

LEARNING TO SHARE THE GOD WE LOVE

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By the Book™ A Chapter by Chapter Bible Study
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Let's Begin

Everyone has heard the questions, "If you were to die tonight, do you think you would go to heaven?" and, "If you were standing before God, and He were to say to you, why should I let you into My heaven, what do you think you might say?" I don't think any of us would disagree with the significance of these questions; they are not small questions. Indeed, the right answer to either of them means the difference between going to heaven or not when you die, as well as whether or not you have a full, meaningful life here.

Let's go a step further: If someone were to ask you, "If you were to die tonight, how would you know you would go to heaven?" Do you think you could tell the questioner how to be saved? Sadly, odds are you would not, if we can believe the statistics. Most Christians tragically are not able to tell another person the way to be saved. Today, we want to address this vital issue in our churches.

Acts 15 is the perfect place for us to learn. As we study this chapter, let's follow the outline below:

- I. The Invitation to Salvation (vv. 1-21)**
- II. The Indication of Salvation (vv. 23-41)**

I. The Invitation to Salvation (vv. 1-21)

Paul and Barnabas had been preaching salvation by faith in Jesus Christ alone. Such was the power of the message they proclaimed on their missionary journey. The results were amazing. The Gentiles, just as the Jews, had been saved by placing their faith in Jesus Christ. Paul learned firsthand what he would later tell the Romans, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek" (Rom.1:16).

One would think, since multitudes of people were being saved, things would go very smoothly. Understand, however, that when people are saved, hell raises the stakes and starts trouble anyway it can. Thus, a group of men from Judea went down to Antioch and began teaching the people that they were not saved on the basis of the Gospel Paul preached. Instead, they insisted the Gentiles had to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses. In other words, the Gentiles had to come through Judaism in order to become Christians. Recall these were Jewish men speaking to young Gentile believers. One can imagine the confusion caused by such teaching.

Paul and Barnabas headed to Jerusalem to try to straighten out their concern. Consequently, Luke records the

First Church Council, "When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and

elders about this question" (v. 15). The question the council addressed is one of the most crucial questions to consider, "Who does God invite to be saved?"

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Reflection Connection

Do you think the atmosphere of the church today is friendly toward all people of all races? Explain. Are there any steps you can personally take to make sure everyone within your sphere of influence is invited to consider the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

If this question receives a wrong answer, the stream of Christian faith clogs up. What do you have to do to be saved? What makes it possible for an individual to be saved? Paul says you are saved by grace through faith and nothing else. The Judaizers said, “No, you must be saved by Jesus plus circumcision. They added something to the Christian faith, the work of Jesus and God’s simple way of salvation. There are four central truths concerning salvation revealed in these verses. We must know what salvation is in order to know if we’ve experienced it. And, unless we’ve experienced salvation we can’t very well invite others to be saved.

The first central truth is — salvation is imperative not optional (v. 1). Actually, all parties at the Jerusalem council agreed on this (4:12). So must we. Salvation is not an elective, a tag-on to our spiritual life. The fact is we don’t have a spiritual life apart from being saved. Spiritual life is salvation! There are two reasons why salvation is not optional but imperative. First, because our sin is a *universal problem*. We tend to classify people as rich or poor, educated or uneducated, churched or unchurched. Unlike us, the Gospel classifies all people into one category — *sinners* (Rom. 3:22-23). Second, the Savior is a *universal Provision*. Jesus came into the world to confront our universal problem. Scripture says, “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8).

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The second central truth is — salvation is individual, not collective (v. 14). Society will never be saved. When the 20th century was dawning, a popular movement in Christianity was waxing. It was called the Social Gospel. In this movement, society was the object of salvation.

Doing away with ghettos, solving world hunger, world brotherhood and peace, etc. The problem for the movement was simple: they ignored the Gospel! Jesus never said the world would be saved. Nor did He say to Christianize the world. He said, go and preach the Gospel, make disciples, grow churches until I return (Matt. 28:18-20). Salvation comes one at a time, including times when more than one person comes to salvation. In other words, even in a mass meeting when many people are saved, salvation doesn’t come to them as a group. It comes as each person places his or her faith in Christ. Jesus Christ is the universal Provision for all.

The third central truth is — salvation is inward, not outward (vv. 8-9). This gets to the crux of the Judaizers’ complaint. They insisted salvation ultimately was outward by arguing that circumcision was the key to being saved. But we know salvation is not an outward ceremony. It’s not that ceremonies are not good; on the contrary, God has given ceremonies to point to realities. For example, baptism is an outward Christian ceremony which points directly to an inward reality. But neither the law of circumcision nor the ceremony of baptism is what salvation is about. Instead salvation is about an *inward cleansing* not an *outward ceremony*. The heart must be changed in order to be saved (2 Cor. 5:17). Paul and Barnabas knew this. They were first-hand witnesses who saw the change among the Gentiles.

Reflection Connection

Think back on your own salvation experience. Were you in a group or by yourself? If you were in a group, reflect on the moment when you came to Christ. Be prepared to share this moment with the entire group.



The fourth central truth is — *salvation is imparted, not earned* (v. 11). The Judaizers were saying salvation is something earned by keeping the law. For Paul, salvation is something God gives, and no one can possibly earn it. People have a tendency to try to do things to save themselves. Whether it's religious rituals, humanitarian aid, philanthropy, serving charitable organizations, giving to charitable organizations, etc., people attempt to gain credit for themselves from God. Here's the Gospel fact: God has already done everything necessary for your salvation. He did this in Jesus Christ. It's through faith in Him, and through no one else, that a person can be in right relationship with God (Eph. 2:8-9).

II. The Indication of Salvation (vv. 23-41)

The decision of the council was monumental — it clearly established salvation is by grace, not by works. It's not what you do that saves you; what God has done for you in Jesus Christ saves. Consequently, the council agreed to send a letter concerning "necessary things" to the Gentile churches (vv. 23-28). Certainly by requiring "necessary things," the Jerusalem church was not attempting to contradict their clear statement which says we are saved by grace through faith alone. Instead they were insisting a life which has been touched by grace is a life which will live by grace. In other words, belief affects behavior; one's creed changes one's character. Our morals are molded by faith in Christ.

So, the Jerusalem church was concerned that the Gentiles who came to faith in Christ understood the responsibilities indicative of their faith. Two opposite dangers threaten believers in living out their faith in Jesus Christ. The first threat is *moral legalism*. Moral legalists reduce faith to a set of specific rules. Usually, these rules possess a long life within the community of faith; so long in fact, the rules tragically overshadow Scripture.

The perfect example of moral legalism is the Pharisees. Listen to Jesus' words in Mark's Gospel, "For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do" (Mark 7:8). Pharisees were highly respected men of Jesus' day. They were pious, particular about ritual, punctual in ceremony, and had commanded public admiration for at least two centuries. That is, until Jesus came along. The Son of God immediately saw through their hypocrisy. They placed so much emphasis upon ritualistically washing pots and making sure their hands were ritually clean that they totally ignored the commandments of Scripture.

It was not that the Pharisees focused on the lesser things of the law. To the contrary, they ignored the law and followed their own writings. Such disrespect is why Jesus charges them with "laying aside the command of God." Moral legalists make the Christian's life a burden not a blessing. No set of rules is to set aside the Word of God.

The second threat is — *moral license*. Moral license is equally as dangerous to true Christian living as is moral legalism. Those who fall into this temptation

Reflection Connection

Dr. Vines says one's creed changes one's character. To what degree do you think this is so? Explain.



Reflection Connection

Which do you think is the greatest danger facing the church, moral legalism or moral license? Explain your answer and be prepared to discuss with the entire group.

began to feel just because they're saved, they are not under any system of rules or moral principles. They believe their salvation in Christ is secure, and therefore, they are under no law. Scripture, however, teaches that while we are not under the law of Moses, as followers of Christ, we are subject to the law of Christ (1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2).

The Jerusalem council's concern within the letter to the Gentiles focused on the danger of moral license. In fact, the letter indicated Christians have responsibilities in three different directions. Those were the "necessary things" (v. 28). Again, this did not mean they were necessary to salvation, but to the faithful living out of the responsibilities of salvation. Luke records the letter's instruction, "That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well" (v. 28).

The first direction of responsibility is toward one's self. Every believer has a moral responsibility to himself or herself. Jerusalem believers exhorted the Gentile believers to "keep yourselves." At salvation God gives new life. The question is, what are you going to do with it? Thus, believers possess a responsibility to constantly check themselves. Paul writes to Timothy, "to take heed unto thyself" (1 Tim. 4:16). He instructed the Corinthians to, "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith" and to "prove your own selves" (2 Cor. 13:5). John, the Apostle of love, wrote, "Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward" (2 John 8). Such self-examination assists the believer toward holiness, healthiness, and happiness. The kind of life God wants every believer to live!

The second direction of responsibility is toward one's society. By society is meant the community of others. In essence, we have a responsibility as believers toward others. Recall the parable Jesus spoke about the obligation we have toward our neighbors (Luke 10:30-37). The Jerusalem letter instructed the Gentile believers to "abstain from meats offered to idols" and from "fornication." They had a responsibility concerning their witness to the church, the community, and the entire world. Other people were watching. They could not afford to tarnish the name of Jesus.

We have liberty in Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, liberty in Christ is not a pass from our responsibility to others. The society in which we live includes our governmental structure. The state under which we live is instituted by God and must be honored (Rom. 13:1-6). State authority is not absolute authority. In other words, the state's power cannot usurp God's authority. But as long as there is no conflict between God's law and state's law, we are responsible to our state.

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Reflection Connection

Reflect on the relationship between a Christian's responsibility to both God and government. Do you think there are indications today that government threatens our faith? Why or why not? Name some examples, whether here or abroad, where the state's authority trampled God's authority.

The third direction of responsibility is toward our Savior. As we mentioned earlier, no responsibility on earth trumps the spiritual responsibility we have toward God. We are to love Him, which is the greatest commandment of all (Luke 10:27). The fascinating part is, it isn't hard to love Someone like Jesus. Someone Who suffered scorn for you, Who bled for you, Who died for you, and now Who lives for you! Also, we are responsible to learn of Him, in order that we may know Him (Phil. 3:10). Such learning and loving leads to living for Jesus. We're responsible to have Him in first place in our lives. Every day we must dedicate our time, our talents, our treasures, our totality of life to His service.

The responsibility we have to Him and the joy we receive from Him do not cancel out the difficulties we will face (vv. 36-41). Even Paul and Barnabas had difficulties over which they contended. Barnabas insisted John Mark accompany them once again on their missionary journey. The Apostle Paul insisted otherwise. A compromise came when Silas agreed to travel with Paul while Barnabas served as spiritual mentor to John Mark. Even the difficulties could not stop the church. Now they had two missionary parties doubling the spread of the Gospel!

Golden Greek Nugget

Luke records a "contention" arose in the church concerning John Mark. The term translated "contention" is found only one other place in the New Testament—Heb. 10:24. It is a strong word and carries with it the idea of "provocation." The strength of the word indicates the contention was very real and very stern. Thank God for sending Silas to assist in mending the hearts of Paul and Barnabas. And, even though they parted ways, it was with a good spirit and a true bond in Jesus Christ.

Wrap Up

When we fulfill our responsibilities to ourselves, to our neighbors and community, and especially to the Lord Jesus, God will glorify His name wherever we go. And people of all nations will believe the Gospel we preach and share, and be saved.

