**BY GOD’S GRACE ALONE**

August 28, 2016

Acts 15:1-35

Key Verse 15:11 “No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”

In the previous passage Paul urged the Gentiles to turn from worthless things to the living God. He also taught us the right attitude of a disciple by saying, “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.” So we should not avoid hardships but take up the cross of mission with resurrection faith. We can do so when the Spirit of Jesus who rose from the dead is in our hearts. Today’s passage describes the first church council held in Jerusalem. It convenes to consider whether Gentile Christians need to be circumcised in order to be saved. The Jerusalem council’s decision was, “we are saved by the grace of our Lord Jesus.” They did not require new Gentile believers to be circumcised as a condition of salvation. This decision paved the way for a subsequent fruitful world-wide ministry. May God bless us to become gracious servants of God and invite many unbelievers to salvation by God’s grace alone.

**First**, “Unless you are…” (1-5) After Paul and Barnabas’ first missionary journey, Antioch church was filled with the world mission vision. They must have put maps of Galatia in the walls of their houses and marked the cities Paul and Barnabas had visited with red dots. Perhaps they prayed every day for the new converts, calling those whom they knew by name. Many may have decided to go as missionaries to other nations. However, before the gospel continued its advance, the church had to resolve one issue. Look at verse 1. Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and said, “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” Wow! This was a serious stuff. Their preaching was like pouring out cold water on the rising fire of world mission. Some stricter Jewish Christians found it unthinkable that the Gentiles could be saved without the circumcision because it was the sign of the covenant with God. It was unacceptable that these Gentiles who did not know anything about God could cut in line and enter the kingdom of God before them while they had to go to the whole route, including Judaism and the law of Moses. So they insisted on circumcision as the condition of salvation. Here “circumcision” means more than a surgical procedure. It means to acknowledge the entire Jewish law as binding and necessary for salvation. The Gentile Christians at Antioch had simply accepted Jesus as their Savior by faith. Then the Holy Spirit worked in their hearts to forgive their sins and give them the living hope in the kingdom of God. But these men claimed that in addition, they needed to be circumcised and obey the law of Moses. Probably they must have argued, “Now that you believe in Jesus, you began the process of purification. It needs to be completed by your keeping the Law of Moses, including the circumcision since it is the sign of being God’s people.”

This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute with them. Paul and Barnabas stood up and challenged their false doctrine of salvation. But there was no immediate solution. There was a danger that this issue might have divided the churches like Jerusalem verses Antioch, and Jewish Christians versus Gentile Christians. The Antioch church decided to consult with the apostles and the elders in Jerusalem to reach some agreement over it. They respected their spiritual authority. They wanted to maintain unity with them. So the Antioch church appointed Paul and Barnabas, along with some other believers. Paul and Barnabas took the opportunity to hold the world mission report meetings on the way, both in Phoenicia and Samaria. The title of Paul’s mission report might have been like, “Former persecutor turned to missionary by the grace of God; Paul, a light for the Gentiles--the conversion stories of the Gentile believers.” He was delighted to tell them of the expansion of the Gospel to the Gentiles. They praised God for great missionary work among the Gentiles. They were amazed how Paul was changed dramatically to become a gracious servant of God. It was only by the grace of God.

But whenever there is a great work of God, there are always the critics who disturb believers with their narrow view of the Scriptures. Some churches say, “You have to be baptized immersed not sprinkled, in order to be saved.” Catholic church emphasizes good work to be saved. They miss God’s overall salvation plan through Jesus alone. Look at verse 5. “Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, ‘The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.’” They repeated the same demand for circumcision. They were like the old wineskins. They were distractions and hindrances to the Gentile Christians who just found salvation in Jesus. How did the Jerusalem church resolve this issue?

**Second**, by God’s grace alone (6-11). The apostles and elders met to consider this question. Luke does not give any details of the debate. But he takes up the matter toward the close of the debate. Peter’s position is reported because of its great significance. Look at verse 7b. “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe.” Peter’s address was based on his own experience when he had witnessed the conversion of Cornelius in Acts chapter 10. Through that event, God taught Peter to accept the Gentiles. At that time Peter did not circumcise Cornelius to be saved. Shortly thereafter, at a meeting of leaders, the Jerusalem church also accepted the Gentiles. Still, however, some of the circumcision party thought that the Gentiles must be circumcised to be saved. What did Peter say?

Look at verses 8-9. “God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.” Peter makes point that God had made no distinction between Jews and Gentiles in giving the Holy Spirit. Both were able to receive cleansing of heart through faith. Paul said in Romans 2:29, “circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code.” Real circumcision is not just visible and physical symbol but it is inward transformation of heart. It is a matter of purification of our heart. There is a saying, “We may know what is in the ten-feet deep water but we may not know what is in the one-inch deep heart of a man.” Nobody knows what is going on in other’s heart. Someone may look gorgeous and handsome outwardly but his heart may be filled with filthy and ugly thoughts. Written law reveals our many dirty sins but cannot change our hearts. No one can change our hearts. That’s the reason why God cleansed our dirty hearts when we believed in his Son’s blood. Only the blood of Jesus can cleanse us from our sins. God justified, sanctified and glorified us when we have faith in Jesus. Let’s pray that God may create in us a new heart purified through faith in Jesus. God gave us the Holy Spirit as his approval and acceptance.

Look at verse 11. “No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.” Peter makes a very emphatic statement that people are saved by God’s grace alone. This is as much a personal testimony as a theological statement. Peter himself was saved by God’s grace alone. He did not choose Jesus; Jesus chose him by his grace. Peter was just an ordinary fisherman. He could have spent his whole life chasing fish across Lake Galilee. At last, he would have died and destined for eternal condemnation. One day Jesus called him, “Follow me.” Peter followed Jesus and became one of his top disciples. But he could not give up his human dream to become the prime minister in Jesus’ earthly Messianic kingdom. He made many mistakes with his big mouth. Peter denied Jesus three times at a crucial moment. It was a total and complete failure. Yet Jesus did not condemn Peter. Jesus loved him to the end unconditionally. It was by the grace of Jesus that he was restored as his disciple. Later he wrote, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed” (1Pe 2:24). Peter was saved by God’s grace alone. Likewise, the Jews were saved by God’s grace alone. The Gentiles were saved by God’s grace alone. Peter’s speech silenced all the critics.

We are saved by his grace and we are sanctified by his grace alone. It is not by anything we have done, but by what God has done for us. Here we need to understand salvation. It has three meanings: (1) When we believe in Jesus, our hearts are purified through the Holy Spirit; (2) We become holy children of God; (3) We can enter the kingdom of God. In short, salvation means that we can experience the kingdom of God on earth as God’s holy children. Ephesians 2:8,9 says, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith---and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God---not by works, so that no one can boast.” If we contributed even 1% to our salvation, we would boast about it as though we did 80%. But we did not do even 1%. God, in his wisdom, saves us by his grace alone. The glory for salvation work belongs to God alone. When we try to replace the grace of God with our own self-righteousness, the Holy Spirit within us becomes suppressed. As a result, our souls become dry because the Holy Spirit, the living water, cannot flow. Therefore, we should rely on the grace of God even for our sanctification, not by our own effort.

**Third**, the Council’s decision was based on the word of God (12-21). No doubt, Peter’s testimony carried great weight in the Jerusalem council. It gave the clear principle that salvation comes by God’s grace alone, not by human merit of any kind. On this basis, Barnabas and Paul began to share what God had done among the Gentiles through them. They told of miraculous signs and wonders God did. When they finished, James spoke up. This James was the brother of Jesus and the moderator of the Jerusalem Council. Since Peter’s miraculous escape from prison, James emerged as the leader of the Jerusalem church. It was up to him to share the judgment of the Council. He quotes the prophecy of Amos to show that what is happening is in agreement with the prophecy. Look at verses 16-18. “After this I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things’—things known from long ago.” According to the prophet Amos, God had salvation plan for the Gentiles. God knew that all the Gentiles would bear his name someday. Even the most devout Jew like James could recognize God’s work among the Gentiles and base his decision on the word of God.

Look at verse 19. “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.” In essence, James was saying that since God had accepted the Gentiles simply by faith and by grace, the church should not make it harder for them. Instead, they should accept the Gentiles into Christian fellowship. Although James makes this decision, it seems to have been the consensus of the entire Council (22). In this way, the issue of circumcision---that evoked passion in the hearts of many---was settled in a meaningful way. At the same time, all believers, both Jew and Gentile, could be united in the church. The Council’s decision paved the way for the future successive world mission work. It was the historical moment for the world mission history.

James went on to give a few instructions to the Gentiles. Look at verse 20. “Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.” These four rules have nothing to do with salvation. The Jews were particularly repulsed by these four rules, which they believed were given before the Mosaic laws. For the sake of fellowship, the Gentiles should not provoke Jewish Christians intentionally by doing these things. For example, Gentile believers have freedom to eat anything such as food offered to idols. But this causes Jewish believers to doubt whether the Gentile believers have given up idolatry.

Likewise, we Christians are free. We are not under the law of Moses. We are under one law, the royal law, “Love one another as Jesus loved us.” You don’t have to come to the worship service to be saved. You don’t have to give an offering to be saved. You don’t have to teach the Bible to be saved. But we keep these rules to experience the kingdom of God on earth as God’s holy children. If we break them, we experience hell on earth. Then we will have culture shock when we enter the kingdom of God. Furthermore, when we break God’s commands, it plants doubt on others who wonder if we are really children of God. It hinders the fellowship.

In conclusion, salvation is by God’s grace alone. We are justified by his grace alone. We are sanctified by his grace alone. We grow in holiness by God’s grace. We will be glorified by God’s grace alone. As God’s holy children, we keep the laws to experience the kingdom of God on earth because the kingdom of God starts now.