

Yes, Some Things are Worth Fighting For!
Acts 15:3-5

We started through this passage last time we were together. And we saw that certain men came from Judea to Antioch and began to teach that you had to be circumcised in order to be saved. Listen to verse 1 again, **“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.’”** There are two things being emphasized, one is circumcision, which was the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant that marked out Israel from all others; and the other is according to the custom of Moses, in other words the keeping of the Mosaic Law, and this would be not just the moral law but also the ceremonial law. And these men were teaching unless you do that you cannot be saved. In other words, you are under the eternal judgment of God. There is no hope for you. Jesus is necessary, but Jesus is only effective in the lives of those who are under the Mosaic Law and belong to Israel.

We see there was a no small argument with Paul and Barnabas against these men who came. And by now Gentile believers started to outnumber those who were Jewish believers, and this became a hot button issue. And it might not seem that relevant for us who believe that we are saved through Christ alone but there are always those who are seeking to add to salvation through various means and through various ways. And let me name a couple of things to keep in mind here. One is that if you add anything to salvation, if it is Jesus plus something else, then you destroy Jesus as the complete Saviour. He left something undone or there was something that he could not accomplish. He is not the Author and Finisher of our faith because we have to do or accomplish something else. And the other thing, even if we say that Jesus brings us 99% of the way, whatever that 1% is become preeminent. The focus is no longer on Jesus but accomplishing whatever is left undone. Our boast becomes that 1%.

And you can see that in various different factions under the wider umbrella of Christianity. There are some who really trust in ritualism. They are dead churches, but it is all how you come. You need to go through the ritual. Salvation is found in you repeating certain phrases or responding when someone says something, or how you take the Lord's Table. There is no living and dynamic relationship with Christ, but it is what you do. Come and go through the ritual. Many extreme KJV advocates even say that you cannot be saved unless you respond to the words of the Gospel in the KJV text. It is all what you hear, and then what you do. The message of Jesus is not the most significant thing but the “thees” and “thous” or an ancient translation.

There are still others who say that you are not saved unless you have a certain experience. And that experience may be talking in tongues or some sort of other manifestation of the Spirit. Now they will say you are saved through Christ alone but what is emphasized is the experience. And what individuals in that movement are looking at and emphasizing is not Jesus crucified for sinners and risen from the grave, but have you had the experience. And therefore the emphasis on their preaching actually points away from Jesus to some so-called manifestation of the Spirit. I talked to a gentleman once who said the Spirit does not come on a person and he is not One of God's children until they believe on Christ and are baptized. It is at baptism that the Spirit comes and grants life. And it all these different practices it is Jesus plus

something. And again, if you ever heard the preaching in these churches, the thing that is emphasized over and over is “the something.” Jesus is not our complete Saviour.

And here is where we have to be so diligent. Because as we see Paul and Barnabas and the others that are in the delegation make their way to Jerusalem, we have to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that some things are worth fighting for. We often do not choose our battles wisely. We make things gospel issues, which really are not gospel issues. But this is one thing that we need to be passionate about. What is at stake is salvation through grace alone in Christ alone. What is at stake is the gospel. You add anything to it, and in Paul’s words in Galatians chapter 1 you make it a false gospel. You destroy the good news. There is only one name under heaven where we must be saved and it is in Christ alone. Oh, we are so passionate about so many things in our lives. But how passionate are we about the things that God is passionate about? He is passionate about his glory and his gospel. Are we? This is not just an academic debate, but something in which the very eternity of our lives hang.

And I want us to see a couple of things in the text, and that is the gospel of salvation in Christ alone is both worth celebrating, and the gospel of Christ is worth defending at all costs. This truly is a battle worth fighting, and this truly is a battle that we need and the church needs to be engaged in.

1. We need to see the gospel is worth celebrating. Vv. 3-4.

Now tell me what gets you fired up and what gets you excited and I will tell you what is nearest and dearest to your heart. There is so much about our great and eternal hope that should captivate our hearts and our lives in Christ. We often let that great joy and celebration wane and grow stale. We do not let the truths constantly saturate our souls. Think of it, Jesus has done it all! There is nothing more that needs to be done. He has accomplished for all time all that needs to be done. He has lived a stunningly perfect and holy life, and died taking the punishment I deserve. He even rose conquering the penalty of our sin forevermore. I know I will be found in eternity not by looking at me but by looking at him. Do you ever fill your minds with the grandeur and the glory and the certainty of those gospel truths? If salvation was anything that I have done or would do, like keeping the law, than no matter how stellar I kept it, there is still the possibility I might mess up and therefore never be saved. Salvation is secure because our blessed Jesus really has done it all! It is amazing what people get excited about, but the gospel really is worth getting excited about!

And it is so exciting that we have to share it with others. We have to announce it and want to announce it with others, and here it is — others of like precious faith who have trusted Jesus and Jesus alone want to celebrate that faith in Christ. So look at verse 3 as the delegation start to make their way down to Jerusalem, **“So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers.”** These individuals were not lone messengers, but they were emissaries of an established church in Antioch. They are sent out from them. The church realized the importance of this battle and debate. And notice the places where they passed through were Phoenicia and Samaria. Now it is so interesting that these were the areas that many Jewish Christians were scattered after the martyrdom of Stephen, and these were also areas that where Philip and Peter were preaching. And it seems that the

mission of making and maturing believers and establishing local churches had been carried on by many who were scattered. There were places to stop and fellowship and report the good work that had been going on in Antioch, Cyprus, Pamphylia and Galatia.

And I want you to see one significant word in this text, because you cannot understand the joy of these believers without seeing this word, and it is “conversion.” Look at the text, what were they doing in these churches, “**describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles.**” Now we talk about “conversion” all the time that you think this word is used extensively throughout the New Testament, but this is the only time it is used in the Bible. Here are a couple of definitions of conversion, “the process of changing in one form to another,” or “the fact of changing one’s religious beliefs, being persuaded so one changes their convictions.” Listen to how 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 describes the conversion of the Thessalonians, “**For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.**” Listen to that language of conversion. There is a turning from something — idols — to believe and serve the true and living God. They are believing in his resurrection and believe that they have been delivered from God’s wrath not by any works but through the finished work of Jesus Christ. And it is this good work that changes us, not just our destiny but our lives, what we truly rejoice in.

And after the churches heard of the conversion of so many who turned from pagan idols to believe and cherish and follow Christ, listen to the response at the end of verse 3, “**And brought great joy to all the brothers.**” Not just joy but great joy. And think of it, because they do not know any of these brothers and sisters who have come to Christ, but if Jesus is your joy, and you realize that individuals who used to worship all sorts of different things are now trusting and loving Jesus, and you realize Jesus is worthy of worship, then you cannot help but be filled with joy. That is the passion of missions. We want to see this Jesus worshiped and adored because he is worthy to be lauded and adored and cherished and believed on in this world and the One to come. God’s people celebrate that belief in the lives of those who are converted. And think of it, what brings you great joy in your life? What holds your attention — is it Christ, his gospel and his glory? Because if it is, then you’ll rejoice and rejoice greatly when that grace is extended to others. My Christ is worthy to be worshiped!

And then look because this entourage from Antioch continues on to their destination in the next verse, “**When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them.**” Now we see a three fold makeup of those who welcomed them from the church at Jerusalem. They were made up of the individual members in the church as a whole, then the apostles who might have been in different areas but came back for this important meeting, and the the elders, these would have been the pastors and overseers — the leaders of the church such as James, the Lord’s brother. And often we get the idea of the tension or that the church was opposed to these men, but it really seems like a small portion that were opposed because we see in the text, “**they welcomed them.**” All three groups just mentioned. They welcomed them means that

they gave them the right hand of fellowship. They recognized them as fellow believers in Christ, fellow workers in the harvest field of Christ.

And here we see they reiterate what had been said and gladly received in all the churches they visited on the way to Jerusalem, **“all that God had done with them.”** Don't you love the way that is worded. What had they reported — all that God had done through them. There is a couple of things we should point out here. One is that the conversion of anyone is not a work that we accomplish but a work that God does through us. The various individuals that have come to Christ is validation that this is none other than the work of God. It is only God that can open the heart and cause one to believe. So you can preach and preach and preach, but it has no effect without God. Paul says in Romans 8:7, **“For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.”** The mind left to itself will not submit to God, not — might not, Paul says it cannot. So here is the second thing in this passage, you can swap out Paul and Barnabas and have someone else preach the gospel and have the same result. This is what God has done. The main importance here is not the messenger but what God has done.

And that is a humbling truth. In an age of self-importance where we want to point and say, “Look at me,” we are mere messengers who give a message. God wants us to give it accurately and passionately, but he is the one who applies it effectively. But as that truth humbles us it causes us to worship the God of the gospel — the God of our salvation. Salvation is all of the Lord. it causes our hearts to celebrate that he would even use us. What is important is not the instrument but the one who is wielding the instrument, and that is our God. Are you amazed that God uses feeble instruments like us so that all the glory and boasting is toward Him? The more we see him in the gospel the more we are enamoured and love and are devoted to him from the deepest recesses of our hearts. And here it, the more passionate about him, the more passionate we are giving his gospel but also in protecting his gospel.

2. Those who celebrate his gospel will passionately defend his gospel. V.5.

This is it. If you love your spouse, and someone attacks them verbally or physically you will not sit idly by. Your love for them will cause you to defend them. The same with your children. When God's gospel is attacked his glory is attacked. Salvation which is all of God means that God gets all the glory, which is awesome to those who are God lovers. But add works or any deviation to the gospel and that glory is deleted. Also, the very welfare of those who will spend an eternity somewhere is in jeopardy. If you get the gospel wrong then there is no hope. Those who taught there is no resurrection, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:17-19, **“And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.”** And this goes with any alteration of the gospel of Jesus. If salvation could come through any means others than Jesus and him alone then Christ died needlessly. And so God's glory is at stake and the eternal welfare of others. So if we love God and love others, we will passionately defend the Gospel of God. This is a fight worth having.

And often we have to really think about issues and whether they are a gospel issue or not. Not every controversy or even every controversy in the church of Jesus Christ rises to what we have right here. Often we try to make an issue a gospel issue and in the end we weaken the meaning of what the gospel truly is and even our passion for it. Good believers can disagree on this like Covenantalism or Dispensationalism, or end times theology. They can differ on the mode of baptism, or even church polity. They can differ on spiritual gifts. And all of these doctrines and teachings are important, but they are not at the heart of the gospel. We would not or I hope we would not pronounce an anathema on any because of these issues, that they are out of the faith and outside of true Christianity.

So look at this verse because it is interesting, and think of it because some of the baggage that we enter Christianity with we carry with us. And think of it for Jewish believers because they really had a knowledge of the true God of the Old Testament. The problem was that they also had that huge corpus of oral tradition that went along with it, and it was hard to distinguish after they came to Christ what to jettison and what to not. What do we do with circumcision or the Sabbath day or the dietary restrictions that we practiced all of our lives? Are these still binding? Are they still enforced? And if someone does not practice them — are they a believer? Are they truly saved?

So look at the position that some took in the church, **“But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.’”** It is interesting that Luke calls these individuals who are of the party of the Pharisees “believers.” They are at this church council and accepted as those who have new life through Christ. And we see both grace here and how the problem arose. We see that the grace here in that the fiercest and most unrelenting enemies of Jesus during his earthly ministry were the Pharisees. Yet, unlike the Sadducees they believed in miracles and the resurrection from the dead. And many of them, like Nicodemus came to Christ. Now here is the debate. They took obedience to the laws of God seriously. They took the Old Testament seriously. And here is what believers struggle with — what part do works play in my salvation? Again, we struggle with that sometimes don’t we? We might sin with our words or with our eyes, and we wonder whether we are truly his.

And this is where we have to be so careful and distinguish between the result of salvation and the what salvation truly is. Our salvation is based solidly on the finished work of Jesus Christ. There is nothing left undone. This is why the doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone was such an important doctrine in the reformation. We are declared and have a position of righteousness based on the finished work of another. Our sins forevermore have been paid for by Christ. Now, the more that message is understood and received the more we love Christ and want to follow him and glorify Him by keeping his commandments. This is the irony of the gospel. When the gospel is understood many conclude it will produce lawlessness or a license to sin, but when it is preached that salvation is in Christ alone it creates passionate believers in Christ who want to obey him. He has really done it all.

And that is why Paul and Barnabas and Peter are here. They are here because of the significance and the nature of salvation. They are passionate about it, and how can they not be if there really is no other name given among men where we must be

saved? How can they not be if this is God's gospel and in heaven we will sing of the Lamb who shed his blood for the remission of our sins for all of eternity? Now were these Pharisees truly born again believers? Well, the text seems to indicate they were. This might have been a polite way to talk about them, also and give them the benefit of the doubt. But the real evidence is in how they will respond when the truth of Christ is presented, when the gospel of Christ is presented in a fuller way. There really is only one way, one road, one path, one door, one gate, one light, one bread of heaven, one Lamb of God, one Lord, one truth, one substitute, one redeemer, one ransom paid for all time, one life, and one Saviour, one bridegroom, one cornerstone, one peace, one hope, one rock, one vine, one Author and Finisher of our faith, one Passover, one Emmanuel, one Messiah, and he is Jesus.

And many might look at this section and think this whole controversy is much to do about nothing. What is the big deal? But this is a big deal. The gospel itself is at stake. And here is the thing, if you love Christ and have your confidence in him, how can you not be passionate about him and his work? Christ is our all. Christ is our confidence. This passage really challenges us in what we are willing to fight for. We waste so much of our time and energy on battles that should never be fought, but also ignore those that need to be fought. We are passionate about things that really don't matter, yet yawn at the glory that should captivate and overwhelm our hearts. What is at stake is God's glory and the eternal destiny of others. Now that is something worthy to be passionate about!