adherence to the law is unnecessary for salvation, as they wrote in verse 28 “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things.” In the following verse there is a list that they implore the Gentiles to abstain from. It should be noted that this is not a new law given, this is not replacing one set of rules for another but rather is a notification and instruction to abstain from behavior that was culturally acceptable in the gentile pagan cities..for though it may have been social acceptable, it was contrary to the things of God. This is an important detail to point out for we even deal with such issues today. As society more and more becomes accepting of things that are expressly opposed by scripture, we must be ready to take a stand against it, just because it is accepted by our society or culture does not make it right. Society does not dictate what is right and wrong, it is God who does so. Despite things being socially or culturally acceptable, we as Christians must stand for what God has deemed to be right. It is not our culture, nor or society which determines ultimately what is right and wrong, for both of those things are rooted in the human experience which is at the very least tainted by sinful lusts and desires and at the most driven by them, but God who is the righteous and mighty judge is the one who has determined these things.

It is he whom we should hear, for he stands as judge to the world and each and every individual who has lived, and who will live must stand before him in the last days. But for those who are his adopted children this is not a moment of fear and condemnation, for not only is he the righteous judge of this world, he is also the merciful savior who has come and taken the judgment of sin and paid the penalty of it already for his people. Those who's lives are in Christ are free of the condemnation, free of the bondage of sin, free from its everlasting staining effect, and we do not look to the judgment in fear and trembling, but rather in hopeful anticipation for with it comes the culmination of our salvation, the shedding of this sinful flesh to be adorned in holy robes and to gather at the feet of he who gave his life so that we may live. Despite what the world deems right or wrong, we must stand in the truth of the word, and rest in the faith and knowledge that we ,even though rejected by this society are special children whom God loves. Even in this we see a fulfillment of Israel, whom God set apart. Think of how the nation of Israel must have looked to the surrounding Pagan societies, with their strict adherence to the law, their eating habits and the like. God set them apart to be a peculiar people who stand out for the sake of a clear witness, throughout the entire old testament there are accounts of kings and others confessing that the God of Israel is the one true God for it was clear that he was with Israel.

So to it is for us today, we have been saved out of this world, though we are in it, we are not a part of it, we have been set aside for greater, we have been promised a better land. Our beliefs set us apart, it makes us a peculiar people who stand against sin, even though it may be acceptable by society. And we do so, not out of some sense of piety, or self justification, but purely out of the love of our savior who gave his all so that we may be set apart for this purpose and for his glory. As the world moves ever forward, designing and plotting new ways to carry out old sins, we who are faithful stand out as those who do not follow such trends, for our eyes are upon our savior, and it is he whom we seek to please, not our selves, not others, but Christ alone, so we stand against the sins of this world, being set apart for such a stand, and we bear witness to God, in whom is the only hope of salvation from eternal judgment and condemnation.

I ask this morning, are you such? Has God taken you and set you apart from this world? If so, then be bold for it is the very God of this universe who as set you there, and has put you exactly where you are to reach out to those around you. He has made you to stand out for his names sake, so that your life maybe a witness to his holy nature, and act as a light shining into this dark world. And this light, is not the law of Moses, our witness is not the keeping of this law..but rather it is the reflection of God's love working outwardly through us, the very love that caused him to die, is the same love that flows out of us, we are a reflection of that love, and it is a part of our witness for it lights our very lives. So I challenge you this morning, abide in his love, do good, and be bold, for it is the task that is set before us, indeed it is our purpose, and meaning...to worship God, and to be a witness of his Glorious grace to a fallen sin sick world.