

ACTS | The Complete Gospel | Story 21

Acts 15

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Introduction

Last week we talked about Paul and Barnabas being called, set apart, and sent out on their first missionary journey. In the midweek video we discussed the second half of that journey.

Today, in Acts 15 is one of the first major theological debates in the early church—and it's contentious. It's major because the debate is about the core message of the gospel.

There were different, partial gospels then—and there are even different, incomplete gospels in the church today. What's crucial is—*the gospel you believe will inform the life that you live.*

And the debate in Acts 15 is addressing a very specific, twisted version of the gospel that crept into the first century church and is still alive and well today.

This passage, with this very contentious debate, clarifies for us the truth of the gospel.

Acts 15:1-11, 22-29

But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” ² And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.

- A debate broke out in the church in Antioch about requirements for salvation. Paul and Barnabas submitted themselves to the authority of the Apostles, the ones who were taught by Jesus Himself. So they took a delegation back to Jerusalem to get this debate resolved. Even Paul and Barnabas understood the importance of accountability within the church.

³ So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. ⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. ⁵ But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.”

- In other places in the book of Acts, this group of Pharisees is literally called the Circumcision Party.

⁶ The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. ⁷ And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. ⁸ And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as He did to us, ⁹ and He made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

²² Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, ²³ with the following letter: *“The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. ²⁴ Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, ²⁵ it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them 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 themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. ²⁸ For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: ²⁹ that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.”*

The Gentiles’ response to this letter was total celebration—because there were no further requirements for salvation.

Acts 15:1

But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

The majority of early Christians were Jewish. As Jews they would’ve been raised following the Mosaic Levitical law, which meant they had to follow certain purification and sacrificial rituals. There were ceremonial laws, and there was the sacrificial system to atone for sin. When they’re talking about circumcision, they’re actually talking about keeping the entirety of the law.

A lot of the early Christians still followed these practices because they were raised to do so, but when the Gentiles, the Greeks, and the Romans began to come to Christ—they didn’t adopt the Levitical laws and rituals.

The huge debate breaks out for that reason. What was at stake was very important—because it was going to determine whether Christianity was going to be good news, or a burden.

This is why Peter, who was Jewish, says this in the middle of this confrontation...

Acts 15:10

Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?

- Peter is being extremely bold, because he’s telling the people that no one has ever been able to bear the burden of the law! No one! Not even “you!” And now you want to test God by placing an unnecessary burden on these new believers?

What’s fascinating about “religion” is—all religions start off by *inspiring* you, but in the end, all “religion” does is *place additional burdens* on you. But Peter makes this distinction in the next verse.

Acts 15:11

But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.

**Religion puts burdens on you—
but Christianity lifts the burdens off you.**

Religion demands that you jump through hoops; don't do this, and you better do that; then you've got to do that the right way; if you don't, then God won't accept you; now you're in big trouble; you have to jump through more hoops; and unless you do...!!! The demands of *religion* are so heavy and so burdensome—and no one can live up to those standards!

Peter just makes it plain—it's salvation only through the grace of Jesus Christ. Period. The end. And if that's true for Jews, then it's also true for any Greek or Roman believers.

True Gospel takes the burdens off.

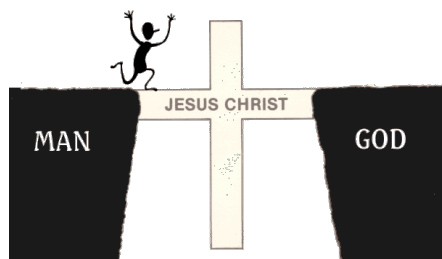
But for the gospel to take the burdens off, we have to have an accurate understanding of what the gospel actually is! There are so many versions of the gospel, and if the gospel you believe is incomplete—it will distort your approach to life.

Here are the outlines of some of the incomplete gospels that we may be unintentionally adhering to...

TRANSACTIONAL GOSPEL
INFORMATIONAL GOSPEL
SOCIAL GOSPEL
RELIGIOUS GOSPEL

Transactional Gospel

Have you ever seen the gospel described with an illustration like this?



Mankind on one side of a chasm, God on the other, and the only way to be saved from sin and death is by walking over the bridge who is Jesus Christ.

What's missing?

- The rest of your life on earth? Life in the kingdom of God.
- Actually, actively following Jesus
- There's no mission. There's no discipleship. There's no purpose.
- It's just—get saved—and wait to die.

“Most of evangelism today is obsessed with getting someone to make a decision; the apostles, however, were obsessed with making disciples.”¹

~ Scot McKnight

¹ McKnight, Scot. *The King Jesus Gospel* (Zondervan, June 7, 2016)

The Complete Gospel is NOT: “Jesus died for your sins and if you will just pray a prayer and believe this fact, then you will be forgiven and can go to heaven when you die.”

Salvation is a part of the story, but it’s not the whole story.

*“The world will not be shaken by people whose most radical thought is
I’ll get to heaven someday.”²
~Bill Hull*

There are those who hold to the belief that salvation is the entirety of the gospel, there is no passion or greater purpose, there is no greater calling to fulfill, there is no reason to sacrifice, or to risk— “I have my ticket, I’m just waiting for the doors to open one day....”

That’s the transactional gospel.

Informational Gospel

One of the challenges we face in western culture is that we think — if I just gain enough secret knowledge about the Bible—if I just learn enough—THEN I’ll be good enough—or then I’ll be saved—or I’ll *feel* saved...

If I just learn Greek, or if I just understand enough new unique facts, then I’ll be this elite Christian—God has to exempt me.

This is why Jesus rebukes the Pharisees in John 5...

John 5:39-40

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about Me, ⁴⁰yet you refuse to come to Me that you may have life.

1 Corinthians 13:1-2

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and **understand all mysteries and all knowledge**, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

The Gospel is NOT: “Build your life on biblical knowledge and information...”

***Because you can know a lot about Him,
but not actually know Him personally.***

Social Gospel

This one is tricky because it looks really good—and the heart behind it is admirable. It’s basically the idea that I’m going to show people Jesus through what I do— although I won’t ever talk about Jesus, or who Jesus is, or what He’s done for us. I’ll just help the poor, widow, orphan, rejected, abused, etc.

² Hull, Bill. *Conversion and Discipleship* (Zondervan, Jan 12, 2016)

It's the idea that Jesus is all about love and acceptance of everyone—no matter what their truth is—so reach out to the poor and marginalized and become a social activist!

Now, should we be helping the poor, the widow, the orphan, the broken— absolutely!

**But if we're meeting temporal needs
without ever meeting people's most urgent and eternal need—
then it's an incomplete gospel.
It's not good news.**

It may be temporarily helpful but it's eternally condemning.

The reality is you can do a whole lot of good without actually knowing or following Jesus.

Matthew 7:21-23

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. ²² On that day many will say to Me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and cast out demons in Your name, and do **many mighty works** in Your name?’ ²³ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness.’

Religious Gospel

The Jews had been taught all of their lives that the Gentiles were unclean—they worshiped idols, they ate impure food, they were constantly breaking the Mosaic and Levitical law. Because of those things, they were viewed as lower-class citizens, as second rate, as “less than” God’s chosen people.

Then Peter, who is a Jew, makes this statement...

Acts 15:8

And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as He did to us, ⁹ and He made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts **by faith**.

In other words—it’s not about your adherence to the law—it’s not about achieving your way into God’s acceptance. On one level we understand that.

PROBLEM: The bigger problem is we look at the people earlier in this passage and say, “*Man, they’re so legalistic, insisting that for their Christianity to be real they had to do certain things, and act a certain way, or have a certain cultural perspective....*”

Today — if we’re not careful, we tend to have expectations that other people should approach life the same way we would in every situation... and what we end up doing to others is the same thing that’s happening in this passage. *We try to put burdens and standards on other people that will crush them. That is a religious gospel.* There’s no acknowledgement of grace... or need... it’s all about our willpower, and self-effort.

Peter literally tells them... “You want to give these Gentiles standards that you don’t even live up to yourself! We didn’t live up to the law and neither did our fathers before us... **you want to hold other people up to a standard that you don’t hold for yourself!** You’re demanding from someone else what even you are unable to do!”

***That is the essence of religious gospel.
You must perform.
You must achieve in order to be accepted by God.
You must be moral enough.
Good enough.
Holy enough.***

How good is good enough? How will you know?

In a religious gospel, you have no assurance that your good enough is ever good enough—and the result is an endless black hole of trying to prove yourself over and over and over again—and it will crush you.

This is how you can tell if your trust is in the complete gospel—because it doesn't put a burden on you—but lifts the burden off.

Matthew 11:28-30

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

***This is an invitation to the complete gospel.
To life in the Kingdom.
It's not frantic, it's not anxious, it's not burdensome.
It is life.***

Peter says that God didn't discriminate between Jew and Gentile. We're all made eternally clean by what?
By faith.

That word Faith... it's the Greek work *Pistis*...

Often in scripture a better translation for that word isn't necessarily faith, but is...

Allegiance

Allegiance... to what?

To Christ and His Kingdom.

This is why Jesus says, “Seek first the kingdom of God...” or when He teaches us to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done...” Where? “On earth as it is in heaven!”

The Complete Gospel is the story of all that God has done in and through Jesus—the King of heaven and earth—the One who preached that the kingdom is at hand and brought the kingdom to bear on the earth.

The gospel is not me-centered, it's Christ-centered. And we get to be the beneficiaries of all that Jesus has done—because His Kingdom is *here and now*, not there and then!

***Allegiance to Jesus and His Kingdom
means abandoning all other loyalties
and placing ultimate allegiance in Him.***

If that's true, then our response to the Complete Gospel

- It's not about praying a prayer one time (*Transactional*) and getting fire insurance
 - It's not about getting more and more information to become a Christian elitist (*Informational*)
 - It's not just about being socially active (*Social*)
 - It's not about earning God's acceptance through religious performance (*Religious*)
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- *It's about our highest allegiance being to Christ and Christ alone.*
 - *It's about learning to live in His Kingdom.*
 - *It's about becoming more and more aligned with His will and ways.*

If that's the invitation... isn't the Complete Gospel compelling?

- That's why it's so crucial in this passage to get the gospel right.
- To make sure it's precise.
- That it's accurate.

Conclusion

At the end of Acts 15, Paul and Barnabas stay in Antioch and continue to preach and teach there.

Acts 15:36-41

And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are." ³⁷ Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. ³⁸ But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. ³⁹ And there arose a **sharp disagreement**, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, ⁴⁰ but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹ And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Paul and Barnabas are pillars in the church, are incredible friends, they've traveled together, they've suffered together, preached the gospel together... *and their disagreement was so contentious that they split ways!*

But here's what's so beautiful about this. *The disagreement wasn't about the gospel. It wasn't doctrinal.* It was a judgment call on whether or not to give John Mark another chance. Barnabas wanted to; Paul did not.

We don't know how heated the contention was—but we know it was enough for them to part ways. Paul chose Silas and went to Syria and Cilicia. Barnabas took John Mark with him back to Cyprus. *But neither Paul nor Barnabas allowed the contention to distract them from spreading the gospel.*

Paul writes in Philippians 1:15-18 that as long as Christ is being preached, we have reason to rejoice!

Even though Paul and Barnabas split ways—they both preached the gospel—and years later, Paul asked specifically for John Mark to be sent for him, and he encouraged others to support the work that Barnabas was doing. Their disagreement may not ever have been fully resolved, but their love for one another never changed, and they never once waived on the mission of spreading the complete gospel.

In the words of Pastor Myron...

Jesus is Lord, the Bible is the Word of God, and my brother in Christ is never my enemy.

Discussion Questions

1. What important aspect is missing in the Transactional Gospel that emphasizes Salvation only?
2. Have you ever gotten caught in the trap of thinking that if you can just learn more about the Bible or understand more of the mysteries that you will become “good enough”?
3. How easy is it for us to get caught up in “doing good” without sharing the gospel with those we are “ministering to”?
4. Do you find yourself holding up other Christians to “your standards,” and thinking that they are not “good enough”?
5. How is your highest allegiance to Christ and Christ alone, becoming more aligned with His will and ways?
6. Does the story of the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas encourage you? Why or why not?

NOTES