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**“A GRACE-BASED RELATIONSHIP”**

**Acts 15:1-11, 22-29**

**In previous weeks we’ve seen how in his Acts narrative Luke has reported how the Christian message spread first among Jews, bringing them to faith in Jesus as the Messiah and Lord. Then as a second major step, a whole group of Gentiles, who met in the home of a Roman centurion named Cornelius, embraced Jesus as sin-bearer and leader in life! And following that initial outreach to Gentiles Paul took his first missionary journey, carrying the Christian message to both Jews and Gentiles.**

**In the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts, Luke tells how this outreach to Gentiles produced significant disagreement in the early church. Let’s hear about that controversy (read Acts 15:1-6; page 134 NT in pew Bibles).**

**Who met to resolve this controversy and what was at stake? Two groups of key leaders – apostles and elders. Apostles (those who had encountered the Risen Christ and been commissioned by him as church planters and spokespeople),**

along with church leaders known as elders (that's the word "*presbuteroi*") – the word from which we get our label as "Presbyterians" – that is we are a church governing by elders. And according to v.22 this group of church leaders reached a consensus decision.

What issue was at stake which brought together this assembly, known today as "the Jerusalem Council?" It was whether Gentiles who wanted to become followers of Jesus first had to convert to Judaism, and assume the burden of the Torah with its 613 commands? A key membership marker for Jewish males was circumcision, a sign which marked participation in the covenant with Yahweh. A group of Jewish Christians who were members of the Pharisee party argued, "It is necessary for them (Gentile believers in Jesus) to be circumcised (the external sign for males of the covenant God made with the Jewish people through Abraham) and ordered to keep the law of Moses" (the terms of the covenant God made with the Jewish people through Moses). No one argued that Gentiles shouldn't be admitted into

**the Christian fellowship, but some argued it should be on the condition that they became Jews first.**

**What happened next? (Read Acts 15:7-11) The position of the legalists is answered first by Peter. He said that in reaching out to Cornelius and his household “God . . . testified to them (the legitimacy of their faith) by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us.” Seeing that God had acted by giving the HS to these Gentile believers, Peter baptized them in the name of Jesus Christ and welcomed them into the Christian community!**

**Peter questioned those of the circumcision party, “Why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the (Gentile) disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?” In other words, those who tried to use the law of God as a means for self-justification, to achieve or meet God’s righteous standard have failed because no one (except Jesus) has been sinless and has been able to consistently obey all 613 commands in the law of Moses!**

Here is Peter's alternate understanding of salvation – “On the contrary we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” Grace as defined by Christian ethicist Lew Smedes as “the gift of *being accepted before we become acceptable*” (p.108; Shame and Grace; c.1993; HarperSan Francisco). In his book The Reason for God, Presbyterian pastor Tim Keller clarifies what was at stake in this controversy. He writes, “There is, then, a great gulf between the understanding that God accepts us because of our efforts and the understanding that God accepts us because of what Jesus has done. Religion operates on the principle “I obey – therefore I am accepted by God.’ But the operating principle of the gospel is ‘I am accepted by God through what Christ has done – therefore I obey.’ . . . In religion, we try to obey the divine standards out of fear. We believe that if we don’t obey we are going to lose God’s blessing in this world and the next. In the gospel, the motivation is one of gratitude for the blessing we have already received because of Christ“(p.186; c.2008; New York; Riverhead Books).

**Then Barnabas and Paul and James the Lord's brother spoke in succession expressing agreement with Simon Peter.**

**Let's pick up the way this episode concludes with v.22 – 29.**

**The final decision includes two basic elements. The first is a list of restrictions meant to allow Gentiles and Jews to enjoy table fellowship together without needlessly offending Jewish sensibilities. Eating food sacrificed to idols or participating in idol worship in pagan temples would be understandably offensive. Avoiding “strangulation” and the “blood” of animals they ate involves slaughtering animals the way the Torah directs by slitting their throat and draining the blood vs. strangulation and consuming the blood.**

**In addition to these “ritual requirements” there is one “ethical requirement” the Jerusalem Council imposed on Gentiles who wanted to follow Jesus – that they abstain from what the NRSV translates “fornication.” The actual Greek NT word is *porneia*, from which we get our English word “pornography.” It is actually a generic term for a whole laundry list of unacceptable sexual behaviors (see Lev. 18) and is far better translated**

**“sexual immorality” (as in TNIV and ESV) than “fornication.” So sexual ethics are important!**

**But again, ours is a gospel of grace! Our behavior is not our attempt to earn or merit or achieve our salvation, but our way of thanking our merciful God for His grace poured out on us in the person of Jesus Christ!**

**So the central point of this entire text is the gift of God’s grace for us in the person of Jesus Christ which we receive by personal faith! In his classic, What’s So Amazing About Grace? Christian writer Philip Yancey cites the film “Babette’s Feast” as a parable of grace and comments “grace is a gift that costs everything for the giver and nothing for the recipient.” Near the end of the film General Loewenhielm told those grim-faced parishoners, “Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude” (p.26; c.1977; Grand Rapids; Zondervan).**

**In Victor Hugo’s classic novel, Les Miserable, the central character Jean Valjean was imprisoned for nearly 20 years for stealing a single loaf of bread to prevent his sister and her**

**children from starving to death. Now released from prison but on parole, Jean is in desperate need himself when he encounters a priest and experiences grace in a very powerful way! As a result he gives up his deep self-pity and bitterness and begins to live a life of integrity and graciousness toward others. Thanks to grace, he becomes a deeply changed man! This is a scene from Director Tom Hooper's film "Les Miserable," in the musical, which garnered 8 Academy Award Nominations and won 3 Golden Globe Awards, including "Best Picture."**

**Let us pray: Thank You Merciful God that our relationships with You are based on grace. We praise You for the wisdom You provided the Jerusalem Council to help those gathered realize that salvation for all people, Jews and Gentiles alike, rests on the grace of Christ which we receive by faith, and not our achievements. And we thank You that you want to use each of us to spread the good news of your undeserved grace for us in Jesus Christ, in Whose Name we pray. Amen.**