

What is the Gospel? Acts 15:10-12

We are in this fascinating text of Scripture that we call the council of Jerusalem. We have seen at the beginning of this chapter that certain men came from Jerusalem to Antioch, Jews, who taught that in order to be saved ones must be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses. Yes, Jesus is necessary but one has to become a Jew and be faithful and obedient to God. This led to a delegation being sent from Antioch to Jerusalem and what they discuss and debate is the very nature of salvation. And what we have in this chapter is some of the clearest statements in all of Scripture about the nature of what constitutes salvation. It is an incredible passage full of high drama, tension, and emotion.

At the end of the debate four men rise up and speak. And we see the first to rise and speak is Peter. And Peter relates how about seven years earlier he by direct revelation from God went to Cornelius' house — a Gentile, and preached the gospel of Jesus Christ to him, his family and friends. They responded affirmatively and God cleansed their hearts from sin and gave them a right standing before him. They had the same standing as Jewish believers, which was validated by supernatural signs that they received from the Spirit of God.

And Peter had already reiterated all that took place about the grace of God coming to the Gentiles or non-Jews right to the church seven years earlier, so that there would be no disagreement or factionalism in the church. And listen to the response in Acts 11:18, **“When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, ‘Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.’”** They agreed or recognized what God had accomplished through Peter. It is incredible how easily we forget. There was no need to make these individuals Jews or put them under the Abrahamic Covenant or the rituals of the Law.

And this was all a transition period. And these new thoughts of what salvation is — that it is through the sacrifice and merits of Jesus and him alone is still all knew. But as time goes on, it is so easy to go back to old habits of thinking and practice. And that is what it was like for these Jewish believers who came from a Pharisaic background. They loved the Law of God, which we all should, and they also loved the religious holidays and all the extra traditions they placed around the Law. It gave them a sense of self-righteousness and accomplishment — that they were actually better or closer to God because of their efforts. They had proven their worth before God.

And we all have besetting sins in our lives. Some struggle with lust or sensuality. We realize we live in a very provocative world that idolizes sex and it is so easy to believe the lies that life and joy and meaning are found here. Some struggle with anger and other emotions, others with just lethargy — just laziness when it comes to following Christ. But if I had to name the one sin that seems that props up in most Christians lives and we do not even notice it is self-righteousness. We are constantly comparing ourselves not with God or his Law but with others. Think of all the slander, back-biting, and so-called sharing you did this week. You just shared the weaknesses or the sins or the struggles others with no real purpose, but in the midst of that talk we are basically saying we are better than them. We are more righteous than others. And other people do have struggles. They do need help. But our talk about them is not to

help or aide them but just to condemn them. And in condemning there is a subtle message that God is more pleased in me than in them. We believe the lie that we are fundamentally different. When we came to Christ, we were humbled by our sin and lack of righteousness. We were humbled by the gospel and therefore looked to Christ. But somewhere along the line that shift took place, where we started looking more at ourselves and less at Christ. You can sense it in your frustrations with others.

And let me ask you has that shift taken place in your heart and life? Here is the thing we don't realize about self-righteousness. It leads to a host of sins. You see we don't play the sins that we do because of our stellar lives. One of sins that we are most blinded to is the pride — everyone should be like me. We do not see the lack of love for others. We are above them. We do not see the lack of forgiveness, because we do not need forgiveness. We do not see the lack of patience because we don't need others to be patient with us. We have everything together. We don't see the lack of control of our tongue because we always right. Where has self righteousness invaded your life? Wherever it is there can be no growth even though we think we are growing. God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble.

And nothing humbles us more than seeing and savouring the gospel. The real question becomes what is the gospel? We might be able to articulate the gospel properly, but what am I truly believing about my relationship with God? Have I earned my salvation or am I earning a greater status with God? We can be so please at who and how we live before God, and not see our need of his daily grace therefore why give grace to others? So I want us to see two points this morning that will help us see the gospel, and seeing that gospel it will have a humbling effect on our hearts. It will change us and change the focus of our lives from celebrating self to celebrating Christ.

1. We need to see what the gospel is not. V. 10.

There is so much we can say about this verse, and much of it could be misunderstood or misconstrued. Any addition or whatever we make to the gospel nullifies the gospel. Why am I saved? And the answer is never found in me. The moment I make it about me — some gift, quality, or work — I am standing opposed to what God has done. Now here is the push back, and Paul brings this out in the Book of Romans — when the gospel is truly understood, there are going to be those who are going to make the accusation that if you teach that Jesus has done it all, then you will cause lawlessness, a disregard for God's holy law. You will cause loose living and immoral people who say they are right with God, but have more friendship with the world and the devil. And therefore there will always be those who try to add to salvation because of that very reason. And in many ways might be well-intentioned protecting the reputation of God. There are many things we could say to that. Our law keeping is not to earn salvation but in response. We want to honour God.

The other thing, as time goes on our lives do change, or standards change, and we can make those standards of behaviour or place those standards on believers as essentials to salvation. Some examples is the radical element of the KJV movement that says if you were not saved by hearing the words of the KJV Bible then you are not saved. Others, if you do not worship on the Sabbath, which is Saturday, then you are not saved. Still others, if you never got baptized and never had the opportunity to be baptized you are not saved. The thief on the cross was never baptized but Jesus

promised him this very day he would be with him in glory. In our pride, the thing that becomes most important is what we do or accomplished rather than Christ. And that is an offence to God and his gospel.

Look at the beginning of verse 10, “**Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test.**” Peter accuses those who are standing opposed to Gentile Christians being saved by simple faith in Jesus as putting God to the test. And you have to understand what this means. It does not mean that I am seeking to see if God is faithful or giving God some exam. Putting God to the test meant for them that they had a clear revelation of the will of God, but they did the opposite. An example might be the Israelites during their wandering in the desert. They complained and grumbled. God is an all good God. They put God to the test in how he would respond. The believers at Jerusalem had been given this revelation from God through Peter and his ministry that they validated was from God, now they are standing opposed to God. They are not seeking the will of God but actually seeking, whether they know it or not the judgment of God. This is serious to know the will of God and then to put him to the test by doing or even teaching the opposite.

And how were they testing God? Look at the verse again, “**Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples.**” The yoke here was an instrument to be placed around an animal’s neck to cause them to do labour. We realize we have the yoke of Christ, but his is not burdensome, but light because he is with us. Here the burden is the Law and law keeping. And it is so important that we realize what this is. It is the totality of the Law. It is not just the moral Law but also the civil and ceremonial aspects of the Law. The Jews looked at the Law as a gift from God, and it was. It showed them the need of Christ. It was never a way to earn salvation, which could be seen in the sacrificial elements of the Law. It was there because they could not keep the Law. And then you add the oral tradition around the law, and the law really lost its impact and blessing. For the average Israelite this law was arduous. There was never enough, and there was always the threat if you messed up at any time in your life God was through with you. It was a burden. It was not a joy.

The only people who it was a joy to was those who had more time to keep a little more of that Law. They compared themselves not with the Law but with others. It bred much self-righteousness, because they refused to see the holiness of God and his righteousness and his mercy. And notice they were placing this around those who could be categorized as disciples of Christ — those who are not just believing but true Christians, followers of Christ. So listen how he rounds out this verse, “**Now, 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?**” There are none in the long history of Israel who ever kept the Law and were found righteous through the Law except one, and we will talk about him in a second.

Listen to how Paul concludes his argument about sin, and the Jews who had been given the Law of God. Did that Law bring them any closer to God? Did they live up to its standards? Romans 3:9-12, “**What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: ‘None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no**

one does good, not even one.” Do you hear all the negatives in that verse? That is not only who the self-righteous Jews are before God but who we are.

We can take such pride in ourselves and what we do and accomplish. It is almost like we are finished products. I am the answer. Jesus started it but look at what I have become. But even any changes that have come in our lives are not because my efforts but his grace. But if you and I will look into our hearts we will see the very same sins, the very same violations of God’s will and commands at least in seminal forms that others commit that we might deem below us. All of us can see lust in our hearts. All of us struggle with pride. All of us struggle with hatreds and unforgiving attitudes. And yet it is so easy to be blinded by these sins and come out to a service like this and sing passionately and loudly, “Amazing Grace, How sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.” Do you still see yourself as a wretch? Do you still mourn over your sin and notice your sin more than you do other people’s sins? If we are not noticing and seeing humbly our unworthiness before God, then how can we rejoice in his grace? It is so easy to say we believe and not even notice that we have stopped believing that I need his daily grace. We are believing, maybe not officially, but practically living a false gospel. What are you believing about yourself this morning?

Horatio Bonar wrote in the 19th century, “**in unbelief there are two things, a good opinion of one’s self, and a bad opinion of God.**” And may I say, one leads to another. That is why God is opposed to the proud. That pride keeps you from God. Do you feel that distance from God? Do you find yourself getting worked up about the sins of others, or are you seeing the desperate condition of your own heart? It is such a gift from almighty God to be able to be humbled by the gospel and see our need. Because that brings us to the good news of the gospel itself.

2. We need to see what the gospel is. V. 11.

I love the way this verse begins, “**But we believe.**” We all believe something. The question is what do we believe? It also indicates that there is a proper way to believe and a wrong way to believe. And this verse is a simple gospel testimony of what we believe about the eternal destiny of our souls. And can there be anything more serious and more necessary in our lives than an understanding and a growing understanding of what we believe? The more we see and savour what Jesus has done, the more we look away from self and rejoice in Christ. Christianity is incredible because it is both lament and celebration. There is a mourning over our sins and a zealous spirit in us of what Christ has forever accomplished for us. It is why we are here this morning. Our hearts should be overwhelmed with joy, gratitude with all that he has done.

Again, look at this verse, “**But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.**” Now notice what we believed. We believed we will be saved. Now he is talking to these Jewish believers and he is talking also about Gentiles converts. We will be saved. And it speaks of a need of all. And that need is to be saved. And then the question is saved from what? And the answer is the wrath of God against sin and against us as sinners. Listen to the importance of understanding what we are saved from, which so often is not emphasized, J.I. Packer writes, “**Yet if we would know God, it is vital that we face the truth concerning his**

wrath, however unfashionable it may be, and however strong our initial prejudices against it. Otherwise we shall not understand the gospel of salvation from wrath, nor the propitiatory achievement of the cross, nor the wonder of the redeeming love of God.”

That is well said, and the reason why that is so important is today is I wonder how many professing Christians realize what or who we are saved from. You here salvation testimonies that are not salvation testimonies. “I had substance abuse all my life, I tried Jesus and he gave me victory. I was living a meaningless life, just wandering with no purpose then Jesus found me. He gave me purpose. I was victimized all my life and couldn’t trust anyone then Jesus found me and I know I can trust in him.” Many of these might signal the fruit of salvation but they are not salvation. This is not a salvation from drugs or a purposeless life or from being a victim. All, whether Jew or Gentile have sinned against the one and only holy God and deserve his everlasting wrath against sin. We deserve the Lake for Fire forever and ever. We get embarrassed by wrath because we just don’t realize how great sin is, how offensive sin is and what an immense crime it is before a holy God. Paul says in Romans that he is not ashamed of the gospel of Christ because it is through this gospel that everlasting salvation comes — salvation from this very God’s wrath. And for three chapters he preaches about our sinfulness and the necessity of wrath against us. Part of the humbling and then the glory of salvation is recognizing who and what we are are saved from, and that through that salvation we are brought to that very God!

Now look at the means of salvation, because this really is the nail in the coffin in the whole debate, **“But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus.”** Now what is grace, it is some sort of favour that is given to us that we do not deserve, in fact, we deserve the opposite. But favour is freely given. And this is indicating that law keeping could never bring them to God, could never save them. But the only grace that could save them is the grace that is found in Christ alone. Ephesians 2:8-9, **“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”** The faith in this verse is the same as “we believe” in this verse. And we say all our boast is never in self but in Christ, in our God and the great gift of salvation. It is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone that we are saved from the just wrath of God and are brought to God.

And when you think of all the world religions, in one way or another they are all work based. They know something is wrong, but how you come, how you are saved is through your works. Think of Islam. There is no way anyone can be sure that God will accept him. The Muslim has to hope in one way or another his good works will outweigh his bad works, and there are certain things he has to do in his life. One is to take a trip or pilgrimage to Mecca. But it is all what you do. Think of Buddhism. Buddhism is a religion or a state of mind. It is all about becoming nothing. But it is still about what you do or don’t do. You are to meditate and think nothing, be nothing, and hope in the end you are absorbed in the great nothingness. Wow, there is a hope. Hinduism is breaking the cycle of death and rebirth. It is achieve in one of three way - through works, through knowledge, or through devotion. It is all what you achieve. In Roman Catholicism, they see the need of Jesus but he is not enough. There are works

of penance that have to be done. Faithfulness at the mass, confession, prayers to the saints just to name a few things. It is all about how you come.

You look at world religions and they differ on who God is and what heaven is, but they all agree in this — there is something that you have to do because there is something wrong with you. None of them would have anything resembling what we read in verse 11. None of them could rejoice in the certainty of salvation because Jesus has done it all, all to him I owe, sin had left a crimson stain but he washed it white as snow! Salvation is completely dependant on the finished work of another. Why am I saved from God's eternal judgment? Look to the grace found in Christ! How can I know for certain I have eternal life? Look to the cross of Christ! How can I know I am accepted in the beloved? Look to the cross! The message is so humbling. That's why there is always a temptation in our hearts and lives to base my acceptance on something I do — my superior morality or knowledge or devotion or talents and abilities. Jesus really did pay it all!

And so the question become this morning, and I can ask it two ways. First, what are you believing? Maybe you have heard this word gospel — good news, but you never really realized what you need to be saved from. Here is my encouragement to you — Jesus paid it all. Salvation is simply by recognizing my need. I am a sinner worthy of the wrath of God. We call that repentance. We feel something of the weight and significance of our personal sin. But after being humbled, we look away to what Jesus has forever accomplished. And this is what all true Christians do — “we believe!” We believe what he has done is absolutely sufficient to pay the debt of my sin.

The second way I ask this question is to those who are believers, what are you believing? Have you strayed away from seeing who you truly are and the glories found not in you but in Christ alone? We walk around with a chip on our shoulders so often not seeing the sin in our own lives, and therefore cannot see the glory of verse 11, we are saved through grace. I need grace. And that is found in one place — at the foot of the cross. It is found in one person — Jesus Christ. Preaching the gospel and preaching it to yourself will change your heart and life. Jesus is the gospel! Put your confidence in him. This is the gospel of God's grace!