



Never Been to Spain

The Journals & Journeys of Paul

"Grace Off"

"You can have a theology of grace but not have a lifestyle of grace." In fact, most Christians are performance-oriented, thinking that the things they do for God make them more spiritual or, in some cases, insures their salvation.

It's not a new problem. Early in the life of the church, around 50AD, there was a movement to introduce a lifestyle of works in order to be truly saved. Paul was instrumental in defending grace and preserving the integrity of the Gospel.

Acts 15:1 And certain *men* came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

Acts 15:2 Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question.

Acts 15:3 So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren.

Their missionary trip was two years in the past. Paul and Barnabas had been sharing Jesus with Gentiles who were getting saved and growing in The Lord.

It was nothing new for a Gentile to convert to becoming a Jew. The procedures had been in place for centuries. One of the requirements was physical circumcision.

These new Gentile converts, however, were accepted by Paul and Barnabas as true converts to Jesus without being required to be circumcised. They weren't being required to keep any of the customs associated with conversion to Judaism.

Did a Gentile need to keep the customs of the Law of Moses in order to be truly saved? Or, as we would put it, is salvation by grace alone through faith alone, or is it by grace through faith *plus* some kind of work or works of righteousness that I must perform?

Acts 15:4 And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them.

Acts 15:5 But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command *them* to keep the law of Moses."

Acts 15:6 Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter.

Paul filled in some of the details of this trip when he wrote his letter to the Galatians.

Galatians 2:1 Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and also took Titus with me.

Galatians 2:2 And I went up by revelation, and communicated to them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to those who were of reputation, lest by any means I might run, or had run, in vain.

Galatians 2:3 Yet not even Titus who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised.

Paul, Barnabas, and Titus were first formally "received by the church" (Acts 15:4). There followed a private interview with Paul and the leaders in Jerusalem in which Titus was presented as an example of salvation by grace alone without any further works of righteousness required by the law.

At some point the objectors spoke.

Acts 15:5 But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command *them* to keep the law of Moses."

A public meeting of the church followed.

Acts 15:6 Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter.

Acts 15:7 And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: "Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.

Acts 15:8 So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as *He did* to us,

Acts 15:9 and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.

Act 15:10 Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?

Act 15:11 But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they."

Act 15:12 Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles.

Act 15:13 And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, "Men and brethren, listen to me:

Act 15:14 Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name.

Act 15:15 And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written:

Act 15:16 'AFTER THIS I WILL RETURN AND WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID, WHICH HAS FALLEN DOWN; I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS, AND I WILL SET IT UP;

Act 15:17 SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD, EVEN ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME, SAYS THE LORD WHO DOES ALL THESE THINGS.'

Act 15:18 "Known to God from eternity are all His works.

Act 15:19 Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God,

Act 15:20 but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood.

Act 15:21 For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

Peter, then Paul and Barnabas, presented the case for salvation by grace alone without any further works of righteousness being required. James then summarized the discussion and the decision.

Acts 15:22 Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, namely, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren.

Acts 15:23 They wrote this letter by them: The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings.

Acts 15:24 Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, "You must be circumcised and keep the law" - to whom we gave no such commandment -

Acts 15:25 it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,

Acts 15:26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Acts 15:27 We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth.

Act 15:28 For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things:

Acts 15:29 that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.

Paul added the following recollection, again from Galatians.

Galatians 2:7 But on the contrary, when they saw that the gospel for the uncircumcised had been committed to me, as the gospel for the circumcised was to Peter

Galatians 2:8 (for He who worked effectively in Peter for the apostleship to the circumcised also worked effectively in me toward the Gentiles),

Galatians 2:9 and when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.

Galatians 2:10 They desired only that we should remember the poor, the very thing which I also was eager to do.

There weren't two Gospels - one for Jews and another for Gentiles. There was only one and it was being taken to Jews and Gentiles. If a Jew wanted to continue to observe certain customs that was fine so long as it was understood those customs had nothing to do with attaining or maintaining salvation. Gentiles need not adopt any Jewish customs - only they ought to be sensitive to Jews and not act in ways to offend their customs and culture.

Acts 15:31 When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement.

Acts 15:32 Now Judas and Silas, themselves being prophets also, exhorted and strengthened the brethren with many words.

Acts 15:33 And after they had stayed there for a time, they were sent back with greetings from the brethren to the apostles.

Acts 15:34 However, it seemed good to Silas to remain there.

Acts 15:35 Paul and Barnabas also remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

The church at Antioch could have been wrecked by the teaching that salvation was by grace plus works. Every church from that point forward could have been wrecked. The Holy Spirit saw to it that did not occur.

Even though the issue was settled one and for all there is a sense in which it is never settled. Works of righteousness always try to replace grace as a way of living.

Paul recounted an episode involving Peter.

Galatians 2:11 Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed;

Galatians 2:12 for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision.

Galatians 2:13 And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy.

Galatians 2:14 But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, "If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?"

Peter went to visit the Gentile church at Antioch. It was the custom of the early church to share a meal once a week. They called it the "love feast." Peter, though a Jew, had been set free from Jewish dietary laws. He could eat anything he wanted, with whomever he wanted. He enjoyed this wonderful freedom of grace - until some Jews came from the church at Jerusalem.

Fearing their criticism, Peter gradually withdrew from fellowshipping with the Gentiles. His hypocrisy led others, including even Barnabas, into hypocrisy. He was causing a serious division in the church between Jews and Gentiles.

Paul calls it hypocrisy because, as we just learned, Peter believed that the Gospel was the Gospel of grace and that it excluded the keeping of Jewish laws. Yet here he was, believing one way but behaving another way.

We learn from Peter that it is possible to have a theology of grace but not a lifestyle of grace.

We must fight the tendency to diminish the grace of God by adding works of righteousness.

No one is to ever add anything to the Gospel of grace. Not the customs of Moses, like circumcision and Sabbath regulations. Not dietary restrictions. Not the way we dress or the holy days we observe. Not baptism. Not any sacraments. Not speaking with other tongues. Not our own unspoken rules for behavior. Not our church traditions. Not even Christian disciplines like prayer, fasting, giving, and Bible reading. Grace plus nothing.

Our daily growing in The Lord, between getting saved and seeing Him face-to-face, is called *sanctification*. I came across the following quote.

Sanctification is not slavishly submitting in the energy of the flesh to somebody's man-made list of do's and don'ts in order to enhance our own reputation or earn points with God. It is laying hold of God's gracious assistance to become more like Christ for His glory and praise. Grace delivers us from bondage to laws and frees us to enjoy God in an enriching and satisfying relationship. We will be motivated to please Him from within rather than pressured from without. We delight in pleasing someone who never stops giving good things to us.

Is God assisting you by grace? Or do you think you are helping Him by performing at a high level?

Do you think others are more spiritual than you because of their Christian disciplines? There's a fine line between the publican and the Pharisee - between recognizing your dependance upon the grace of God and thinking your performance sets you apart from others.

Simply seek to please Him and grace will fill in the rest.