ACTS 15:1–35 | WEEK

STAY THE COURSE

Diving Deeper • Small Group Bible Study

START HERE

Have you ever felt pressure to prove yourself—to earn approval, meet someone else's expectations, or show that you are "good enough"?

Where do you feel that pressure most, and how does it affect the way you relate to God?

LOOK AT THE WORD

Read Acts 15:1–35 together. After Paul and Barnabas returned from their first missionary journey, some believers began teaching that Gentile converts had to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses in order to be saved. The question was brought to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. After much discussion, Peter testified that God had accepted Gentile believers and given them the Holy Spirit, just as He had done for Jewish believers. James then pointed to Scripture and urged the church not to make it difficult for Gentiles who were turning to God.

The Jerusalem Council clarified an essential truth: we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, not by adding religious requirements to His finished work. At the same time, the church was called to live in holiness and to consider one another in love. As you discuss, keep this central question in view: **Is Jesus enough?**

DISCUSS

1. Jesus is enough

Read Acts 15:1–2; Galatians 2:21.

Some teachers insisted that Gentiles needed Jesus *and* circumcision and the law of Moses to be saved. Paul and Barnabas strongly opposed this because salvation was at stake. Paul later wrote, "If righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!" The Gospel is not Jesus plus our effort; it is salvation by grace through faith in Christ.

What were the teachers in Acts 15 adding to the Gospel, and why was this such a serious issue?

Why is it tempting to believe that Jesus saves us but our performance keeps us accepted by God?

What might "Jesus + nothing = everything" look like in the way you approach God this week?

DISCUSS

2. Know what is worth standing for

Read Acts 15:2, 6; Galatians 2:21.

Not every disagreement carries the same weight. The sermon described three tiers of issues: first-tier essentials of the Gospel, second-tier biblical convictions where Christians may differ, and third-tier preferences. The church must stand firm on the essentials while holding other convictions with humility and extending charity in matters of preference. The Gospel was a first-tier issue, so Paul and Barnabas could not simply agree to disagree.

Why is it important to distinguish between essential Gospel truths and matters of conviction or preference?

Which kinds of disagreements are easiest for you to treat as essential? What might that reveal about your priorities?

How can the saying “In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity” shape the way your group handles disagreement?

3. Let Scripture and God’s work shape your convictions

Read Acts 15:3–18.

The church listened to testimony from Paul and Barnabas, heard Peter explain how God had given the Holy Spirit to Gentile believers, and then listened as James brought Scripture into the discussion. Peter reminded them that God purified hearts by faith and that both Jewish and Gentile believers are saved through the grace of Jesus. The leaders examined their traditions and experiences in light of what God had done and what Scripture said.

What do Peter’s words teach us about the way God receives people?

Why is it important to examine our traditions, backgrounds, and assumptions in light of Scripture?

When have you had to reconsider an assumption because God’s Word or His work in someone’s life challenged it?

4. Remove unnecessary barriers

Read Acts 15:19.

James concluded that the church should not make it difficult for Gentiles who were turning to God. The Gospel should not be burdened with extra requirements that Jesus did not give. Churches and believers can unintentionally place cultural expectations, personal preferences, or outward standards in the way of people taking a step toward Christ.

What are some ways Christians can unintentionally make it harder for someone to approach Jesus?

How can we tell the difference between a biblical call to follow Jesus and an unnecessary barrier created by our preferences?

What is one attitude or expectation you may need to lay down so that others can more easily see Jesus?

DISCUSS

5. Live in holiness and love—not to be saved, but because you are saved

Read Acts 15:20–21; Galatians 5:13.

James gave Gentile believers practical instructions concerning food connected to idolatry, sexual immorality, and food practices involving blood. These were not additional requirements for salvation. They helped believers from different backgrounds live together in holiness and fellowship. The Gospel rescues us from legalism, but it is not a license to live however we want. We are called to use our freedom to serve one another humbly in love.

How would you explain the difference between obeying God in order to earn salvation and obeying God because you have been saved?

Why does Christian freedom include considering how our choices affect other believers?

Is there an area where you may be using “freedom” as an excuse to avoid obedience, or where you may be adding rules God has not required?

6. Protect unity by putting love ahead of preference

Read Acts 15:20–21; Galatians 5:13.

Jewish and Gentile believers came from different cultures, customs, and convictions. James called them to be mindful of one another. The sermon’s example was a person giving up a beer for a day to support a friend in recovery: not because it is a salvation requirement, but because love is willing to make a sacrifice for someone else. We are not only saved into a relationship with God; we are brought into a family.

What is the difference between giving something up out of legalism and giving something up out of love?

Where might you need to be more considerate of another believer’s background, convictions, or struggles?

What is one preference you could set aside to strengthen unity in your church or small group?

7. Fight for grace graciously

Read Acts 15:22–35.

The church sent a letter to Antioch explaining the decision. The believers were encouraged, and Judas and Silas strengthened them with their words and gifts. Paul and Barnabas continued teaching and preaching. The sermon also noted that Luke does not name the people who first stirred up the controversy. Those who fight for the grace of the Gospel should be among the most gracious people. We can stand firmly on truth without responding with arrogance, a critical spirit, or hostility.

What does it look like to stand firm for Gospel truth while still treating people with grace?

Why can it be difficult not to match someone else’s anger or hostility?

Is there a disagreement or relationship in which you need to speak truth more graciously, forgive, or pray for someone?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Take a few minutes to reflect silently:

1. Where am I relying on my performance, goodness, or religious effort instead of resting in what Jesus has already done?

2. What might I be adding to the Gospel—either for myself or for others—that Scripture does not require?

3. Where do I need to hold a conviction with humility or extend charity in a matter of preference?

4. Who could I love well by laying down a preference or making a thoughtful sacrifice?

TAKE IT WITH YOU

This week, take one step:

• **Preach the Gospel to yourself.** Begin each day by remembering that you are saved by grace through faith in Jesus—not by your performance.

• **Remove a barrier.** Consider whether an expectation, preference, or attitude could make it harder for someone to take a step toward Jesus. Choose to lay it down.

• **Choose love over preference.** Make one practical sacrifice to support, encourage, or protect the unity of another believer.

• **Speak truth graciously.** If you need to address a disagreement, do it with humility, prayer, and love rather than matching someone else's hostility.

Challenge: Identify one area where you have been tempted toward either legalism (trying to earn God's acceptance) or license (using freedom as an excuse to ignore obedience). Bring it before Jesus, receive His grace, and choose one step of faithful obedience.

PRAY TOGETHER

Pray that God would help your group:

• Trust fully in the finished work of Jesus and rest in salvation by grace through faith.

• Recognize what is essential to the Gospel and hold other convictions with humility and charity.

• Remove unnecessary barriers for people who are turning to God.

• Live in holiness and use Christian freedom to serve one another in love.

• Stand firm for truth while becoming people who demonstrate the grace they proclaim.

"We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are." — Acts 15:11