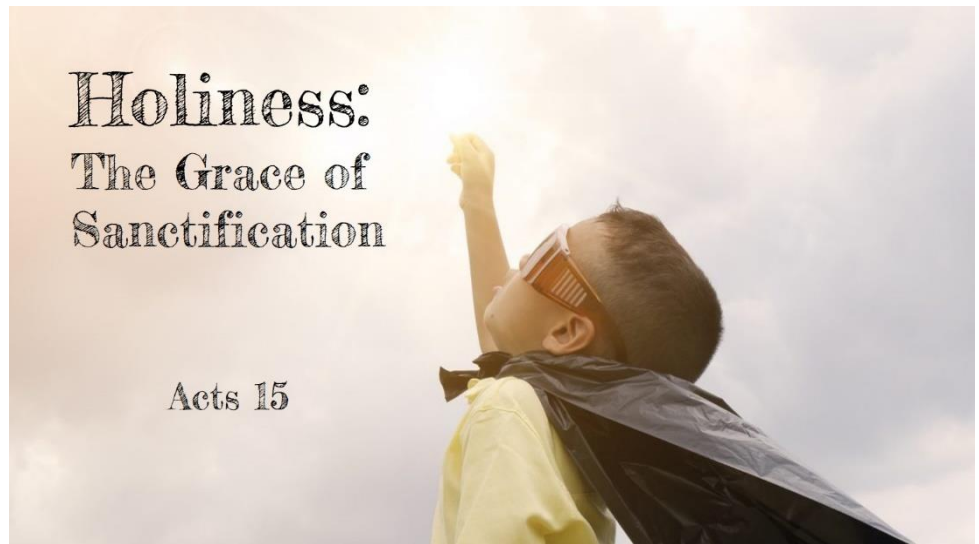


“Holiness: The Grace of Sanctification”

- Acts 15 -

by Pastor Tim Dodson
at JF Believers Church
in Menomonie, Wis
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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." 12 Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles. 13 And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, "Men and brethren, listen to me: 14 "Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. 15 "And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written: 16 'After this I will return And will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, And I will set it up; 17 So that the rest of mankind may seek the LORD, Even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, Says the LORD who does all these things.' 18 "Known to God from eternity are all His works. 19 "Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, 20 "but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood. 21 "For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath." 22 Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, namely, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren. 23 They wrote this letter by them: The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings. 24 Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, "You must be circumcised and keep the law" —to whom we gave no such commandment— 25 it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who 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 necessary things: 29 that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell. 30 So when they were sent off, they came to Antioch; and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter. 31 When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement. 32 Now Judas and Silas, themselves being prophets also, exhorted and strengthened the brethren with many words. 33 And after they had stayed there for a time, they were sent back with greetings from the brethren to the apostles. 34 However, it seemed good to Silas to remain there. 35 Paul and Barnabas also remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also. 36 Then after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing." 37 Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark. 38 But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work. 39 Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus; 40 but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God. 41 And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

At the end of the last chapter we read “*From there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had completed. 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.*” Thus Chapter 15 of Acts seems to begin almost with an audible sigh of relief. Paul and Barnabas were home from their first mission trip, and they had

lived to tell the story. It was a time of joy and reflection...one shared with the whole of the church. And yet the battle was far from over. For even while the fellowship was rejoicing in the victories that they had experienced, the enemy was coordinating a new attack. Satan does not simply stand back and let that happen without a calculated response. Like the apostles when they came down from the mount of transfiguration, Satan was waiting to immediately try to steal their joy. If he could not stop them *out there*, he would come in the back door and attempt to cause disruption *in here*. (the church)

The issue presented in our text today was quite simply a classic battle of grace vs. legalism. The believers had embraced and even celebrated their freedom, but there were those within the ranks of the religious world that wanted to add to the work that Christ completed on the cross. Once again, this is a battle that has raged for over 2,000 years! Man loves what Christ has done, but innately wants some of the credit for themselves.

Grace is both easy to receive and hard to accept. While we love the fact that Jesus paid for us all, it can only be accepted with a heavy dose of humility; and that creates in many people an internal battle that can consume one with the struggle to find an unattainable middle ground. Deep inside all of us lies an inexplicable need to **do** something. We so desperately want to be a part of our salvation! This causes us, in varying degrees, to attempt to run a “Jesus-plus” approach to salvation.

Some say we are saved by grace, but stay saved by our works. Some say we have to do certain things along with the cross of Christ to really be saved! This criteria, of course, varies according to denomination or even individually invented criteria. And as the scriptures say, the problem with this approach is that such a stance is a “yeast” that only grows and grows. At first we just want to “hedge our bets” and do a little something to “make sure.” Once we add to our roster, we naturally start thinking, “what if that’s not enough? Maybe I should do a little more.” Then the game really begins...

It seems clear that Paul and Barnabas were having nothing to do with it. They weren’t getting on that train! One can only imagine what the term “no small dissension” means, but I think I have a pretty good idea! As the Book of Acts marches on, we will see that God clearly chose the right men to fight this battle. Many, even Peter, would ultimately have a hard time making the transition to freedom under grace.

I’d like to believe that besides the Holy Spirit and the bold integrity that these two had, perhaps the missions trip that they had been on had forever affected their resolve to embrace only an “uncontaminated gospel.” For I am the first to acknowledge that something happens to a man “out there.” Something that he is not quick to forget.

In verse 2 these “misbehaving grace-boys” were being “sent to the principal’s office,” but not without passing by a few of the local churches to share their joy! So, despite the developing difficulties, they were still embracing the advancement of the kingdom and were rejoicing in the souls that had joined it! They hadn’t forgot their calling to lead and encourage the body of Christ, even as they walked through the fires of testing.

The foes of God’s grace were as unrelenting in their attacks as Paul and Barnabas were in their position. For these Pharisees, this step of circumcision “was necessary.” Clearly there is nothing that a legalist hates more than a man under grace. The “gracer’s” joy only infuriates the legalist, who is never satisfied with his own bondage, but is obsessed with bringing everyone else under his bondage too. Like so many today, they needed to have things “their way” or it was the “highway” for them.

In verse 6, the debate begins! After “much dispute,” Peter “rises to the occasion.” He states the facts as they were widely known. He reiterates that God had made it clear that the Gentiles were, like it or not, “coming on board.” He reminds them that God was firstly concerned about the heart, and that God had proved His position by also delivering to them the gift of the Holy Spirit. He “purified their hearts.” Not because of any works, but because of their faith.

Peter calls this issue of circumcision for what it is: **a yoke**. That big wood and metal thing that they strap on a cow’s neck so it can plow, so it can **work**. Peter questioned why they would want to saddle the Gentiles with such a yoke? A yoke that none of the Jewish leaders were ever able to bear and never able to obey. In fact, a yoke that no one has ever been able to bear! Yet, the language should righteously cause us to pause. For did not Jesus Himself say that following Him *was* a yoke, albeit one that was ‘easy’...that HIS burden...yes, **burden**, was “light?” So clearly, following Christ was and is not without some aspect of human effort and accountability. Please note I did not say **salvation**. I speak of **discipleship**. *Following Jesus*. Salvation is free, but following Jesus will cost you **everything**. The war between grace and legalism is actually settled on the ground of sanctification. When I am “set apart” for the exclusive use of God, I am not perfected in behavior, but centered on priority. I am clear as to my objective and God covers me for shortcomings in my passionate desire to please Him first and foremost. When God is truly first in all things, God has my back.

Paul and Peter had had their say, and now James, the brother of Jesus, throws his hat into the ring. He boldly reminds them that God had indeed chosen people out of the Gentile nations to be His. James was the leader and apparent pastor of the church in Jerusalem at this time. Despite the spiritual stature and standing of both Paul and Peter at this point, it was James who would have the final say. It seems pastoral authority was established from the beginning of the church age.

James makes his call on this matter, not according to emotion or public opinion. He makes a righteous judgment based on the Word. He quotes Amos 9:11-12, which speaks of the coming Gentile believing church. The Jews would be the light unto the Gentile world which would ultimately point them to Jehovah God and His redeeming element, Jesus Christ. But the prophecy does not say that the Gentiles would adopt Judaism as a gateway unto this standing with God. They were to “seek the Lord,” not “seek Judaism.”

In verse 19 James gives some instructions that were in turn to be given to the Gentile church. (“Therefore I judge...”) The pastor had to make the hard decisions and live with the fallout if such were to come. The guidelines he gave was not a “free lunch.” He did not discount the crucial aspect of holiness in the church. The instructions were not issues of salvation, but rather of fellowship and harmony. James seemed to understand...*as Jesus taught Himself*...that an “everyman for himself” practice of grace would lead to chaos, not living the unity that God desired of His church. If this discussion had resulted, as many claim today, in a grace that encompassed a free-for-all practice of individual interpretation and a ‘let-it-all-hang-out’ living, there would be no “body” and the call to holiness would be abandoned!

James was seeking to “bridge the gap” and establish harmony within the church. These requests were not extreme, nor were they at their root unbiblical. Were they Jewish rooted and worthless to our salvation? Yes...certainly. Then why didn’t he exclude them along with circumcision? Because James understood that we are to be a body, and everything we do individually affects the whole. That some members of that body were not as mature as others, and He had to consider the health and welfare of the whole. He was, at the most basic level, seeking to not stumble the Jewish believers before they grew in grace and its understanding. Paul certainly understood the concept! In Romans 14:21 he says “*It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak.*” And in 1Co 8:13 he says “*Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.*”

In verse 22-29, we see that the church not only submitted to the authority of their leadership, but recognized that this decision was a good one. They gathered together with different opinions, but with humble spirits and open hearts they were convinced through scripture and the present Holy Spirit of the right and righteous path to take. For one thing was for sure: the early church understood that the battle was bigger than just them. They needed to bend with what was best for the health of the whole church. Let us acknowledge that such a faithful condition is crucial in any and all churches today! Certainly we have had many come in amongst us that would not embrace such a view and left us to pursue their singular priority of self. Praise God that such hearts were found *that* day. For if things had gone differently, how would the body of believers look today? Would there even BE a body of believers today?

In confirmation of both the decision as well as the loving desire of the believers, the directional letter was received and embraced. The harmony of the church was established, and the ministry continued, both in “teaching and preaching,” which ironically is so often attempted to be abolished from the modern church!

In the seemingly constant battle between grace and legalism, one of the great dangers facing the church today is that professing believers will substitute the God of the Bible for a lesser deity of their own design—one that reflects *their* values, *their* morality, and *their* priorities. It’s a subtle shift, as men and women who claim to know and love God de-emphasize aspects of His nature and attributes that don’t sit well with them, or adhere to their worldview. Even those who truly love God can venture onto that slippery slope, as they stress the more attractive features of God’s character and sidestep those that offend and convict.

We need to understand that God’s grace does not cancel His demand for holiness. Because we have so overwhelmingly lost our fear of God, we have in so many cases begun to take His grace for granted. Truth be told, you and I are alive only because God is merciful. Instead of punishing every sin instantly with the penalty we deserve, God extends grace and goodness. That kindness *ought* to provoke us to repentance: “*Do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?*” (Romans 2:4).

But our hearts are so desperately wicked and corrupt that rather than receiving God’s mercy with thankfulness and fearful contrition over our sins, instead, we begin to take His grace for granted. Consequently, when God does punish sin, we think He’s mean and unjust. When our church moves to deal with our sin, we think that they too are being mean and ungracious. Today people look at the Old Testament and question the goodness of God. Repeatedly we can find ourselves asking “*why would God...*” Why would God command the Israelites to destroy all the people living in Canaan? What kind of God would snuff out the life of a man simply for touching the Ark of the Covenant? How could a kind and loving God cause a bear to destroy a group of children for making fun of a prophet’s baldness? Did God really open the ground and swallow up people for rebelling against Moses’ authority? Are we really supposed to believe that God would drown the whole world?

We are so used to mercy and grace that we think God has no right to be angry with sin. Romans 3:18 sums up the world’s attitude: “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” Do you know why God took the lives of certain people in the Bible? It was not because they were more sinful than anyone else; it was because somewhere along the line in the long process of grace and mercy, God had to set some examples to make men and women fear. First Corinthians

10 cites some Old Testament people who were destroyed, and verse 11 says, “Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction.” He turned Lot’s wife into a pillar of salt, not because she did something worse than anyone else ever did, but because she was to be a monument to the exceeding sinfulness of sin. Yet we must acknowledge that the highway of history is paved with God’s mercy and grace, just as the history of this church is built on a foundation of grace received and grace given. But there are billboards all the way along, posted so that sinners may know that God at any moment has a right to take their lives.

God is gracious, but don’t confuse His mercy with justice. God is not unjust when He acts in a holy manner against sin. Don’t ever get to the place that you are so used to mercy and grace that you abuse it by going on in your sin. Don’t question God when He does what He has every right to do—to punish sin. Don’t abuse God’s grace; He will judge you, too. Remember this: He is holy, and He is to be feared.

The question is not why God so dramatically judges some sinners, but rather why He lets any of us live. God has every right to punish sin, and “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). God’s mercy is not somehow a wink toward our sin. As we already noted, one major reason for God’s mercy is that He is driving us to repentance. Romans 2:4 says, “*The kindness of God leads you to repentance.*” God, by His mercy and kindness to us, is often actually bringing us to the point where we will see His love for us and our need of repentance.

In the Chronicles of Narnia, a series of children’s books by C. S. Lewis, there is one scene where some talking beavers are describing Aslan to Lucy, Susana, and Peter, who are newcomers to the realm of Narnia. In anticipation of meeting him, they ask questions that reveal their fears.

“Ooh!” said Susan, “I’d thought he was a man. Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.”

“That you will, dearie, and no mistake,” said Mrs. Beaver, “if there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or else just silly.”

“Then he isn’t safe?” said Lucy.

“Safe?” said Mr. Beaver. “Don’t you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? ’Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King...”

We in modern Christianity have somehow missed that truth. While we are thankful for the reality of God’s grace, and while we want to enjoy the experience of His love, we have somehow neglected the truth of His holiness. That imbalance is eating at the heart of our worship. God is a living, eternal, glorious, merciful, holy being. His worshipers must come in the contrition and humility and brokenness of sinners who see ourselves against the backdrop of that holiness. And that should put such thanksgiving and joy in our hearts for the gift of His forgiveness. We are to live lives of confession, repentance, and turning from our sin so that our worship is that which fully pleases God. We dare not go rushing into His presence in unholiness. We cannot worship God acceptably without sincere reverence and godly fear, and our worship must be arrayed in the beauty of holiness. We must return to the biblical teaching of God’s utter and awesome holiness in order to be filled with the gratitude and humility that acknowledges the gift of grace...

(taken and adapted from “Grace vs. Holiness” by John MacArthur, August 12, 2016)

Jeremiah 32:40 ‘And I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from doing them good; but I will put My fear in their hearts so that they will not depart from Me.