

What is the Gospel Acts 15:1-2

It is incredible to look through the history of the church where there has been great upheaval and dissension, so often God uses that debate to clarify what the Scriptures actually teach. You had in the following centuries controversies about the canon of Scripture. There were many books and letters that were written after the time of the apostles that claimed to be inspired and written by them or someone associated with them. The church met together to look at the marks of inspiration and form what is known as the canon of Scripture. They validated what was already being used in the churches at that time. You had what was known as the Arian controversy where they debated the very nature of Christ. Arius taught that Jesus was just a man who was god-like, almost like the Jehovah Witnesses would teach today. They looked into the Scriptures and declared that he is fully God and fully man. Then we had the reformation, which again was about how a person can be justified in the sight of God. Is it a process that involves Jesus and the church and our good works, or is it through Jesus and him alone? The reformers came to the conclusion through Scripture alone it was through Christ and him alone.

And not all controversy is bad in and of itself, because it helps us clarify and think biblically about our faith and trust in Christ. And here we have a controversy brewing in the early church, and really it is about the nature of salvation. How is a person saved from God's wrath? Is there anything he needs to do or be in order to have the benefits of Christ sacrifice placed on his account? And we cannot fathom how old ways of thinking many times hamper us from seeing and savouring all that Jesus is for us. What truly is the Gospel? With the explosion of so many Gentiles or non-Jews coming to Christ, so that they began to outnumber Jewish believers, and with Antioch taking the lead role in this expansion, there were many that were who were frustrated with all that was being done. These churches in the Galatia area were looking to Antioch for guidance and not Jerusalem, and you have to think that hurt feelings might have even entered into this controversy.

And this passage and chapter is so important. There are so many modern day cults and variations of Christianity that could be placed into this chapter in the way they define Christianity as Jesus plus something. You see it in Roman Catholicism, or Mormonism, or Seventh Day Adventism or Jehovah Witness, the Church of Scientology, the united Pentecostal church, which is different from Pentecostal church in they deny the Trinity. And the gospel formula that is going to win out and espoused by the very apostles themselves is Jesus plus nothing. Salvation is through simple faith in Jesus Christ. We are justified forevermore through his merits and his alone. Think of it: what needs to be done for us to come into the presence of any all holy God? And the answer is nothing. Why? Jesus has done it all. It is this blessed and glorious truth that we celebrate every day and this day.

But this chapter is so important for us as believers also, because I think we often fall into some sort of work-based faith in Christ. There are many that celebrated salvation in Christ when they first were saved, but now it is almost is as if God is perpetually angry with you. He is disappointed with you. Preachers and teachers of God's word can many times give that impression. They preach on wrath and sin

without the good news. And it's almost like we are still under the Law. God has called us to impossible standards that we can never meet in this life. You might have daily devotions, but you can often feel guilty if you are not constantly in the Scriptures. We never witness enough, or serve enough, or study enough. And some need to be challenged to do better in these areas, but sometimes we can never do enough and there is no rest. God is constantly angry with you and he takes no pleasure in you. And you feel exhausted and down, and you have a hard time coming into the presence of God, if that is the way you feel that God looks at you — complete failure.

But think of it, because I am clothed in the perfect righteousness of Christ. God delights over his redeemed children. He loves you with an everlasting love. If we are in Christ and he loves Christ with a perfect love, then he loves us with the same love. And the motivation to study, know, love and make known this God is so different, because I come to him not to earn his pleasure. I already have it. I come because of my joy and delight in him. We need this gospel in our hearts and in our lives every single day. How about you? Are you drifting, or are you drifting away from the true nature of salvation? Do you celebrate that God is for you and not against you since you are in Christ? I want us to see a couple things this morning. I want us to see the controversy and then I want us to see the response. We need to see the controversy that rages so often in our hearts and minds, and then we have to preach the remedy to ourselves and others. Christ really has done it all!

1. We need to understand the controversy. V.1

It is amazing to belong to a church for many years and see the functionality in the church. We realize that there are many things that come into the lives of God's people, and in between God's people. There are many divisions and discords that happen. We saw that earlier in the Book of Acts when the Hellenist widows were not being looked after in Jerusalem. It threatened to divide the church. And there are many controversies that happen because we are still in the process of being changed in the image of Christ. There is pride and blind spots in our hearts. There is self-righteousness and bitterness that can take hold. And we can get worked up and fight and battle about the most infantile things. And we have to really guard our hearts. Church controversies are not rare, and most often they are not about things that really matter. They are not about things that are really eternal. And what things are you worked up about today? How are you judging others and battling others?

But there are some controversies that truly need to be fought and there are some truths where there cannot be any bending. There is too much at stake. It is not that good people can disagree. Think of it: because of your sin, you deserve to be banished to a place of punishment for all of eternity where there is no let up in that punishment. You have sinned against an infinite God, and your sin deserves punishment. Well, how can you ever be presented clean before an absolutely holy God? Psalm 24:3 asks that question, "**Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place?**" And listen to the answer, (Psalm 24:4) "**He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully.**" What is the problem? We do not have clean hands or a pure heart. That is the problem. Nothing unclean can come into his presence and sin is against a holy God and has to be punished.

And here is the glory of Scripture, because it gives clarity how that problem is solved. And God in his goodness designed this controversy to happen so that the doctrine of justification alone in Christ alone would be clarified. It was certainly preached before, but now clarified. We could live in the joy of our salvation. And I believe if you understand this passage, you can almost answer any question from any cult out there, because they all in one way or another define salvation by adding to the work of Jesus Christ. This passages helps us realize we can ascend that holy hill because we are in Christ.

So look at what Luke records here in verse 1, and let us see if we can understand this, **“But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’”** Now this a huge distance from Jerusalem to Antioch to come. We do not know if these men are here to see the nature of what is going on. We realize that the church at Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch as an official representative to check out this church and came to the conclusion that the same Gospel they were preaching was being preached and believed on here. This does not seem to be an official delegation by the wording here, “but some men came down from Judea.” We see a little later they belonged to a sect of Pharisees. And it also seems that they have already made their minds up as far as the nature of salvation. They are there to set others straight as far as how one needs to be saved.

And what they stated as far as the nature of salvation was a strong statement. Do you see how strong it is — **“Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”** Think of it, because you can substitute many different things with that word “circumcised” in so many modern day cults and religions, “Unless you are baptized, or worship God on the Sabbath, belong to the right church, or do certain penance or whatever you cannot be saved” — impossibility! And the radical shift that has happened in the church as it expands out from Jerusalem is great, surprising and for many alarming. And think of it, because this was ingrained in you for all of your life. Salvation belongs to the Jews alone. God chose them. He has given them the covenants and the promises. So think of why circumcision is such a critical thing. It was the sign of the male for skin being cut and this sign was given to Abraham whom the nation of Israel would come. It was a sign of the people of God. So think through the logic here. Messiah is coming. He will save his people. He will offer that perfect once and for all sacrifice, but for that to be any use, you have to become a Jew, or Jesus is of no value to you. You have to come under the Abrahamic Covenant.

And notice that it is worded this way, **“are circumcised according to the custom of Moses.”** Circumcision was something that was given through Abraham and not Moses, but this put you under the Mosaic Law. And the Jews, and it seems that many Jewish believers were very fervent about dietary restrictions. Some cults even follow those restrictions today. You see something of that in Peter’s vision on the roof of Simon the tanner’s house. The sheet is lowered with clean and unclean animals, and he is told to eat. Never! Nothing unclean has ever touched my lips! Hear the pride?

So here is the argument made by these men, and these men are claiming to be in the church, they have placed their faith in Jesus. They say he is necessary to salvation, but how do you appropriate that work? How do you trust Jesus? You have to

become a Jew. You have to ceremonially put yourself under that covenant with Abraham. And the key phrase there is “you have to.” There is something you have to do or you cannot be saved. And these arguments, the reason why people struggle with them is they do have a sense of believability. There are some things that seem to line up. But in the end it is just a crooked path. What comes to be central, and you can see that in so many cults, is not what Jesus has done but they have done. You’ve trusted Christ! Good, but have you kept the Sabbath (Saturday), but have you gone to the confessional, have you been baptized (baptismal regeneration is alive and well today), have you spoken in tongues? What comes to the forefront is not what Christ has done but what we do — it is Christ plus something, and that something is works righteousness. You tell me your definition of salvation and I can tell you what you boast in? It is one of two things. It is either what you have done or what Christ has done.

And works righteousness feeds into our pride. There seems to be an air of contention here rather than care for others. The gospel is such a humbling message that glorifies Another. And think of all the pride that exists in the true church. Think of all the backbiting and slander that goes on in churches today. What is behind it? At least in that moment, it is a failure to believe what the gospel says about me and about Jesus. I am really like all the rest. I am a sinner who deserves everlasting judgment, but look at what Christ has done. I am absolutely complete in Christ. There is no other sacrifice or anything left undone. And the message of justification through simple faith in Christ is not only a message that needs to be constantly heralded but it is a message that constantly needs to be defended.

2. We see the defence of the gospel. V.2.

Now there seems to be so much going on in this verse, more than what is recorded here. Much of what is recorded over in Galatians 2 seems to be talking place in this verse in Antioch. The whole letter of Galatians is a defence of justification by faith in Christ alone. Paul says there is no other gospel or way to be right in God’s sight. Any other person who preaches any other gospel should be accursed. And Peter was at Antioch, eating and fellowshiping with the believers there. Here we see that Paul took others to task about what they were teaching, and others like Peter for the impression they were giving. Listen to Galatians 2:11-12, “**But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party.**” These are no doubt the certain men or the some men we find in verse 1. And we find in the next verse that even Barnabas was getting caught up in withdrawing from the Gentiles, and Paul calls it “hypocrisy” because of the gospel they preach and confess.

And think of the importance of table fellowship. We invite people to the Table of the Lord, or the Lord’s Supper who have like precious faith. We say we are one. There is a bond, and in Christ we are one. Well, to withdraw table fellowship of any kind is to say something is wrong with you. There is a difference between you and me. And the hypocrisy here is that after Peter’s vision and up until that time that these men came he had no problem eating and fellowshiping with his fellow Gentile believers who have equal standing before God and we are all one connected to Christ and to one another.

So look at this verse, and try to see the discord and the confusion this must have created in the church at Antioch, **“And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.”** This seems to be a heated and contentious debate, and there is good reason for that because what is at stake is none other the eternal destiny of souls. Barnabas came to be his senses and sided with Paul, and so did Peter as we will see in our text. And it was about this time Paul wrote the Letter to the Galatian churches. It seems to be written before the Jerusalem council because we have no mention of it in the letter sent. Could it be that these men from Jerusalem were not content to make their views known only in Antioch but started to go to the other churches that Paul and Barnabas planted throughout Galatia? We do not know. But no doubt, news about what was being taught by these men would spread and clarity was needed on the issue. And Paul does give clarity on the issue. He says in that epistle in Galatians 2:15-16, **“We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.”** Jews by birth and not Gentiles sinners is just they were born under the covenant of God. They had the law, but here is the problem is that no one is justified by the laws. The law exposes our need but there is an impossibility of a person to be found righteous in God’s sight through that law.

So the question is what hope have I? And the only answer can be found if someone came and lived an absolutely perfect God-like life, and then took the punishment I deserved on my behalf. We are justified or stand righteous by faith in Jesus Christ and him alone. It is as we will see in this chapter appropriated by simply believing on Christ — trusting in him that what he has done is enough.

Now let me close with a couple of things to think about. One is for the true believer we have a perfect standing with God forevermore. Because we are found in Christ and clothed in his righteousness, because he paid the penalty nothing can ever separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus. And the reason I point that out is our justification, or standing before a holy God does not rise or fall with how we feel or what we are going through. So often because we do not feel close to him we will try to conjure up some sort of feeling, or because of our not feeling close to him, we will try to earn his approval. The only problem is the law teaches us is we cannot earn his approval. Your acceptance before a holy God never rises or falls by your performance or how you feel but is based on the perfect performance of another. I believe if you have belonged to this church for any amount of time you believe that. You have that knowledge.

The fact is believing that at any given moment of our lives. Because of the pressures, trials, and even failures in our lives, it is so easy to think that God is against me. And so many live such defeated lives. Realizing Christ has done it all, means living in such security and peace. It means celebrating who he is. Christians and congregations who know and live in light of what Christ has done for worthless sinners like us are usually the most zealous Christians. it does not make us lawless but zealous

to follow Christ. But the motivation is so different. It is not to prove ourselves and earn favour but celebrate that nothing on this earth, no scheme of man, no plan of the devil can ever separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus. I follow Christ not to earn or prove but because I love him and want more of him. But you will never have that joy, zeal, and security in Christ unless you are preaching that message constantly to your heart and mind. Jesus has done it all. We are complete in him.

Jerry Bridges writes in his book *Trusting God*, **“God’s unfailing love for us is an objective fact affirmed over and over in the Scriptures. It is true whether we believe it or not. Our doubts do not destroy God’s love, nor does our faith create it. It originates in the very nature of God, who is love, and it flows to us through our union with His beloved Son.**

But the *experience* of that love and the comfort it is intended to bring is depended upon our believing the truth about God’s love as it is revealed to us in the Scriptures. Doubts about God’s love, allowed to harbour in our hearts, will surely deprive us of the comfort of His love.”

So the question becomes, what are we believing about the gospel? There really is only one gospel message. It is here where comfort, joy and security is found. It is here that the peace of God is known no matter what we are going through. Our destinies depend on the right understanding of this message. Our joy and sanctification is based on understanding this message of what Jesus has done. We need to be constantly be preaching and teaching this message to ourselves.