

Defending Free Grace

Acts 15:6-19

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Introduction

How is a person saved?

- That was the question that came before the church court in Acts 15.
 - EXPLAIN:
 - Acts 15:1—Certain men came from Judea...
 - denied salvation by free grace alone through faith alone.
 - said everyone must be circumcised to be saved...
- Do you realise the magnitude of this question?
 - What a dreadful thing it would be if we were wrong about it!
 - What a dreadful thing it would be if we were leading others astray!
 - What a dreadful thing if you are wrong about yourself.
 - Think of the consequences!
 - Everlasting damnation.
 - Some mock—“Get it a little off and you go to Hell???”
 - But when you know the way of salvation, you realise that it is not little error to deny free grace.
 - You are totally wrong about all that God is—you are a chronic major truth suppressor.
 - You are totally wrong about Jesus—why He had to come.

Salvation by grace is a very sweet very excellent doctrine—

- It is the doctrine that salvation is a work that God does.
 - We must trust in Him to save us because we cannot save ourselves.
 - We must trust in what He has done—
 - in sending Jesus to save us by the cross.
- Nothing else can give you true assurance!
- Nothing else can deal with your sin!
- Nothing else can cause you to see the glory of God.

The doctrine of salvation by free grace is unique to OT Judaism and NT Christianity.

- It is what makes the truth stand out from all false ways of self-salvation.
- It is hated by those who are outside for the same reason that is loved by those who are saved...two reasons...
 - Because it changes your life and reconciles you to the true God.
 - The natural man does not want to be changed or to be reconciled.
 - Because it is true and clear—does not mask and hide.
 - The natural man wants to hide—he makes fig leaves.

Because it is hated by the natural man, it is always attacked...

- It is attacked by those who are outside the church.
- It is attacked by many who are inside the church.
 - Though they are in the church visible, they oppose salvation by grace.
 - Outsiders are confused because of all the views out there...
 - But they need not be—the truth is self-attesting if only they will be honest before God.

Today I want to show you how the Council at Jerusalem proved that salvation is by free grace!

- We need to be sure that we are right about this matter.
- We can be sure.

I. That salvation is by free grace is proven by the experience of the saved.

- What do I mean by this?
- A. I mean that those who come to God, looking to Him alone for salvation, actually experience salvation!
 - They find that they are transformed into a new creation in Jesus Christ.
 - Salvation by free grace is the only way to a clear conscience (*know* that you are forgiven)...
 - There is always an underlying guilt till you come to Jesus.
 - No soap, no good deeds, can take it away—only His shed blood!
 - Salvation by free grace brings about a love and admiration for God (you know Him as you did not know Him before).
 - You see how great His love, and wisdom and justice are.
 - You come to know Him as your Father and Christ as your brother and the Spirit as your mother.
 - Salvation by free grace transforms your life—you put off the old man and put on the new.
 - There are the fruits of the Spirit—
 - **Gal 5:22: But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.**
 - You are radically changed from what you were (or from what you would have been):
 - **1 Cor 6:9-11: Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.**

- Think of the people who have been radically transformed by the gospel!
 - The raging Saul (or Paul) of Tarsus on his way to rid the world of Christians...broken, humbled, and renewed!
 - The arrogant Augustine in all his intellectual pride brought to his knees in humble repentance and made a servant in God's house.
 - There is the drunk on the street, a slave to his bottle and an enemy of God—raised up by gospel grace to serve the LORD.
 - There is the nice guy who thinks he has no need of God, awakened by this grace to fall to his knees and confess his sins.
 - And all of us who have been subdued by the gospel of grace who are part of this church—and the church around the world!
- There is a complete change because it is a God-wrought change.
 - Oh yes, people can change superficially apart from the truth,
 - but only the gospel of grace has the power to bring about a true transformation—a new creation—to bring us to God.

TRANS> But does it seem unwise to rely on experience?

- After all, many are deceived.
 - The heart is deceitful and desperately wicked.
- That is true enough—
 - Experience must be backed up by the Word.
 - We will look at that when we get to our second point.
 - But experience is essential...because the experience we are talking about is the experience of God's work in us.
 - The proof is in the pudding!
 - It is a work that must be seen.

B. You see that the leaders of the church at the Council in Jerusalem prove that salvation is by free grace by pointing the experience of the Gentiles.

- The Judaizers wanted to do what so many people want to do to the gospel...
 - They wanted to add to it so that it is not of free grace—faith in what God does through Christ to save—but faith plus something that we do...
 - We looked at examples of this last week—that you must do these rituals or must complete what Christ has begun for justification.
 - In this case, they wanted to add circumcision and keeping the Law of Moses as requirement for justification.
 - “That must also be done,” they said...

1. But the Apostle Peter points to the experience of Cornelius and his house.

- Peter testifies that salvation was experienced by Cornelius and his household without circumcision or observance of the Law of Moses...
- a. Peter listens to the dispute going on and he realises that he must say something...
 - He was a key player, and he had been inconsistent in that he had refused table fellowship with the Gentiles so as not offend the Jews.
 - He never denied salvation by free grace or said that the Gentiles must be circumcised—but he had refused to eat with them.
 - Paul had rebuked him, and he had heard.
 - His words reflect the very things that Paul had said to him.
 - He reminds the court that God chose him to take the gospel to the Gentiles...
 - **v. 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.**
- b. Peter argues that God the heart-knower acknowledged them...
 - 1) He poured out the Holy Spirit on these Gentiles
 - **v. 8: “So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them [the uncircumcised] the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us [the circumcised],**
 - The Spirit is the promise of the new covenant!
 - God made the pouring of the Spirit upon them visible to prove that it had been done.
 - He made it visible the way it was visible at Pentecost.
 - This was God’s clear testimony that He had accepted them and that the Spirit had come.
 - The Spirit did not come by the works of the law, but by hearing with faith.
 - 2) Peter goes on to say that God...
 - **v. 9: “made no distinction between us [the circumcised] and them [the uncircumcised], purifying their hearts by faith.**
 - They were given the same assurance of forgiveness through faith in the work of Christ...
 - They were given the same new heart and new life and all this apart from circumcision and law keeping.
 - It is the same salvation for all of us.
 - Isn’t that great?
 - Your salvation is no different than Peter’s salvation.

- c. Peter suggests that the council dare not test God by putting additional requirements on the Gentiles...
 - **v. 10: “Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples**
 - If God has saved without circumcision and without the works of the law, who are you to come and add additional requirements?
 - Leave them alone!
 - God has done it.
 - To suggest that more is needed when God has already accepted them is to question God!
 - We mustn't be so fussy about right doctrine that we deny salvation to those that God has saved.
 - Don't get me wrong—we have to fight against creeping heresy, but it is a heresy to say that people must believe in a certain narrow way to be saved.

TRANS> But look here at what else Peter says...

- The Gentiles experienced salvation apart from circumcision and law keeping,
 - but Peter points out that...
- 2. He and the other Jews did not experience salvation by circumcision and law keeping either!
 - a. Notice what he says about the yoke that the Judaizers are trying to put on the neck of the Gentiles...
 - He says it is a yoke **“which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear!”**
 - God had never given them such a yoke to bear!
 - He had never made circumcision and law-keeping a condition of their salvation.
 - To suppose such a thing is to completely misunderstand the Old Testament.
 - The law constantly pointed to their sin and their need for a Saviour—for salvation by the grace of God.
 - It is true that many Jews sought to be saved by circumcision and law keeping,
 - just as many professing Christians seek to be saved by baptism and being a good person today.
 - And of course we **are** called to be baptised and to be good people just as the Jews were called to be circumcised and to keep the Law of Moses...
 - but it is an altogether different matter to be shackled with such things as a requirement for salvation!

- Who can bear such a yoke?
 - Neither we nor our fathers!
 - Sin is mixed with our own works.
 - We cannot be justified by them.
- Abraham was not justified by circumcision or by keeping the law, but by faith... trusting in God to save Him...
 - And as Paul says in Galatians,
 - **Ga 3:17: “the law, which was four hundred and thirty years later, cannot annul the covenant that was confirmed before by God in Christ, that it should make the promise of no effect.**
 - No, even though Israel was to keep the law,
 - The Lord did not lay it upon them as what must be done for their salvation.
 - No one can be saved by the works of the law, for the just shall live by faith!
 - Abraham believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness.
 - You see, Peter is accusing the Judaizers of placing a yoke on the Gentiles that God had never placed on **anyone**...
 - A yoke that requires circumcision and law keeping for salvation.
 - Their works could never pass muster with God.
- b. Peter declares that the Jews who have experienced salvation did not experience it by circumcision and law keeping...
 - There were many circumcised law-keepers in Jerusalem who were not saved and that was obvious to all who were in the court!
 - These were circumcised, but they had not received the Spirit or had their hearts purified by faith!
 - Peter declares that the Jews who are saved have been saved apart from circumcision and law keeping too...by grace alone...
 - Verse 11...
 - **Acts 15:11: “But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they.”**
 - This is the only way for anyone to be saved.
 - By free grace.
 - No one experiences true salvation in any other way.
 - There is no other Saviour but Jesus.
 - If we must add something else of our own, we will ruin it all because whatever we contribute will fall short of God’s majesty and holiness.

TRANS> So Peter uses a positive and a negative example to prove that circumcision and law-keeping are not required for salvation...

- The positive example is that the Gentiles were saved apart from these...
- And the negative example is that the Jews were never able to be saved by these.
 - Experience testifies that salvation is by grace through faith in the saving work of the triune God through Jesus Christ.
- You see that all those who had been disputing are now silenced (v. 12) by Peter's testimony.
 - What could they say?
 - God had saved the Gentiles and He had done it without circumcision and keeping of the law of Moses.
 - Who was prepared to oppose what God had done?
- But experience alone is not enough to prove the point.
 - It is essential—God must be at work in you...
 - But experience must be rooted and backed up by God's Word.

II. So we see secondly that salvation by free grace is proven from the Word.

A. First, Barnabas and Paul come forth.

- Barnabas was much better known in Jerusalem, so he is always mentioned first when he and Paul are there...
 - Their contribution to the council is summed up for us in verse 12:
 - **Acts 15:12: 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.**
1. Now you will say, "That sounds like experience too. Why did you put it under proof from the Word?"
- I did that because the experience that Paul and Barnabas testify of here is the experience they had as true prophets of the Lord.
 - They were preaching the Word that God had revealed—at least to Paul...
 - Paul had received marvellous revelations of the gospel as it was to be preached to the Gentiles,
 - And he was faithfully preaching that gospel.
 - He was conscious of the fact that what he preached was the very Word of God.
 - He said things like,
 - **1Th 2:13 For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.**

- And the word he preached, which he claimed to be from God,
 - was the word of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.
 - It was salvation through God's work and not through our own work.
 - That was what Paul preached wherever he went.
 - Remember the sermon that was summarised for us in Acts 13?
 - In Acts 13:38-39, Paul declared:
 - **Acts 13:38-39: Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses.**
2. So what does this have to do with what Barnabas and Paul say to the council?
- Why do they tell them about all the miracles and wonders that God did through them?
 - They tell them this because God uses miracles and wonders to confirm prophets—those who speak the word of God!
 - The council all knew this.
 - So by telling of all the miracles that were done,
 - Barnabas and Paul testify that the gospel of free grace which they preached among the Gentiles was from God.
 - If it had not been of God, God would not have worked such miracles through them!
 - He was verifying the gospel they preached through signs and wonders.
 - He did this to show that He was with them!
 - You can have confidence in the Word because it has been verified by signs and wonders.
 - God did this to make His word sure to us.

TRANS> This was the contribution of Barnabas and Paul, but it may not have carried a whole lot of weight in Jerusalem.

- As ministers to the Gentiles who were, in a sense, on trial about the gospel that they had been preaching that did not require circumcision,
 - and because of the knowledge that they had been fraternising with Gentiles,
 - there was probably suspicion of them.
- But now the most respected man in the whole assembly speaks—James!
 - James was the Lord's brother.
 - He had been a skeptic, but was converted when he saw the risen Christ.
 - Since then, he had become, perhaps, the most highly esteemed disciple of Jesus in Jerusalem.

- He had never fraternised with Gentiles.
 - He had fastidiously kept all of the Jewish holy days and food laws.
 - He was a man who was known for his prayers...and for his self-denial—and his fasting.
 - He was so highly respected that when he was executed by the high priest, many of the Jews who were not Christians attributed the calamities that fell upon Jerusalem to the termination of James' prayers for Jerusalem.
 - Because James was so well respected among the Jews,
 - he had become the leader of the disciples in Jerusalem in place of Peter, who, you will recall, had left town after his imprisonment.
 - Like Paul, he no longer had a ministry in Jerusalem—but James was the man that God raised up.
 - So when he now speaks, his words come with great weight upon all—both the Judaizers as well as the other disciples of Christ.
 - He brings the matter to a conclusion.
- B. James testifies before the court that the Gentiles being saved by free grace was foretold by the prophets...
- In other words, he shows that what has been experienced by the Gentiles is the fulfilment of prophecy recorded in Holy Scripture.
 - Their experience of salvation is backed up by the Word.
 - He speaks of this in verses 14-18...
 - He says:
 - **Acts 15:14-18: Simon [Peter's Jewish name] has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written: "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; 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." Known to God from eternity are all His works.**
1. You see that this is a prophecy about the salvation of the Gentiles when the tabernacle of David was rebuilt.
- Amos, a contemporary of Isaiah, had declared the coming destruction of Israel and Judah.
 - He complained about the corruption of the people in their prosperity and threatened about their insensibility to God's chastisements.
 - He describes them as like a basket of rotting fruit.
 - And he assures them that they will be cut down by the Lord even though they do not believe it.

- But Amos had also offered hope in the last chapter and in these verses that James quotes—Amos 9:11-12.
 - Even though David’s temple will be torn down, it will be rebuilt and when it is, the Gentiles will turn to the Lord!
 - The Jerusalem council would have understood the tabernacle of David to be Jesus Christ,
 - the root of Jesse that would come up after the nation had been cut down.
 - He was the true tabernacle that replaced the temple, for He is God in the midst of us.
 - And when this temple is rebuilt, the Gentiles will become God’s people.
 - The Jerusalem council would also have easily picked up on the language that is used here by James as well...
 - The Jews were God’s people (laos).
 - This was their special designation that distinguished them from the nations (ethnay).
 - But James says that God is going to come to the Gentiles to take out of them a people (laos) for Himself!
 - In other words, they will not become Jews per se, but they will become God’s people as Egyptians and Ethiopians and Greeks and Romans and Arabs!
 - They will not be circumcised, but they will still be a people for God who are called by His name!
2. So the point is that the prophets foretold that God would save Gentiles without first making them Jews!
- In other words, the gospel of free grace and of Gentile inclusion without circumcision is thoroughly biblical.
 - Now that we have the New Testament, it is even easier for us to see that it is biblical.
 - James stresses that saving the Gentiles by free grace is the very thing that God had planned to all along!
 - **v. 18: Known to God from eternity are all His works.**
 - What confidence the council can have that what has happened with Peter and with Barnabas and Paul is just what the Lord had spoken!
 - So James concludes (v. 19)
 - **Acts 15:19: “Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God,**
 - It would be wrong to tell them that they must be circumcised and keep the law—
 - And even more wrong to tell them that they must do this to be saved!

- God has saved them without these things and these things must not be added.

TRANS> So you see how experience together with the word brought the council to the conclusion that salvation is indeed by free grace—

- Salvation is by the work that God does, not by the work that we do.

III. Now my brothers and sisters, if you are saved by free grace, you can defend it too.

A. You can defend it to yourself!

1. If you have come to the Lord for salvation and are looking to Jesus for forgiveness and new life,
 - you can assure your heart in the same way that the council assured themselves that the gospel of free grace was right.
 - Assurance comes when you experience the saving work of Christ in you.
 - When you see that Jesus' work was totally sufficient to totally pardon your sins...
 - And when you see that you now know the Lord and have communion with Him...
 - And when you see that the Spirit has changed your life so that you are a new creature in Christ.
 - Not that you are perfect—you still struggle with sinful desires and sinful actions and sinful habits...
 - but now you confess your sin and look to Christ for forgiveness and deliverance.
 - Now you know that in Christ, the Lord accepts you and delights in all the little steps you take for Him...
 - Even though they are so imperfect...
 - He is a warm-hearted Father who rejoices in your progress and delights in all of your service to Him.
2. You can know for sure that you are on the right track because the word assures you that if you...
 - are confessing your sin...
 - are loving your brothers and sisters in the Lord...
 - are keeping God's commandments and overcoming the world...
 - are trusting in Jesus Christ alone for your salvation...
 - you have eternal life—
 - You have it by free grace—
 - You are experiencing the work of God in you.

- The Word verifies your experience and your experience conforms to the Word.
- You are a recipient of God's saving grace.

TRANS> So you can defend your salvation by free grace to yourself...

- But that is not all...

B. You can also defend your own salvation by free grace to others.

- You can tell them of the work that the Lord has done in you and you can show them from the Word how God promises to save those who come to Him.
 - You can tell and show those who are in the church what God's grace has done in you so that you can be received as a member.
 - You can tell your brothers and sisters in the Lord what God's grace has done so that they will be encouraged by God's work in your life.
 - You can tell and show those who do not know the Lord so that they will see that salvation by free grace is real...
 - that God really does save people who come to Him as you have done.
- Show all of these God's promises of salvation in the Word,
 - And then show them how God is fulfilling those promises in you.

C. Oh my friends,

- Don't you yearn for this saving work of God to be evident in you?
 - Then seek Him—seek Him through the means of grace...
 - Find His promises in the Word and then pray earnestly for them to be fulfilled in your life.
 - Change does not come by flexing your muscles, but by looking to Him to do His work in you.
 - Oh yes, there is hardship and sweat and running the race that are involved!
 - But all of the strength to run comes through grace—through looking to Christ.
 - Not I, but the grace of God in me!
- I testify to you that salvation comes by grace alone through faith in Christ alone.