

Acts 15

- I. 15:1-5 The Problem
- II. 15:6-21 The Discussion
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- I. 15:1-5 The Problem

Whenever God's work is progressing, Satan begins to oppose it, and he usually works through lies. The reason many churches are ineffective today is because they believe "religious lies" instead of God's Word.
WARREN WIERSBE

- A. These guys were later called "Judaizers". They tried to get the Gentiles (non-Jews) to adopt culturally Jewish practices by saying that 1) this was required for their faith, or 2) it would somehow enhance their faith.
 - o In effect, at this point, they were saying that Gentiles had to become Jews in order to become Christians.
 - o This was a legitimate argument that needed to be settled because the first Christians were all Jews, the Bible was a Jewish book, Jesus was a Jewish Messiah.
- B. The Judaizers were the granddaddies of all those in all ages of the church who desire to add unnecessary rules to God's grace operating in the lives of Christians. More on this later.

- II. 15:6-21 The Discussion

- A. 15:7-11 Peter explains what happened back in Acts 10 with the conversion of Cornelius and his household – Romans living in Palestine. Their conversion involved only belief in Jesus – not a conversion to Jewishness.
 - i. 15:10 *why ... test God ... by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear.*
 - a) Peter is referring to the Law.
 - b) Israel never truly kept the Law.
 - c) Why should Gentiles try to keep it who are already genuine disciples of Jesus?
- B. 15:12 Then Barnabas and Paul spoke about their experiences in the last two chapters. Nowhere did they ask the Gentiles *to become Jews*, only to turn from their useless idols *to Jesus, the resurrected Jewish Messiah*.
- C. 15:13-21 James points out from Scripture (Amos 9:11-12) that God intends to raise Israel to a high place, a place of prominence among the nations, but that the nations will then seek God *as other nations*. Amos makes no mention of the nations being *absorbed into* Israel.

- i. 15:19 *we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles* Notice the wording James uses. His concern is that no excessive burdens or requirements be put on the Gentiles.
- ii. 15:20 James does point out that there is probably a short list of things to emphasize with the Gentiles – things they need to avoid because they are offensive to God.

III. 15:22-29 The Decision

A. The Jerusalem Council decides to send a group of men and a letter to explain the conclusions they arrived at:

- i. **Not Required for Gentiles:** Circumcision and other culturally Jewish aspects of the law. These would include things like: eating only kosher foods, offering sacrifices, keeping the Sabbath, Jewish holidays, etc.
- ii. **Required for Gentiles:** Avoiding things associated with idolatry like pagan sacrifices and sexual sins. Both of these would have been extremely prevalent in the non-Jewish world. They are still very prevalent today. More on this later.

IV. 15:30-35 The Result

A. Everybody is happy. The Gentiles are free not to become Jews. The Jewish believers were no doubt divided and troubled over this issue; now they are united and content.

B. Paul, Barnabas and Silas stay on in Antioch. Paul and Barnabas continue their ministry of preaching and teaching.

V. 15:36-41 Departing on Another Missions Trip

A. This section really pushes us into chapter 16 so we'll get to it later.

Conclusion and Application

Legalism

- a) What legalism is: The keeping of rules which have no moral basis and, therefore, do not express the heart of God.
- Unnecessary rules are a work of the flesh. They lead to self-righteousness.
 - The reason churches so often differ over rules and so many conflicts have come up over the years is that the issues always center on areas for which no specific prohibitions or guidelines can be found in Scripture.

- b) What legalism is not: The keeping of commandments which please God, which God gives us for our own good and protection, which accurately express His desires for us.
- Important to understand here is that God does have rights and wrongs. You'll find them clearly expressed all throughout the New Testament.
 - The two biggest problems the church faces today may well be **Idolatry** and **Sexual Immorality**, both addressed in Acts 15 as areas needing attention among the Gentiles. We'll deal with each of these topics next week.

Recognizing Legalism

- a) Legalism still finds ample expression in the church today in the areas hairstyles, makeup, styles of music and clothing, keeping the Sabbath and dietary laws. Other areas that have been argued over the years are smoking, drinking, card-playing and dancing. The list goes on and on.
- b) Falling into legalism turns our faith into a work of the flesh, leads to spiritual bondage and, maybe worse yet, spiritual pride expressing itself in a judgmental attitude towards others.

Legalism is a distortion of obedience that can never produce truly good works. Its first fault is that it skews motive and purpose, seeing good deeds as essentially ways to earn more of God's favor than one has at the moment. Its second fault is arrogance. Belief that one's labor earns God's favor begets contempt for those who do not labor in the same way. Its third fault is lovelessness in that its self-advancing purpose squeezes humble kindness and creative compassion out of the heart. (CONCISE THEOLOGY, J.I. PACKER)

- c) Here are a few New Testament passages that address the issues of legalism:

*Galatians 3:1-3 (NKJV) ¹O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? ²This only I want to learn from you: **Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? ³Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?***

Galatians 5:1 (NKJV) Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.

*Colossians 2:16-23 (NKJV) ¹⁶**So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths,** ¹⁷which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ. ¹⁸Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, ¹⁹and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God.*

*²⁰Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—²¹“Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,” ²²which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men? ²³**These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.***

d) Finally, a few quotations:

Legalists keep the law for self-glory, or to merit some reward; they do not keep it because it expresses the desire of their heart.

ERWIN W. LUTZER (1941–)

Some of the most virtuous men in the world are also the bitterest and most unhappy because they have unconsciously come to believe that all their happiness depends on their being more virtuous than other men.

THOMAS MERTON (1915–1968)

The bite of legalism spreads paralyzing venom into the body of Christ. Its poison blinds our eyes, dulls our edge, and arouses pride in our hearts. Soon our love is eclipsed as it turns into a mental clipboard with a long checklist.

CHARLES R. SWINDOLL (1934–)

There's a little Pharisee in all of us. Harmful though it is, we find a lot of security in our iron bars and solid walls. . . . Tragically, this ball-and-chain mentality keeps us from giving ourselves in fresh, innovative ways to others.

CHARLES R. SWINDOLL (1934–)