

## ACTS 15: ADDING TO FAITH ERASES IT

Last week, in chapter 14, we saw how many of the Gentiles who heard Paul's message, added baggage from their pagan worldview to the message of the Gospel. The ramifications of that were deadly. They simply added the Gospel to what they had always believed, which amounted to adding Jesus to their list of gods. And we saw how we can't do that. We saw how we must let the text speak and if there is any tension there, then we should continue on and let the text work out the tension.

Today, in chapter 15, we will see something similar, as we now have some within the church adding to the message of the Gospel of faith. Last week the problem came from without the church, this week we see it coming from within the church. But at its core, the problem is the same. Namely, that you can't add anything to Gospel of faith, or it ceases to be faith. There are rules and practices for the Christian, but entering the kingdom is still done by faith. True faith does change our lives, practices and the rules by which we live, but we enter by faith. As I once heard, **"Evidence of a changed life, is a changed life."**

Now, as we get into chapter 15, just when things seem to have settled down, more drama creeps into the church. Let's look at how it is handled and what that means for us today.

### **Acts 14:27**

***27 Now when they had come and gathered the church together, they reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. 28 So they stayed there a long time with the disciples.***

***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." 2 Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question.***

***3 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. 4 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. 5 But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.”***

We see that upon returning from their travels in what is now Turkey, that Paul and Barnabas reported to everyone on how things went on their first missionary voyage, and then we see that they spent some time there as they continued to minister to the church in Syrian Antioch. Sometime later, some fellows came up from Jerusalem and began teaching that if the Gentiles were going to be true Christians, then they should be circumcised. We then read that that created quite an argument – so much so, that Paul and Barnabas accompanied these gentlemen back down to Jerusalem in order to straighten things out. The fact was, that this statement was contrary to everything Paul and Barnabas had seen and said. In verse 3, we see that on the way back, Paul and Barnabas told these teachers all that had happened on their trip. And all this mirrored what Peter had already said. In fact, this issue had already been dealt with, and should have been put to sleep. But it came up again, and it will, in some form or fashion, come up again. When they got to Jerusalem, then gave another report and

it is here that we see from whence the issue arose – at least on the surface.

I suggest you go and read Galatians for more background on this. I believe it was around this time that Paul wrote the letter to the Galatians, which were the churches he just established. In that letter we read of Peter eating with Gentiles, but then separating himself when Jews came around. Paul confronted him about this. The word hypocrite was even used. (define) It is also in Galatians that we read from whom the men that had gone to Antioch and caused the trouble there had gotten their marching orders, of sorts. It was James, the brother of Jesus. He had become a pillar in the church of Jerusalem. We will read later in the chapter that these men did not go to Antioch with official sanction, but we do see from Galatians that James had apparently condoned the message. Now, with all the heavy hitters being in Jerusalem, what we call the Jerusalem council, they are having to work out this issue. And it is a big one.

Pharisees – there is a good side.

The Jewish exemption – “if these Gentiles are going to wear our badge, then they must be circumcised, or we will have issues with Rome.”

There was a great deal at stake.

**6 Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. 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. 8 So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, 9 and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. 10 Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? 11 But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they.”**

Peter and James seem to do most of the talking – at least of what we can read.

Peter goes back to his vision on the roof.

(explain)

Tells of God validating the Gentiles by giving them the Spirit.

He then asks the question, “Why do you want to put on them a weight we aren’t able to bear ourselves?”

Verse 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 an eschatological verse, if we are reading carefully. (explain)

**“Don’t you know you are the temple?” 1 Cor. 3:16,16; 2 Cor. 6:16.** There is no difference in the way the Jews are saved versus how Gentiles are saved. It is through faith. No need for the temple to be rebuilt.

The discussion moves forward.

***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. 13 And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, “Men and brethren, listen to me: 14 Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. 15 And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written:***

***16 ‘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;***

**17 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.’  
18 “Known to God from eternity are all His works.**

Paul and Barnabas then speak once again, testifying to the fact that God had given His Spirit to the Gentiles and had granted miracles among them, validating their entry into the kingdom. There was no way to argue that they weren't now part of the family. If they were already in, then there was no need to add to their entry. Peter had just expressed the same thing and now James, who was at least in a sense, behind the whole debacle has now become convinced also. And James now quotes from the prophet Amos, chapter 9, verses 11 and 12. I would encourage you to read the book of Amos. It isn't a long book. Neither is Galatians. Once again, you can see the context in full color.

Background of Amos: Israel had become rich and they were neglecting their duties to God and the poor and vulnerable. That is a no – no, when you read your OT closely. Amos tells of the judgments to come on Israel as well as some of the surrounding nations. In fact, he says that

Israel would now be regarded as a Gentile nation to God, (**Amos 9:7**). Amos then goes on to say what James quoted, namely that the Gentiles would be brought into the fold. And when this happened, which it now had, then the tabernacle, read temple, would be rebuilt in a different way. According to James and the Word, this was the plan from the beginning. And therefore, they shouldn't fight it. Paul goes into great detail in Galatians about the difference between faith, which is how everyone has always been saved, old and new Testament, and compares faith to salvation through the Law. In fact, there never was any salvation through the Law. The Law was only there to teach us about sin vs. the character of God.

Having hammered out this much of the problem, they come to a practical compromise. Not a compromise of the Gospel, but a compromise on the behavior of the Gentiles as opposed to the sensibilities of the Jews.

***19 Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, 20 but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from***



***blood. 21 For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath.”***

**Gal. 5: 13 - 15**

**13 For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. 14 For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” 15 But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!**

This was a problem. The Gentiles were being allowed into the fold, but they had no background in the ways of the Jews. They continued, in their ignorance, to do certain things, which to them weren't a big deal. Namely, they would still hang around the pagan temples, and if even if they were no longer worshipping there, they would at least buy the leftover meat from the rituals. This was marked down at the end of the day. “So,” you may ask, “what is the big deal?” Well, the meat, the animal, was killed by strangulation and wasn't drained of the blood. This was anathema to the Jews. They were greatly offended by this. There was also ritualized prostitution at these temples. Hence, we read of not partaking in sexual immorality, which was

fornication. So, the compromise was one that allowed for the Gentiles to not have to be circumcised, but as Paul said, they should take their liberty as license. They shouldn't knowingly offend the sensibilities of their Jewish brethren. These weren't rules to be kept in order to be saved, but they were "rules" that kept down the drama between the Jews and their new Gentile brethren.

22 Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, namely, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren.

23 They wrote this, letter by them: The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings.

24 Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, "You must be circumcised and keep the law"—to whom we gave no such commandment— 25 it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth. 28 For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit,

and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: 29 that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell. 30 So when they were sent off, they came to Antioch; and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter. 31 When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement.

They then penned the letter explaining everything and sent people with it in order to verify that it had come from the elders. In short, the decision and the letter had been officially sanctioned. This had to be done especially since the guys who started the whole thing had not been officially sanctioned. And when it was read, everyone rejoiced over its encouragement.

When it comes to the Gospel, there is no adding to faith in Jesus. God's grace and faith in the finished work of Jesus are what gain our entrance into the kingdom. We have nothing to add.

We can easily bring baggage in from our past. We can easily hang onto things that we believe to be "the gospel" that actually aren't. We can hold onto things we have been taught in the past that aren't

scriptural. What do you mean? Circumcision was scriptural, wasn't it. Yes, it was. But the Gospel is circumcision neutral. I have seen it a million times. People have been taught something all their lives and then, upon studying things in their context, they hear something that blows their minds. Sadly, the first reaction is to panic and run. Don't be afraid of the data! Work through it. Do what the Jerusalem council did. Discuss it! Go back to the scriptures for a larger picture. Look at it in context, which is a much larger picture than you were probably taught. Yes, it takes work. As one scholar said, **"Scholarship isn't for sissies!"** Just like the pious, well-meaning Pharisees, what you think you know, may not be so!

Have faith in Jesus and lean on the grace of God. None of us can wrong there. God bless.