

# Loving Peace Enough to Fight for It

Acts 15:1-6

*Halifax: 14 October 2012*

## **Introduction**

My dear brothers and sisters,

- In our study of Acts, we have seen the marvellous way that the sweet gospel of grace transformed the remnant of the house of Israel,
  - and then how it began to make its way into the Gentile world and bring untold blessing there.
  - It was an altogether marvellous thing.

But whenever God performs His marvellous works in this fallen world,

- You can be certain that there will be opposition...
  - Something will come to oppose and challenge that work of God.
- We have already seen how wave after wave of persecution came against the church—
  - first in Judea when the Sadducees rose up against Peter and John...
  - Then among the Hellenists when God's servant Stephen was martyred and the raging Saul of Tarsus began to breathe out threats and murder against the church and to haul both men and women off to prison...
  - And then there were all the persecutions that Paul and Barnabas had to endure as they went on the first missionary journey.
    - These were enough to turn many men back—
      - There was no lightness about them—Paul was even stoned and left for dead on one occasion!
      - But they kept fighting the good fight of faith—they pressed on in their work without slackening their pace!
- And now in Acts 15, we see a new kind of opposition that comes to challenge the work of God.
  - This time the opposition is from those who profess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.
    - Now there is an attack that rises up from within the walls of the church.
    - It was a very serious matter, and in Acts 15, we get to see how the church rose up by God's grace to meet the challenge.
      - We see here how faithful believers rise up to fight.
- Oh brothers and sisters, there are important lessons for us here.
  - We live in a time of great foppishness in our corner of the Christian church—in North America.
  - We are so indifferent that we often don't see the truth as worth fighting for.
- I'm not talking about fighting the way the radical Muslims fight...

- Jihad—going out and blowing things up to make your point and to push your cause!
- I am not even talking about going out to protest in the streets or to join in a boycott.
- Jesus explained to Pilot when Pilot asked Him if He were a king that He was indeed a king, but that His kingdom was not of this world.
  - If it were, His servants would come and fight.
  - But because it is not of this world, they do not come to fight in that way.
- But this does not mean that we are not to fight in any way!
  - We are in a great battle!
  - And we are called to advance the cause of truth, humility, and righteousness!
    - We are to spread the knowledge of Christ in every place,
    - And we are to fight against sin and unbelief in our own personal lives, in our families, in the church, in our city, in our nation, and in our world.
- And I tell you that whenever opposition comes, we should not look at it as if something has gone wrong.
  - The opposition and the difficulty are part of God’s plan.
  - It is good for us because when we fight for the truth and the gospel, it causes us to realise how precious the gospel is...
    - We need such help because we are very dull about such things.
    - But the blessing only comes when we are willing to rise up and fight...
      - to fight as we shall see that Paul and Barnabas did.

So let’s get underway.

- I want to start off with a reminder of how precious the peace of the gospel is....

## **I. The gospel brings precious peace to those who receive it**

- A. You can see how this is spoken about in verse 3-4 as Paul and Barnabas’s trip from Antioch to Jerusalem is described...
  1. We are told how they spoke to the churches along the road (in Phoenicia and Samaria) and finally in Jerusalem itself.
    - They told them about how the Lord had used them to bring the gospel to the Gentiles.
      - You see how they declare it all to be the work of God.
    - Verse 3 says:
      - **Acts 15:3-4: 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. 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.**

2. It brought great joy to these churches because they themselves knew of the blessing that the gospel brings to those who receive it.
    - They knew what a difference it had made in their own lives, so they were thrilled to hear that those who were far from God were being saved.
    - They knew what great peace the gospel brings...
      - Do you know it?
      - Does it give you great joy when you hear of those who have received the gospel?
      - It brings tremendous wholeness—tremendous peace!
- B. Someone might say, “Peace? It seems to me that it causes division wherever it goes.”
1. In a way that is true, is it not?
    - a. Think of all the turmoil that Paul and Barnabas caused when they went out on their first missionary journey.
      - Before they arrived the people were getting along fine, but when Paul and Barnabas came, there was a great stir.
      - For example,
        - Do you remember what happened at Iconium?
          - We were told that the whole city was divided!
      - The gospel was very divisive.
        - Even Jews who had worshipped together at the Synagogue turned against each other—
          - Now there were those who were for the gospel and those who were against it.
        - And the Gentiles were dragged into the fray too—
          - Some of them were bitterly opposed and some of them were strongly in favour of the gospel.
          - The division was so great that in some places, the citizens became quite violent and starting hunting Paul and Barnabas down.
            - You could hardly say it brought peace!
    - b. And this has been the case throughout history as well...
      - Many people reject religion because they see it as the cause of war.
      - There was the great conflict and bloodshed at the time of the Reformation between the Reformers and the Catholics and the Anabaptists in many parts of the world.
      - Just think of all the conflict and bloodshed during the times in Scotland when the Church of England rose up against the Covenanters.
    - c. And today—if Christians would be quiet about abortion and homosexuality and stop saying that these are wrong,

- everybody would have a lot more peace, wouldn't they?
  - And you know what happens in homes when someone turns to the Lord—
    - It divides parents and children, husbands and wives, and brothers and sisters.
    - Many of you have had division because of the gospel.
2. We should not hesitate to admit that there is a sense in which the gospel does cause division.
- a. Even our Lord Jesus told us that this was true.
    - In Matthew 10:34-36 He clearly declared:
      - **Matt 10:34-36: “Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to ‘set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law’; and ‘a man’s enemies will be those of his own household’.”**
    - He says that if we follow Him, we will be tempted to turn back at times because our allegiance to Him will cause others to hate us.
  - b. Sometimes believers will try to deny this.
    - Someone will throw out the objection that religion causes war so they want nothing to do with it and we will say—
      - No it doesn't—that is not caused by true Christians.
    - But it is much better to just go on and admit it the way our Lord does.
      - I know that unbelievers will distort things, but it is very true that there is great division and trouble when the gospel comes.
- C. So if the gospel causes division, how can we say that it brings precious peace to those who receive it?
1. This is a constant theme of the scriptures...
    - a. Almost every epistle brings a salutation of peace—you know, something like:
      - **2Co 1:2: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**
      - These are not just empty words of greeting—
        - They are a true blessing that God bestows on His people through the gospel—He really does give them peace.
      - Romans 14:17 describes the kingdom that Jesus came to establish as a kingdom of peace...
        - **Rom 14:17: for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.**
    - b. In many places, peace is even used as the word of choice to summarise Jesus' entire ministry and message...

- 1) For example, in Ephesians 2:17, it says:
  - **Eph 2:17: And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near.**
- 2) And the gospel that is preached by the church is referred to as the gospel of peace.
  - For example, Romans 10:15, it says that
    - **“How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things!”**

TRANS> So what is the deal—

- There seems to be a contradiction here—
  - Does the gospel bring peace or does it bring division?
- 2. Jesus Himself explains the contradiction in the Olivet Discourse—on the night that He was betrayed and taken away to be brutally crucified.
  - a. Knowing that He is about to depart, He says to His disciples:
    - **Joh 14:27: “Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you.**
    - And similarly in John 16:33 He says:
      - **Joh 16:33: “These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”**
  - b. So you see that it is not a contradiction at all.
    - It is rather that the kind of peace that Jesus brings is not the kind of peace that the world knows.
      - It is something much better than that!
- 3. The peace that the gospel brings is peace in the most important place!
  - a. It is peace with God!
    - It is reconciliation with Him with whom we were once enemies.
      - It is peace with the One that it is most important to have peace with.
        - You know, there are some people that it makes more difference to have peace with—
          - Peace with a bees nest is more important than peace with ant hill.
          - Peace with God supersedes all and every other kind of peace.
    - So when we speak about gospel peace,
      - It is not just that we are now able to get along better with others in this world...
      - Now it is true that this ought to be so—we are transformed by the gospel and it ought to make us kinder and more loving and less easily offended—
        - but Jesus tells us and it is often the case that we get along worse with others because we are hated for His sake.

- Let's face it,
    - The fact that you have tuned to Jesus does not make most people pleased with you—especially if they understand who He is!
      - Until people come to Christ, the last thing they want is to be reminded of a Saviour who had to be crucified to save people.
        - That is a message of judgement to them!
    - If you have not come to that salvation, it is just plain offensive to be reminded about it...
      - Because the message of cross tells you that there is something severely wrong with you and that Jesus is the only way of salvation...
      - It tells you that you have so offended God that there is nothing you can do about it.
        - Nothing but come to Jesus who was crucified and plead for mercy.
    - So even though He came to bring peace,
      - People who reject His salvation cannot be neutral toward Him because the very mention of Him is offensive to them!
        - That is why self-righteous religious people hate Him—He tells them that their righteousness is not nearly good enough...
        - And that is why the middle of the road nice guy who wants to just get along hates Him—because Jesus cuts right into his comfortable little world and tells him that he needs radical salvation...
        - And that is why the person who has abandoned himself to his lusts hates Jesus—because Jesus reminds him that he needs to repent and be saved.
- b. But once you come to Him—once you come to Jesus for His salvation—that is when you find joy and peace!
- Just to think that you who have offended a holy God—
    - You who could do nothing to save yourself—
      - **You** have peace with God!
  - This is a peace that wonderfully supersedes whatever peace you might have had to give up in this world in following Christ.
    - The net effect of peace lost compared to the peace you gain in Christ is nothing short of an abundance of peace!
      - It is a peace that passes all understanding!
  - You know where you are headed now!
    - You know that as one who has peace with God through Jesus, you are headed for eternal glory!

- You know that there will be pleasures forevermore at the right hand of God!
- In the gospel, you have seen God revealed in a way that you had never imagined before...
  - You have seen the glory of His wisdom, of His power, of His grace, of His holiness, of His wrath, of His justice, of His mercy!
  - And you are being renewed into His likeness day by day through work of Christ in you by the Holy Spirit!
  - This fullness of life—this fullness is what the Bible calls peace (or shalom)...
    - is yours through the gospel.

TRANS> So you see why the churches were filled with great joy when they heard how the gospel had reached Southern Galatia and Cyprus.

- I grant you that this is an incidental point in our text,
  - but I think it is put there for contrast...
- It sets off the contrast between those who were naturally delighted to hear about the Gentiles' conversion because of their own joy in the gospel,
  - with those Judaizers who, although they too professed Christ, were distressed when they heard about the Gentiles coming to Him.
    - In fact, they would not even acknowledge that the Gentiles had been saved.
    - They had a gospel that did not bring true peace to them and therefore they could not rejoice in the peace that had come to the Gentiles.
  - And that brings us to our second point:

## II. Peace is disrupted by those in the church who distort the gospel

- It is disrupted for everyone—for the ones who distort the message as well as for those they preach their distortions to.
- A. The problem is described in verse 1.
- **Acts 15:1: 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."**
1. You can only imagine how disturbing this would have been to the Gentiles who had recently come to Christ.
    - a. They had a great respect for their Jewish brothers who had confessed Jesus Christ.
      - It was through such persons—persons like Paul and Barnabas—that many of them had heard the gospel.

- And they were so happy to be found in Christ and His salvation that they were gladly bearing reproach for His name...
  - As I mentioned before—though they had to suffer for His sake, the net effect was an abundance of peace!
- b. But now these brothers from Judea were telling them that they were not saved.
  - It was a great blow to their joy.
  - Have you ever had anyone come along and question your salvation?
  - I did—when I was in university—several times.
    - I was a new believer and I was rejoicing in the gospel,
      - but there were a couple of different groups on campus that approached me at different times and told me that I was missing something.
    - I remember after talking to one of these groups...
      - I spent several sleepless nights in agony trying to discern if they were right.
      - They were using the Bible and they seemed to know what they were talking about.
        - It was very disruptive to my peace because it attacked me at the very point of my relationship with God.
        - That is where the very fountainhead of my peace was located!
- 2. You see what the disturbing message of these men from Judea was.
  - a. They were telling the Gentiles that they were not really fully saved yet—
    - not until they came all the way to God by getting circumcised and keeping the law of Moses.
  - b. And their message was hard to resist because the men who were saying this were, for the most part, probably quite sincere...
    - I mean, they really believed what they were saying—they really cared for these new disciples and wanted to help them.
    - Their problem was not that Gentiles were being saved.
      - They knew that God had promised that.
        - They were not racist—they loved to make proselytes and when they did they were fully incorporated into Israel.
    - Their concern was that Paul had made the way too easy for these Gentiles so that they were not fully brought to God.
      - They were concerned that these Gentiles were missing out on all that they needed for salvation.
      - They were concerned that as a result, these Gentiles would bring a lot of immorality and corruption to the church.



- And of course, as you can see from Paul's letters, there was a lot of immorality and corruption that was brought into the church by the Gentiles.
  - They were having to learn to walk with the Lord.
  - But the solution of these "certain men who came down from Judea" was not the right solution.
3. Adding to the gospel of grace is always a very tempting solution, but it is not the right solution.
- a. It is tempting because it seems to make perfect sense that if you impose some code of righteousness that must be achieved to be saved,
    - It will restrain sin...
    - If you must do something to achieve your righteousness—
      - If there is always a little more to do to be right with God it will keep you pressing on more than if you are told that righteousness has been achieved by Christ for you.
      - The thought is that it will keep you motivated if you are not entirely sure that you have yet done enough to be saved.
  - b. But the truth is that it does not!
    - It will only bring about hypocrisy to have incomplete righteousness.
      - If righteousness is something that we have to personally achieve, we will have to either become hypocrites or we will be swallowed up by despair!
        - Because if you are trying to measure up to some standard of righteousness before God,
          - You will know deep down that you have failed.
          - And you will despair and give up—
            - either by becoming wild and abandoning yourself or by just losing yourself in everyday living...
          - Or you will start pretending that you are measuring up and become a first class hypocrite who judges everyone around you for not keeping all the rules that you keep.
            - You will dream that because you are doing better than others (keeping more rules), you have a better status with God.
    - c. You can see how pernicious this doctrine of incomplete righteousness is!
      - Wow! Talk about a recipe for taking your eyes off of Christ!
        - There is no better way to turn a disciple's eyes from Christ than by telling him that Christ is good—but you need to do this too!

- My brothers and sisters!
  - Understand this!
  - You cannot contribute one thing to your righteous standing with God!
    - Whatever you add will always be corrupt!
    - You need the righteousness that Christ obtained for all of His elect.
    - It is a perfect righteousness, and it is not about what you do or don't do...
      - It is about Christ and what He has done for us!
      - It is about receiving and resting upon Him alone for your salvation as He is offered in the gospel.
        - Whatever you add to His work will only corrupt it.
- The true gospel does not teach us to do this or do that so that we can be saved.
  - It teaches us to rejoice in the righteousness of Christ...
  - And then to yearn to be like Him—
    - not that we may achieve a righteous standing with God...
      - but that we may be renewed into His glorious image and be filled with His love and wisdom!
    - If we are saved, it is true that we will desire to live a godly life and we will live a godly life...
      - but we must not for moment suppose that that living a godly life makes us right with God.
      - That is something that only Christ can do.

B. We have such issues in our day—such distortions of the gospel.

1. Sadly, the average person in the church will not boast of the cross but of works.
  - They will tell you that they hope God will accept them because they try to do the best they can—
    - They try to help people and they try to live a good life and on that basis they hope that God will accept them...
    - They hope that their good deeds will outweigh their bad deeds...
  - What a pitiful, pitiful thing to hope in!
    - Compare that to what really had to be done to save sinners!
      - The Son of God had to live the righteous life that you have failed to live...
        - And then He had to be cut off in shame and disgrace and suffer the curse of God...
  - And you are hoping that your good deeds will outweigh your bad deeds?
    - That is **so** weak!

2. And then there is the Roman Catholic Church and their doctrine.
  - They are worried about the very same thing these Judaizers from Judea were worried about...
    - They are worried that if they teach righteousness by free grace alone through faith alone, the people will be unrestrained.
    - And so they impose their own rules and regulations and requirements—
      - Things that must be done to complete the salvation that Christ has begun—and no one is ever sure if they have done enough.
  - The ironic thing is that people in their church are often very ungodly...
    - Many just resign themselves to the fact that they will have to go to purgatory anyway...
    - They rest in the rituals to achieve righteousness and they do not see the much higher righteousness of God that inspires those who hold to free grace along through faith in Christ alone.
    - The result is ungodliness coupled with trust in rituals.
      - They miss Christ and they do not yearn for godliness.
      - Everything is just superficial.
        - It has to be because again, as soon as you try to add your own works to the work of Christ,
          - you grossly reduce the true standard.
3. And then one more contemporary error that I should mention is the so called new perspective on Paul.
  - N.T. Wright points out that there are many different takes on the New Perspective,
    - so I will say something about *his* take on it.
  - He argues that righteousness is something that cannot be imputed to us by the work of another.
    - This leaves us with the impossible responsibility of attaining righteousness before God by our own doings!
    - It is essentially that same doctrine that that certain men from Judea were preaching, only with different clothes...
      - At the end of the day, it is a doctrine of despair because it puts before you the impossible task of producing your own righteousness instead of finding it in Christ and His work.
      - It forces you to either be superficial or to despair.
        - It takes your eyes off of Jesus Christ and His saving work and it leaves you without any solid hope.

TRANS> Do you see how destructive this doctrine is to gospel peace?

- Paul certainly did, and this led both him and Barnabas to fight for the gospel.
  - And that brings us to our last point...

### III. Those who love peace are willing to fight for it

A. They cannot stand by when peace is threatened without taking action and fighting for it.

1. This makes me think of the story of Sergeant York.

- He was a poor man from the hills of Tennessee who was converted out of a life of drunkenness and carousing.
- He was absolutely amazing with his rifle—no one could match him at the turkey shoot...
- But World War I broke out and the day came when this simple, ignorant young man was drafted.
- All he understood from the Bible was that it said, “you shall not kill,”
  - so while he was willing to use his skills with firearms to help train others, he was unwilling to shoot another man...
  - He was a man of peace who loved peace.
- Until one day when he was on the battlefield and the Germans were shooting down many of his comrades—
  - until he was in charge.
  - He began shooting and was so effective that 132 Germans surrendered, enabling him and a handful of men to take them as prisoners.
  - He was the most decorated American soldier of World War I.
- But why did he decide to fight and even to kill?
  - It was, he said, in order to save life by hastening the end of the war.
  - He loved peace so much, you see, that he was willing to fight for it.

2. That is just what Paul and Barnabas did!

- a. They understood that the teaching of these men from Judea that you must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses to be saved would utterly destroy the peace that the gospel had brought to the Gentiles.
  - It would cast them into works of righteousness and cloud if not eradicate the gospel of peace.
  - They would lose the solid joy of a firm and sure peace with God and be left with uncertainty and despair.
- b. And because Paul and Barnabas saw this so clearly, they began to fight—
  - not because they were men who loved war...
  - but because they were men of peace who realised that they must fight to defend peace.
- c. You see in the first place that they had “no small dissention and dispute” with these Judaizers.
  - They tried their best to persuade them of their error, but these brothers would not be persuaded.

- They were fighting because the peace of the church depended upon it.
  - It was not a matter that could be safely ignored.
    - It had the potential to destroy the whole church!

B. And I want you to see further that those who love peace will fight in a wise way.

1. When men are just cantankerous and quarrelsome, or when they fight because of envy or from personal injury,
  - they do not fight in a way that is wise and beneficial.
  - No, instead they stir up more strife and discord and cause even more disruption in the church.
    - They resort to measures such as exaggerating what their opponents have said...
    - They will misquote them and then instead of repenting, will say, “well, that is the sort of thing he would have said...”
    - They will try to attack their opponent’s character or find ways to demean him as a foolish man or an uneducated man or a man who is out of touch.
  - When men behave like this, they are no longer fighting for peace.
    - They are stirring up strife and discord and discrediting their own cause.
2. But look at what Paul and Barnabas and the presbytery at Antioch do!
  - a. Recognising that disputing with these men is getting them nowhere,
    - and recognising that this matter is one that affects the whole church,
    - **Acts 15:2: they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question.**
  - b. This is a matter for the church as a whole to work out!
    - It is necessary for the whole church to decide whether or not the Gentiles must be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses to be saved.
    - This matter cannot be left undecided or it will destroy the whole church.
      - So off they go to Jerusalem to meet with the elders from all of the churches in a general assembly or Synod.
  - c. This is the work that Synods are meant to do—to settle disputes about doctrine and practice.
    - This is the pattern that God instituted from the beginning—
      - when He appointed the Sanhedrin which was made up of elders representing the twelve tribes.
    - Synods are not human inventions,
      - and the apostles’ example is normative for us.
      - The church has had many such councils throughout her history.

- They are not infallible, but they are God's appointed method for the church seeking to do His will.
  - Rather than a one man show on the local level, or some pontiff at the top in an hierarchical church,
    - such assemblies recognise Christ is the head of the church and look to discern his will as a plurality of elders.
  - It is very sad that the church is so divided these days because of irreconcilable doctrinal differences,
    - but as much as we are able, we should come together with others to seek the Lord's will together as brothers.
  - God has given us this method and it is much better than starting an internet campaign against the brother we believe to be in error...
    - or arguing with him endlessly without submitting to other brothers to make a judgement.
    - If you love peace—if you really love peace—you will fight in a way that will productive of peace.
3. And my brothers and sisters, this is true at all levels.
- It is true at work, it is true with your spouse, it is true with your parents, it is true with your children and your neighbours and your church.
  - You need fresh supplies of the grace of God so that you will truly love peace—
    - and fight for it because you love it rather than for some other reason.
      - or not fight for it when it is in the best interests of peace to do so.
    - And then you will need more grace in order that you might have wisdom to know how to fight in a way that will best promote peace.
      - Otherwise, you can end up making things worse.
  - Perhaps an example will be helpful at this point.
    - Suppose that your spouse is doing something that has the potential to destroy the peace in your home...
      - Say your husband—who is a godly man generally—is frequently losing his patience with you and the children.
        - You can blow up at him because you get annoyed with him.
        - Or you can belittle him and gossip about him to your friends.
        - But if you love peace, you will go to him with a meek and quiet spirit—not in the heat of the moment, but when he is calm...
          - And you will express your concern.
            - In other words, you will approach the matter in the way that the Lord says—in a way that will promote peace.

**Conclusion:** Oh my brothers and sisters,

- We all need to pray that we would love peace enough to fight for it.
  - It is only by God's grace that as individuals and as a church that we can cherish peace so much that we will fight for it with wisdom and meekness!