

O Church Arise: Through the Book of Acts

Grace Alone (Acts 15)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on June 21, 2015

Introduction

- ❖ For me, becoming a Christian was pretty easy. There wasn't much of a struggle. I didn't grow up in a Christian home, but my parents were never against it. They actually encouraged me going to church. And they let me attend our church's summer youth camp (Discovery Camp). And there I heard the gospel preached for the first time.
 - ▶ I heard about this good news, that Jesus the Son of God loves me and died for my sins and rose again to give me new life and the hope of heaven. **And he stressed how no one is born a Christian. You're not raised Christian.** Yes, you can be raised with Christian values, but that doesn't make you a Christian. You have to believe in the gospel, to trust in Jesus. Salvation is a gift of grace to be received by child-like faith.
 - As I sat there listening to that speaker, I realized I wasn't a Christian. But I wanted to be. So I put my trust in Jesus. I received God's grace. I became a Christian. Like I said, there was no struggle. It felt easy. Perhaps *too* easy.

- ❖ **When something is offered to me for free, I assume it's not worth much.** If I'm in a store and I accidentally break something but apologize to the store owner, if he tells me not to worry about it, then I assume that item was probably cheap and replaceable. But if the store owner demands that I pay for it, then I must of broke something very valuable.
 - ▶ **So if my sin broke a relationship with God, but if he's willing to forgive me after a simple apology, that seems to imply a relationship with him must not be all that valuable.** It must be cheap and replaceable.
 - Of course that flies in the face of everything the Bible says about God and his infinite worth and the preciousness of his salvation. **But if God is *so* great and his salvation is *so* amazing, then how could it be so free and easy?** How could it cost you nothing? But that's what they kept telling me, "*It's free, Jason. Don't worry about it. That's beauty of grace. You don't need to do a thing!*"

- ❖ That still didn't sit right with me. If God is all you say he is, if his salvation is as great as you claim it to be, then I ought to do something more than just ask for forgiveness and believe. It's got to be harder than that. It has to cost me something.
 - ▶ **And so out of a sense of what I thought was a reverence to God – a desire to honor the true worth of his salvation – I became a heretic.** I ventured into heresy. I strayed from the gospel of grace. And I wouldn't be surprised if most of you have done the same at some point in your experience of God and the gospel.

- ❖ Now you might chafe at that suggestion because in your mind a heretic is someone who tries to subtract from the gospel. Someone who denies a core doctrine like the divinity of Christ. That's heresy. And you've never done that. You've never subtracted from the gospel.
 - ▶ **But what's far subtler and harder to detect is heresy that comes in the form of addition.** Where you're not trying to subtract from the gospel but add to it. Just a little bit. So that the gospel now says you're saved by Christ *and* _____. And you can fill in that blank with all sorts of things. It usually centers on some contribution of yours.

- ❖ But there's no denying of Christ. There's no denying that you need his grace. **It's just saying that God is so great and salvation is so precious, that it would be an insult to come empty handed.** You've got to bring something to the table. Some degree of holiness. Some level of seriousness in your personal discipline and devotion. Or some measure of dedication to the Lord or his church. Or else you're treating him and his salvation as cheap and replaceable.
 - ▶ *Do you see how attractive this can be? How easy it is to fall into this line of thinking?* It seems innocent because the motivation comes from a good place. **But nonetheless, if you believe or if you teach that you need Christ *and* something on your part to be saved – if you're saved by grace *and* something – then you're a heretic and you're teaching heresy.** That's not my own opinion. That's the conclusion arrived at by the Jerusalem Council all the way back in the first-century, in chapter 15 of Acts.

- ❖ In this morning's passage, we come to the heart of the book. The debate and the decision made at the Jerusalem Council defines the rest of Acts. This book is all about God's Church being established and sent forth on a gospel mission radiating out from Jerusalem (from a Jewish origin) to other nations, other tribes and tongues, to the ends of the earth.
 - ▶ **And the theological sticking point is whether or not these Gentile converts to Christianity need to convert as well to Judaism.** If they're supposed to receive the grace that comes through Jesus *and* embrace the law that came through Moses.

- ❖ This is not some ancient theological debate. **This debate strikes a chord in each of us. If you've ever felt that salvation by grace alone seems too good of a deal.** Too good to be true. Then this speaks to you. Chapter 15 teaches about the importance of *gospel community*, *gospel liberty*, and *gospel charity*.

Wholly Committed to a Gospel Community

- ❖ I want to start by talking about the importance of church. **I want to you to see from this passage why every believer should be wholly committed to a gospel community.** I'm talking about a church where the gospel is the primary thing that identifies and unites us. It's the honey that attracts. It's the glue that binds. We should be committed to a *gospel* community. I know that's not the main point (we'll get to that next), but it is an important inference.
 - ▶ It's particularly relevant in a day and age where the individual and individual self-expression is elevated over against a commitment to a diverse community where not everyone is going to think like me, act like me, or agree with me.

- ❖ When evaluating a church, we tend to operate out of that mindset. We ask: ***Does this church fit with me? Do these people think like me? Do they act like me? Do they agree with me?*** And if not, then I'll move on to another church. And if I just can't find one that really fits me, then that's fine. It's not that important as long as I have my own relationship with God, my own time with the Lord, or my own small group made up those who really do fit me.
 - ▶ What do you end up with? **You end up with homogeneous pockets of Christians who gather (if at all) and find their primary unity not in a shared gospel but in a shared set of cultural tastes and preferences.**

- ❖ Just imagine if the Christians in the churches of Antioch and Jerusalem operated out of that mindset. The events of Acts 15 would have never occurred! The churches would've just gone their separate ways. There would've been no need to hold a Council and debate whether circumcision was central to the gospel. **Because the gospel wouldn't have been their unifying principle! It could've been their preferences.** Let's agree to disagree. You can have your church were Gentiles don't have to get circumcised, and I'll have mine where they do.
 - ▶ But that's not what happened. That's not how the early Christians viewed the church. **Their primary concern was not whether this church aligned with their opinions and preferences but whether it aligned with the gospel once for all delivered to the saints.** And as long as the gospel of grace is at the center of our community, if it's the glue that keeps us together, we can learn to appreciate and celebrate our differences.

- ❖ We all know it's easy to find deep community and a real sense of unity in a small group of your peers. Where everyone is in your life stage and has the same background. Or everyone shares the same interests or ideology. That kind of community is easy to form and pretty easy to find.
 - ▶ But that's not the vision of a New Testament church. It's not the vision we're given here in Acts 15. **Here's a picture of local churches wholly committed to the gospel and individual believers wholly committed to their local church.**
 - And in that church you'll be worshipping among and finding deep community with individuals you used to scorn, you used to look down on, you used to fear or avoid altogether. But the honey that drew us together and the glue that binds us tight is our common faith and baptism, our one and same Lord who fills us with his one and same Spirit.

- ❖ You should really ask yourself: *Where do I find my deepest Christian community? Is it just between a small group of peers with whom I share the same tastes and preferences?* I'm likely preaching to the choir since you're here after all. But if you haven't committed yourself to a gospel-centered church (whether ours or another), if that's not where you find your deepest community, then you have yet to experience the unifying power of the gospel. And you're missing out on the kind of community envisioned here in Acts 15.

Doctrinally Inflexible When it Comes to Gospel Liberty

- ❖ If the church's unity is founded upon the gospel, then we have to take the gospel very seriously and seriously defend it against any attempts to subtract from it or add to it. **So let's return to the main burden of this passage and that's the need to be doctrinally inflexible when it comes to gospel liberty.**

- ❖ We learn in chapter 14 that there's a growing gospel ministry in the Antioch church. Especially among Gentiles, the non-Jews. **They were being converted out of their paganism and into a relationship with Christ, the Jewish Messiah. But they weren't converting to Judaism.** They weren't becoming Jews. They were following Christ as Gentiles. Discipleship was being contextualized to their culture. That seems harmless to us because that happens all the time, especially on the mission field.

- ❖ But put yourself in the shoes of these early Christians who were all Jews. Remember, they didn't see themselves as starting a new religion. To them, Jesus is the fulfillment of Jewish Scripture. The hope of Israel. The Yes to all of God's promises, to his covenant with Abraham.
 - ▶ So they saw themselves as faithful Jews with a fully-realized hope in the Messiah. **I can understand why these early believers had a hard time dissociating their discipleship to Christ from their Judaism.** To them it was the same thing.

- ❖ We're told in v1 that some men arrived in Antioch from Judea. V5 says that they were former Pharisees who converted to Christ. They "*belonged to the party of the Pharisees*". And they were teaching the Gentile believers in Antioch that "*Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.*" (15:1)
 - ▶ These men weren't against giving the gospel to Gentiles. **They just figured if you're going to put your hope of salvation in a Jewish Messiah then you should become Jewish.** You should convert to Judaism.

- ❖ **In those days, it was widely accepted for Gentiles to do just that.** But it wasn't an easy choice because it required male converts to undergo circumcision. But then you and any women or children in your household were now welcomed into the covenant community so long as you observed the law of Moses (Gen. 17:10-14, 23-27; Ex. 12:43-45, 48).
 - ▶ So you can see how these men from Judea extended the logic to Gentile converts. They were known as **Judaizers**. That comes from the term *to judaize*. It's like how we say to Christianize someone. **So a Judaizer will say a Gentile Christian must become a practicing Jew.** They need to observe all the moral and ceremonial aspects of the law. "*It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.*" (15:5)

- ❖ **They weren't denying the necessity of Christ. Just the sufficiency of Christ.** They weren't saying you didn't need faith in Christ to be saved. You just need Christ *and* law-keeping. Faith in Jesus *and* obedience to God's law, of which circumcision is the first step.
 - ▶ Look, if you really want such a great salvation, then it's going to cost something. But don't worry it's not insurmountable. You can afford it. You can do it. You can get circumcised. It's how you demonstrate that you really want what Jesus has to offer.

- ❖ That seems innocent enough. No one is asking for something you can't do or can't afford. It almost makes sense. But as I heard Alistair Begg once put it: **A Christ supplemented is a Christ supplanted.** If you try to supplement the gospel, you end up supplanting the gospel. Replacing it altogether with a false gospel that offers a false hope that will only lead to despair.

- ❖ Scholars think that Paul wrote the **letter to the Galatians** during this time. The visit he recalls in Galatians 2:12 of certain men coming from James (or claiming to have been sent by James – a claim he denies in Acts 15:24) likely corresponds with chapter 15:1. So Paul wrote Galatians during the height of this controversy.

- ❖ **And in Galatians 5:2, he makes it very clear that a Christ supplemented by circumcision is a Christ supplanted by circumcision.** *“²Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. ³I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law.”*
 - ▶ In other words, you can’t just stop at circumcision. **You give an inch and the law will take a mile. You’ll have to keep the whole thing.** Not just the moral aspects of the law (i.e. Ten Commandments) but the ceremonial laws regulating cleanliness, what you can eat, what you can touch, who you can associate with, and who you must avoid.

- ❖ These Judaizers don’t realize what they’re asking of Gentile Christians. They think it’s just a little requirement tacked onto the gospel of grace. But Peter sees the danger. In vv7-11, he stands up before the Council and recalls his experience of seeing God save Cornelius, an uncircumcised Gentile. It turned his worldview upside down.
 - ▶ Look at v8, *“⁸And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, ⁹and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. ¹⁰Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?”*

- ❖ In other words, why are you putting a burden on these Gentile Christians that you can’t carry yourself? **Peter makes reference to a yoke on the neck.** He wants you to imagine a wooden beam attached to a plow that you’d put on an ox to drag across a field. But imagine a yoke so heavy, the ox is brought to its knees. It can’t stand. It can’t walk. It’s can’t bear the yoke.
 - ▶ That depressing image depicts the yoke of the Law and its crushing demands. **Like the ox, we buckle under the weight of the Law because we’re sinners.** Even on our best days, we’re not free from sin, from transgressing the Law. If you try to bear this yoke and walk before God, it will crush you. You won’t be able to stand before him.

- ❖ But in the gospel there is good news! The gospel liberates us. It sets us free from the heavy yoke of the law. **Because in the gospel we’re presented with a Savior who takes the yoke off our necks and places it on his own.**
 - ▶ Jesus bore the yoke of the Law for us – both its requirements and its curses (Gal. 3:13). Through his perfect life and his sin-atonement death, Jesus kept the Law flawlessly and completely. And in the gospel, Jesus says, *“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden. Come and I will give you rest.”* (Mt. 11:28).

- ❖ Die to yourself, be crucified with him, and the life you now live, live by faith in the Son of God, who loved you and gave himself for you (Gal. 2:20). **Hide your life in Jesus. So when you stand before God, you now stand *in and with* a Savior who is bearing the yoke of the Law in your place.** That’s the gospel!
 - ▶ That’s what I didn’t understand in my younger days. I thought salvation was too easy. There was no struggle. There was no cost. But what I failed to comprehend was the great struggle, the great cost, that my Savior had to put around his neck for me.

- ❖ I broke a relationship with God with my sin. And the reality is, if God is that store owner, he doesn't shrug it off. Because a relationship with him is not cheap. He demands payment for what you broke. It's going to cost all you have – your life. **Your only hope lies in the grace of God who sent his Son to live and die and meet the demands of the Law in your place.**
 - ▶ As Peter puts it in v11, “*But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.*” If we are to be saved from the punishment due our sin, it is by God's grace in the Lord Jesus and that alone.
 - **When the gospel clicked for me, it finally validated what I'd been feeling all along.** God and his salvation are precious and invaluable. The cross bears witness to that. Yet salvation is still a free gift of grace, not a result of works. And the cross bears witness to that too.

- ❖ **Church, this is why we must be vigilant to protect the purity of the gospel.** And doctrinally inflexible anytime anyone tries to restrict our gospel liberty and subject us again under the yoke of the law. You have to pay close attention to what you're hearing or reading.
 - ▶ **There's always someone out there who will say to gain God's favor, to have his blessing, to receive his salvation, you need Jesus *and* something.** You need to trust in Jesus *and* embrace a certain lifestyle in which you worship a certain way, do church a certain way, dress a certain way, eat a certain way, raise or educate your kids a certain way, etc. **All of that has more to do with elevating a set of cultural distinctives over another rather than finding unity in the one gospel that transcends them all.**
 - If you hear anyone teaching Christ *and*, I hope your ears perk up. I hope your heresy detector goes off. And I hope you stand firm in your freedom in Christ and do not let yourself be burdened again by a yoke of slavery (Gal. 5:1).

Culturally Flexible Based on Gospel Charity

- ❖ And the beauty of it all is that once you stand firm and inflexible for the sake of gospel liberty, then **you're free to be culturally flexible and adaptable based on gospel charity** – out of heart that longs to serve the gospel good of others.
 - ▶ What do I mean by that? Well just take a look at what James recommends in v19. After Peter finishes, Barnabas and Paul recount their experience of fruitful Gentile ministry, and then James – the brother of Jesus, a leader in the Jerusalem church (cf. 12:17) – backs up Peter by showing in Scripture, in Amos 9:11-12, that God is welcoming Gentiles into his covenant people without requiring them to first become Jews.

- ❖ And then in v19 he says, “*Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble [lit. to stop annoying] those of the Gentiles who turn to God*”. We should not burden them with the ritual laws of Moses, the laws regulating ceremonial cleanliness, that were unique to Judaism.
 - ▶ **It's not because we're Christians now, and we can just ignore what's in books like Leviticus.** It's not because Jesus ignored or abolished all the laws that distinguished between clean and unclean. It's because he fulfilled them (cf. Mt. 5:17).

- ❖ **The purpose behind all the ceremonial laws was to teach us of God’s holiness and of the uncleanness of our hearts.** Sin in the heart is a barrier to fellowship with God. But once Jesus atones for sin, once he cleanses our hearts, and removes its defilement, then fellowship with God is restored. And it’s in that sense Jesus fulfilled these laws. The purpose was accomplished, and that’s the reason why they’re no longer binding.
 - ▶ So Christians aren’t arbitrary picking certain laws in the OT to keep and others to ignore. Let’s keep “do not kill” but ignore “be circumcised”. **No, Christians are reading the Old Testament as Christians, who also have a New Testament.** Which teaches that these laws are fulfilled and no longer needed. Since all who are *in Jesus* are clean and reconciled to God because Jesus is clean and brings his own near to God.

- ❖ But then notice the interesting thing that James does in v20. He wants to give guidance on how to maintain gospel community between Jewish and Gentile Christians. **His proposal is for Gentile believers to willingly restrict their own gospel liberty for the sake of gospel charity.** To not give undue offense to their Jewish brothers or to lay a stumbling block in their evangelism to the Jewish community.
 - ▶ What should they voluntarily abstain from? Look at v20, “*write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood.*”

- ❖ I know at first glance it looks as if James is adding to the gospel. It may not be circumcision, but he seems to be requiring Jesus *and* abstaining from a) food polluted by idols, b) food with blood in it, c) food that was strangled and not properly drained of blood, and d) sexual immorality. Sounds like he’s saying Jesus *and*.
 - ▶ But that’s not James’s intent. *How do we know that?* Because he explains intent in v21. They should abstain from these things, “*For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.*”
 - **James is identifying four things that were deeply pervasive within Gentile culture, that he knew would be deeply offensive to Jewish culture.** He’s trying to promote fellowship and harmony between two culturally-clashing groups. He’s not trying to add anything to the gospel of grace.

- ❖ **New believers coming from a Jewish background, from worshipping in synagogue, had to learn not to push circumcision and law-keeping as conditions for salvation,** for entering the covenant community. It probably wasn’t an easy lesson for them but it was necessary.
 - ▶ **Yet at the same time, new believers coming from a Gentile background, from worshipping in a pagan temple,** had to learn not to throw around their gospel liberty but to restrict it at times out of gospel charity, out of brotherly love (cf. Rom. 14)
 - Or from a missional perspective, they’re being challenged to willingly abstain from certain things in order to *become all things to all people, that by all means you might save some* (cf. 1 Cor. 9:22). So you restrict your freedom in Christ for the sake of Christ and his mission.

- ❖ That explains why, if we read on into chapter 16, Paul was willing to circumcise Timothy because of the Jews living in that region (16:1-3). It's not like Paul forgot the decision just made less than a chapter earlier, and he's not the kind to cave in and compromise his convictions. **So clearly he didn't circumcise Timothy because he suddenly saw it as a gospel issue. He saw it as a missional issue.**
 - ▶ We're told in the beginning of chapter 16 that Timothy's mother is Jewish while his dad is Greek, and according to Jewish law that still makes you Jewish. So both men realized how much of a stumbling block to faith it would be for an uncircumcised Jew to accompany Paul in his ministry. Timothy and his mixed-Jewish heritage was well known among the Jewish community in that region (v3).
 - **So in a classic case of “*becoming all things to all people*”, Timothy willingly received circumcision with Paul's approval.** It's because they were doctrinally inflexible in their stance on the gospel of grace, that allowed them to be culturally flexible and able to adapt for the sake of mission.

- ❖ **The conclusion being drawn here is that Jewish Christians could continue to observe Mosaic Law as a part of their Jewish culture but could no longer impose their culture on believers of other cultures as if it were part and parcel with the gospel.**
 - ▶ That's very helpful for a multi-cultural church like ours where Chinese immigrant culture and 2nd-generation American culture have to co-exist side by side. **So long as we stand inflexibly firm on the gospel of grace, then neither side should impose a culturally-conditioned way of worshipping or doing discipleship.** Out of gospel charity, we should give each of our different language congregations the flexibility to adapt their ministry methods to fit their cultural context.
 - English and Mandarin and Cantonese worship and discipleship and overall ministry may all look and feel different. And that's okay.

- ❖ And individually, we need to ask: *Are there any cultural preferences that I've wrongly elevated to a gospel issue – that I've imposed on others (or at least I've silently judged them)?*
 - ▶ *Or in what areas do I need to be more flexible and culturally adaptable – to even be willing to restrict my own liberties – in order to be all things to all people that by all means I might save some?*
 - When you're saved by a gospel of grace alone, you're freed to love and serve the good of others even in culturally difficult and sacrificial ways. That's the liberating power of our gospel.