

Acts 15:1-35 • The Law vs. Grace

Introduction

One of the patterns we see in Acts which continues to this day is that whenever God's work is progressing, Satan begins to oppose it. Throughout Scripture there are two symbols of Satan which represent his preferred methods of attack: the serpent, which represents lying and deception, and the dragon representing persecution. He prefers to use the lie first and foremost – the more subtle and less public of the two, but should that be rendered ineffective will not hesitate to employ open persecution to disrupt the Word of God. One of the most effective of Satan's serpentine deceptions throughout every age of history is "religious lies" to supplant God's Word. What is being dealt with here is not Satan's attack of Christianity in general by those in the world whom he controls, but deception within the walls of the church concerning the very doctrinal foundation on which it is built.

¹Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." ²And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.

[Read v.1-2]

Q: What is the core issue?

A: Obedience to the Law of Moses as a requirement for salvation. The belief being espoused here is that one must become a Jew first – observing all that an Old Testament Jew observes such as circumcision, celebrating the feasts, and adherence to every custom and ritual of the Mosaic Law – as a pre-qualification for becoming a Christian under the New Covenant established through Christ.

Q:: Why might the answer not be as obvious to 1st Century Christians as it is to us today?

1. The Old Testament teaching at the time emphasized that the Gentiles could only be saved through Israel, a position that could be supported in many places by Scripture.
2. There wasn't any New Testament yet, so the only Scriptures being used were still the Old Testament. It was probably a very difficult thing to clearly understand where the Word through Moses was fulfilled by the Word of Christ.
3. A Gentile desiring to make Judaism his personal religion was required to submit in obedience to the whole Mosaic Law, even to the point of being circumcised. It was a requirement of Old Testament salvation for a proselyte, so why should it be discontinued?
4. There was no clear understanding at all at this point of the difference between the calling and ministry of the Twelve as represented by Peter, and the ministry to the Gentiles through Paul. The general thinking was still focused on the nation Israel through which all comers must become Jewish, rather than the new concept of the church composed of **BOTH** Jew and Gentile.
5. Others?

Q: It here states that "the brethren determined" that they should take the issue to "the apostles and elders" in Jerusalem. But what actually motivated Paul to go and do this?

A: Paul was expressly commanded by God to do this.

Then after an interval of fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also. It was because of a revelation that I went up; and I submitted to them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but I did so in private to those who were of reputation, for fear that I might be running, or had run, in vain.

Galatians 2:1-2

Point: Paul did not go out of some kind of need to be proven right, but according to God's command so that the place of the Gentiles could be affirmed by God. This isn't about some kind of church hierarchy which many people read into this, but about the direction of the Spirit to bring unity to the church where doctrine is concerned.

[Read v.3-21]

⁵Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren. ⁴When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. ⁵But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses."

⁶The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. ⁷After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. ⁸And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; ⁹and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. ¹⁰Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."

¹²All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

¹³After they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, "Brethren, listen to me. ¹⁴Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. ¹⁵With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written,

¹⁶AFTER THESE THINGS I will return,
AND I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF
DAVID WHICH HAS FALLEN,
AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS,
AND I WILL RESTORE IT,

¹⁷SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY
SEEK THE LORD,

Q: What are the four different meetings which appear to comprise this overall conference?

1. A public meeting during which the church welcomed Paul and his party. (v.4)
2. A private meeting between Paul and the key leaders. (See Galatians 2:2)
3. A second public meeting at which time those holding the Jewish position presented their case. (v. 5 and Galatians 2:3-5)
4. The council meeting proper which rendered the final decisions. (v.6 and Galatians 1-2 – Paul's report of the matter)

Application: Fellowship and ministry were maintained as the first and most important activities. They didn't forsake them in order to "rush" to the "main topic". How well do we consider that, in the course of "church business" that the requirement to love each other is not to be compromised? How did sharing the work of God among the Gentiles contribute to the later, more focused discussion of doctrine concerning them?

Q: What is Peter's most salient point in his summary of his own ministry to the Gentiles?

A: He emphasizes that it's God Himself who has accepted the Gentiles.

- "God made a choice" (v.7)
- "God...testified to them" (v.8)
- "Giving them the Holy Spirit" (v.8)
- "He made no distinction" (v.9)

Q: How does Peter sum up the effectiveness of the Mosaic Law apart from Christ?

A: He calls it "a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear". The Law alone is not capable of accomplishing what the Judaizers claimed in the first place.

Q: How does Peter's final statement in v.11 sum it all up?

A: Peter doesn't say, "They should be saved the same way we were", but rather that, "...we...are saved...in the same way **they** are": "the grace of the Lord Jesus".

*For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him;
Romans 10:12*

Q: How would you summarize James' response to the issue? What is God doing where the Gentiles are concerned?

A: God is taking out from the Gentiles a people for His name. (v. 16-18)

Point: Both Jews and Gentiles stand on the same ground as sinners before God with the same calling to be reconciled to Him and become members of the same church, the same people.

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AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,⁷

¹⁸SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM LONG AGO.

¹⁹“Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles,²⁰ but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood.²¹ For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.”

²²Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas—Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren,²³ and they sent this letter by them,

“The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings.

²⁴“Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls,²⁵ it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,²⁶ men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.²⁷ Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth.²⁸ For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials:²⁹ that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell.”

Q: But what about the Old Testament promises to the Jews concerning the kingdom? How does James address this?

A: James begins by quoting Amos to show that **FIRST** the Gentiles must be incorporated into God's kingdom in this manner and **THEN** Christ will return to build again the house of David. “After these things I will return, and I will rebuild...” (v.16)

Point: As Paul will elaborate in much more detail in Romans 9 and 11, God's program for Israel proper is something yet to be completed. It's an example of the “the first will be last and the last will be first” in that God's program is delayed to those He first called (Israel) but will come back to them at the last.

For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in;
Romans 11:25

Q: What might be telling about Peter's last words as here recorded in Acts and his own second epistle? (2 Peter 3:15-16)

A: They both endorse Paul's ministry.

Application: How is the doctrine of grace vs. the law established here? How would you apply it personally? What are some ways in which you might be trusting or focusing on some aspect of legalism to the detriment of the work of God's grace in your life?

[Read v.22-35]

Q: What is indicated here that these were not official dogmas handed down by some kind of superior, ruling body, but are actually wise suggestions received by spiritual men through the leading of the Holy Spirit?

1. “...it seemed good to us, having become of one mind...” (v.25)
2. “...it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials...” (v.28)

Point: If they were speaking as the Old Testament prophets spoke, their remarks might have been qualified with, “Thus says the Lord”. But having worked together as members of a church – the body of Christ – in having first fellowshiped, shared, and worshiped together, the end result is unity where the Word of God is concerned.

Q: What do the four things they communicated to the Gentiles have in common?

A: They are all things closely associated with idolatry and spiritual unfaithfulness. The common ground of both Jew and Gentile is to separate themselves from false worship and those influences most likely to lead them astray spiritually.

Q: What was the result of the decision? What was its practical effect proving its authorship by the Holy Spirit?

1. Rejoicing because of the Word (v.21)
2. Encouragement by the Word (v.32)
3. Strengthening by the Word (v.32)

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³⁰So when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. ³¹When they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. ³²Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message.

³³After they had spent time there, they were sent away from the brethren in peace to those who had sent them out.

³⁴[But it seemed good to Silas to remain there.] ³⁵But Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching with many others also, the word of the Lord.

Application: *It began with a dispute concerning the proper application of the Word of God, the discussion was guided by the Word of God, and the final judgment was rendered according to the Word of God; but the proper attitude and behavior of love and fellowship were never compromised in the course of pursuing God's Word.*

Prologue

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!

Galatians 1:6-9

This is not an isolated incident in ancient history, but a tragedy which continues in many churches to this day where they are pursuing the emphasis of the early part of Acts – to bring in the kingdom – without the latter revelation of the role of the church. Some try to make strange combinations of law and grace, of Israel and church, of kingdom truth and church truth. The curse for the promotion of such false gospels is just as real and in effect today as when Paul first articulated it to the Galatians. It's more important than ever not to just rightly divide the Word of Truth, but to identify those who would come into our midst in an attempt to alter it both to their and our spiritual detriment.