

Grace: the Gospel Applied

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[0 : 00] Or do you keep your Bibles open to Acts chapter 15? I'm just going to test the mic a bit just to make sure it's not echoey.

Okay, can everyone hear me okay? Is there still a bit of echo? No? All right, it's just me. All right, I'm sure you guys know this better than I do, being at workplaces nowadays and the uni, but diversity is a bit of a buzzword at the moment, isn't it?

And most people think it's such a great thing. And, you know, in some sense, it is. We all like the idea, don't we, that our communities reflect the diversity of this world.

You know, where would Westfield Doncaster be without diversity? To be able to have a pizza place right next to, you know, hot pot right next to K-Barbecue.

Diversity is great. And with those international events that just happened, like the World Cup, you know, we love that color, don't we, of having all the nations come together in their diversity and celebrating and competing and then, you know, doing all their thing together.

[1 : 16] And it's no different in our churches as well. We love, rightly, to see God bringing together people from many races, backgrounds, and ages into his kingdom.

And in fact, the psalm that Brendan read today, it's such a lovely picture, is it, of that unity in diversity. How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity.

It's like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard. That's a sign of anointing, of blessing. It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion.

For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life evermore. What a beautiful picture. And then, the ideal of diversity rubs up against the reality of it.

And that's when things come a cropper. Because diversity entails differences, doesn't it? And we all want to do things a certain way, don't we?

[2 : 20] That's difference. And then, sooner or later, we find that our differences cut across each other. And when that happens, what is it that prevails?

You know, some of you today would probably want to see me preach for just ten minutes. Others, 45 minutes or more. But I've got to decide where to pitch it, right?

I can't do ten and 45. Maybe 45 plus ten. I don't know. What prevails? How do we decide together what's the best thing for the church?

And I'm not just talking about my preaching. I'm talking about every other thing that we do in church, like eating chicken and chips. I'm sure some of you would rather have fish and chips. But we all can't keep doing everything because we have to decide to do something together.

Well, in recent weeks, we've seen how the church started with Jews and then began to welcome diversity, the Gentiles as well. And today, as Enoch has said already, we see this diversity result in conflict and division that threaten the unity of the church.

[3 : 29] Now, recall that Paul and Barnabas had just returned from their mission trip from last chapter. And while they're in Antioch, chapter 15, verse 1, we read, certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers, unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.

Now, this was being directed not just at the Jews, but at the Gentiles in that church as well. And as a result, this brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them.

So, Paul and Barnabas were appointed along with some other believers. So, we see here that Paul and Barnabas weren't going by themselves, but there was a delegation sent to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this very question.

Now, they were going to Jerusalem because that's where the apostles were, but that's also where the Judeans from Antioch had come. And so, as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they taught how the Gentiles had been converted.

This news made all the believers very glad. I don't think Paul and Barnabas were like seriously trying to drum up support on their way there. Rather, I think they were just giving a report at each rest stop along the way.

[4 : 45] But what we see is that, by and large, the believers, many of them probably Jews as well, had no issue with Gentiles being converted and coming into the kingdom.

Similarly, when they get to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders to whom they reported everything God had done through them. So, you see, the issue really isn't about whether the Gentiles could be saved or not.

Nobody's arguing with that. But, the issue rather was that one particular group, the believers of the Pharisee party, wanted to dictate the conditions by which the Gentiles are to be saved.

For, in verse 5, they stood up and said, the Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law. Now, at one level, you can understand where they're coming from.

You know, they've probably spent their whole life obeying the law. And so, even though now they believed in Jesus, they probably still wanted to keep the law. Whether it's out of habit, whether it's a sense of conscience, a requirement, after all, this is still God's law.

[5 : 52] They wanted to insist on it as a requirement to become a believer of Jesus. But, to do that really makes everything that the apostles have been teaching extra.

It's a gospel plus approach. Not just a gospel, but gospel plus something else. It's actually saying that what Jesus did on the cross, that's not enough. You have to believe in that and then do this other thing.

So, it's one thing for law-keeping Pharisees to want to continue to do so as Christians. And in one sense, you know, they couldn't uncircumcise themselves, physically. But it's another to impose it on Gentiles, not just circumcision, but the rest of the law as well, something they had never done before.

Making, obeying the law a condition for salvation, therefore, undermines the gospel itself. And so, verse 6, the apostles and elders met to consider this question.

After much discussion, probably there was a lot of debate on the floor, Peter got up and addressed them. Brothers, you know that some time ago, God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from our lips the message of the gospel and believe.

[7 : 07] God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.

Paul here is reminding them of their collective aha moment back in chapter 10 when after his visit to Cornelius, he demonstrated to them how the Lord had welcomed Gentiles into his kingdom.

And we see here that Peter is saying that there is no difference between the Gentiles and the Jews. The gift of the Holy Spirit was given to them in the same way as it was to us.

God could see into their hearts and knew that their faith was genuine. And so the Holy Spirit came down on them as a sign of that faith. It happened the same way as it did for the Jews at Pentecost.

And so, Peter is saying these Gentiles are included in God's kingdom. No ifs, no buts, and crucially, they were accepted without needing to obey the law.

[8 : 18] And so Peter continues, now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that is the burden that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear?

He's saying, look, you Jews, us Jews, we couldn't even live up to Moses' law, so why are we putting this onto the Gentiles? No, let's not frustrate God's work with them.

We believe, he says, it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are. There's no difference between Jew or Gentile.

What no one, Jews included, was capable of doing, God has done by sending his Son so that we are saved by grace and by the grace of the Lord Jesus.

So this principle, that of grace of the Lord Jesus saving us, is one of the principles that is of first order. That is, it is of great importance.

[9 : 17] It cannot be compromised or the gospel will mean nothing. And of course, we've seen down through the centuries, many in the church have suffered and died to defend this principle.

Reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin taught and insisted that we are saved by grace alone. That's what God's Word teaches, not by works. Not grace plus works because if you plus anything, then grace is no longer grace.

It's no longer the 100% gift of God. And so you see, in the quest for unity in the gospel, there is a proper place for rebuke and correction.

It's not enough sometimes to just pretend, it doesn't matter what we believe, we just need to stick together. No, if the gospel is being undermined, then we need to defend it.

Otherwise, there's nothing to unite around. It becomes a bit of an empty shell, doesn't it? Doing this, defending the gospel, is not creating this unity.

[10 : 27] Rather, it's preserving the basis for our unity. unity. Let me say it again. If we don't do that, then we're uniting what is really around just a facade.

And in the case of Acts chapter 15, the truth that needed defending was the grace of the gospel. Now, today, our issues will probably not be about circumcision.

I don't see many of you talking about it. Probably not about obeying the law of Moses either. But we still encounter teaching, don't we, that undermine the gospel. Because sometimes we hear, don't we, that there's something extra that we need besides Jesus.

You know, some secret knowledge, extra knowledge, some extra blessing, or needing to perform certain rituals or acts. Now, these are actually dangerous because they take away from the all-sufficient work of Jesus.

They can be subtle, but if there's any hint, whenever we listen and we hear any hint that suggests that Jesus is not enough, then we need to be wary.

[11 : 39] We need to be careful. Well, after Peter had spoken, Barnabas and Paul now stand up to add their own voice. Verse 12. The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.

And what here Paul and Barnabas were doing was trying to tell them and show them that what happened to Cornelius with Peter was not an isolated incident, but rather that God was repeating this work across the Roman Empire.

Barnabas and Paul, in their preaching and in their testimony, was confirming this. And so that was a second, if you like, second piece of evidence. And then finally, James speaks.

He stands up as one of the leaders in Jerusalem, and what he uses as his evidence is scripture itself, the law and the prophets. And interestingly, the Pharisee party was appealing to the law themselves.

Well, James is saying, let me quote from the thing that you think is so important. Brothers, James said, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles.

[12 : 49] The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written, after this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild and I will restore it, that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things, things known from long ago.

And so, as we've been seeing over the last few weeks, God again in his scriptures in the Old Testament has given us prior witness to his plans, isn't it? And so, yes, God has sent Jesus to restore the tent of David, that is, the tribes of Israel bring them back, but it's in order that they too will then preach and reach out to the Gentiles so that mankind may seek after the Lord and Gentiles find the Lord Jesus.

And so, every which way you look, everything is pointing to the fact that God is saving Gentiles apart from the law. And so, James concludes with verse 19, this resolution, It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.

Let's not hinder God's work here, he's saying. Let's not put on the Gentiles the law which even we can't bear. No, let's practice what is consistent with the truth that the grace of the Lord Jesus saves.

Now, that would have been pretty easy if it just ended there. But then what happens is that James adds verse 20. He says, 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.

[14 : 33] Hang on, James. I thought you just said gospel only. Is this a bit of the plus that you're trying to add here? Additional conditions so that it's no longer just grace?

Look, yeah, it's not the whole law, yep, we don't make it too difficult for them, but it's a bit of a like version of the law, isn't it? Well, before you conclude that, let's consider what these four conditions might mean.

They look a bit random at first, but the best explanation for them is to see them as activities that are associated with pagan temple worship.

I don't know how many of you are familiar with pagan temple worship, but it normally involves animal sacrifices, and in those days, sexual acts as well, because it's part of a fertility kind of idea, that if they had sex, then there would be crops and all that kind of thing.

And then afterwards, the things that were slaughtered, the meat might be eaten as part of the feasts in the temple. And so if you see all that happening as part of temple worship, you can see these four prohibitions actually not being random, but related to these things, can't you?

[15 : 45] And so put together, James was asking the Gentile Christians not to associate with activities connected with pagan temple worship. Now, you might then think, but hang on a minute, if they become Christians, then surely they should just not do these things anyway.

Why does James have to advise them not to be associated with it? After all, if you've read what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians chapter 6, he says, once you're united with Christ, then don't flee immorality, don't associate with the things of the past anymore, because you can't be united with Christ and be united with the devil at the same time.

However, I think that there are occasions when, you know, you have to understand that these Christians, Gentiles or Jews, are living in a very pagan society where all these sort of temple worship is quite prominent and quite common.

And so, whilst they might not be going to the temple to worship, there may be occasions where they might still come into contact with some of these things and in particular food associated with it.

So, again, in 1 Corinthians chapter 8 and 10, Paul did say that if you're a Christian with a strong conscience, then, you know, if you went to the market or you went to your friend's house and they served you meat, you know, you don't need to check where the meat has come from, whether it's been sacrificed to idols or not.

[17 : 09] Because, as a Christian with strong conscience, it's okay to eat them. We see some modern equivalents today, don't we? If you've traveled around a bit, particularly to Asia, there are some restaurants that adjoin temples.

And as a Christian, you may have to decide whether if you were traveling, you wanted to eat there or not. Because, there's a possibility, isn't it, that the food that you're eating there has been dedicated or offered to idols.

And whether you eat or not depends on the strength of your conscience. So, I think that's one thing that James might have had in mind. But I want to say that James' instructions actually goes further than that.

Because he's not just thinking about the Gentiles. He's not saying, it's good for you Gentiles, don't do this. Yes, it is. But he's also added the next sentence, which is, for the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.

In other words, these conditions that James was putting on was actually also for the sake of the Jews. Not just for the benefit of the Gentile Christians, but also for the Jews in the cities across the empire.

[18 : 25] So, what might James be thinking about here when he says that? Well, firstly, I think again, if you recall what I said earlier, there were probably some believing Jews that were still choosing to practice the law of Moses.

Yes, they believed that it was only by grace that they were saved, but they're still wanting to observe the law. And again, another modern equivalent today might be that if some of you might know Muslims that become Christian, they might decide to still continue to abstain from pork.

Not because they're Muslim, but because maybe it's just a practice that they want to keep going, or they might still be having relatives and friends who are still Muslims, that they don't want to eat pork with them.

kind of thing. So you can see how some of these things, the Jews might still want to keep the law. So likewise, these Jews probably were attending the synagogues, they were still eating with other unbelieving Jews, maybe their conscience didn't allow them to eat certain meats.

And so there was a risk, wasn't there, that the Gentile Christians on this side, fully able to exercise their freedom in Christ with a strong conscience, may still end up stumbling their Jewish counterparts, and by doing so, put the unity of Christ's body at risk.

[19 : 44] Perhaps that would stop them from sharing in table fellowship together and eating together, which really was an important thing because it was demonstrating the unity of the gospel. Up to then, Jews could not eat with Gentiles, so to be able to eat together was a great, important expression of unity.

But further, I think it also threatened the unity of the church across the Roman world. We've already seen how just the Judean Christians coming to Antioch and talking about different practices was already threatening division.

But imagine how news might travel among the churches that I've heard that the Jewish Christians in Antioch are eating with their Gentile brethren who associate with pagan temple worship.

people might not have all the full facts, but you can see how these rumors can spread, isn't it? And then what will happen is that the Christians in this other city, the Jewish Christians in particular, may not be then able to defend the conduct of their brothers and sisters in Antioch, and therefore threaten evangelism in that city, and ultimately also put the strain on the unity of the church.

And again, in our day, we've seen examples as well, isn't it? We've just, for example, if you hear that there's a report of sexual abuse in one church, suddenly every other church is under a cloud.

[21 : 10] It's sort of guilt by association, isn't it? Or the controversy, some of you might not be keeping up with it, the controversies in the Church of England, far away in England at the moment, has an impact on our witness as Anglicans here in Australia.

people associate, don't they, whether there's any connection or not. And so I think that James had the unity of the universal church in mind. In every city where the law of Moses is preached, in every synagogue where it's read each Sabbath, James did not want the witness of the gospel to be hindered.

He wanted to protect the gospel and the precious unity of the brothers and sisters, both Jews and Gentiles, in God's church. And so to do that, James was just urging the Gentile Christians to show grace, to show forbearance, to be generous to their brothers and sisters who are Jewish.

Thus, even as the Jews were asked not to put a burden on the Gentiles with the law, the Gentiles, in return, are asked to show care for their brothers and sisters who are Jewish, all for the purpose of maintaining the unity and fellowship of Christ's body.

So, that's why we have verse 20 and not just verse 19. Now, the rest of the passage then, which wasn't read, was really about how this decision was implemented.

[22 : 39] And so, aside from the decision itself, James and the others also considered how the message could have been delivered carefully and with pastoral sensitivity. So, what they did was wrote a pastoral letter.

So, have you seen the pastoral letters that Andrew has written to us? This is a bit of his cue. This is where he got his cue from writing pastoral letters like that. Just as effective and good.

So, I'm not joking because when you write a pastoral like that, what comes is that you get the same message, don't you? Written, people can read it, and you can pass it around, can't you?

Which is exactly what happened because this letter ends up being written not just to the church in Antioch but to Syria and other churches in Cilicia as well. And as they read it, they all read the same thing.

The message was the same consistent message. It also allowed James and the others to give the reasons behind the decision to explain it. And in addition to the letter, what we also read in verse 22 is that the apostles and elders with the whole church decided to choose some of their own men to send with Paul and Barnabas to Antioch.

[23 : 50] And so they chose Judas and Silas, men who were leaders among the believers. Having them go with Paul and Barnabas was a show of support, a sign of unity and fellowship.

It meant that the letter that Paul and Barnabas were bringing back had the full backing of the entire church. So the letter reads as follows. The apostles and elders, your brothers, so you see how they're not trying to lord it over them, just calling your brothers, you know, we're brothers in Christ, to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia, greetings.

We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. So on the one hand, they're trying to distance themselves from the original group, saying they didn't come with our permission or our message, and then afterwards, they were trying to also validate Barnabas and Paul's commitment to the gospel and to the truth.

So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends, Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing.

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements. You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality.

[25 : 14] You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell. Now, I think it reads as a very partially sensitive letter. It's not heavy-handed or overbearing in authority.

Yet, it carries moral weight, doesn't it? So, James and the others are not saying, you have to do this, you must, we are ordering you. And yet, the appeal comes from all those who in Jerusalem have sat down and talked this through carefully, and as a result, decided that what they're asking of you comes from the Lord himself, because it is the wisdom of the Holy Spirit that has enabled this decision.

And so they're saying, we're not forcing you, but do know that actually, this comes from the Lord. Now, the people read it, they were encouraged and glad. Judas and Silas were well received, they encouraged them even further, and then afterwards they went back in peace.

Paul and Barnabas, however, remained in Antioch and continued to preach and teach the word. So, all in all, a very happy ending, pretty Hollywood in chapter 15.

So, that's great, isn't it? what appeared to be a conflict that would threaten the unity of the church, ended up preserving the unity and resulting in joy and encouragement for all.

[26 : 40] Now, I think the application for us is pretty clear. I've already covered some of it earlier and it's down at the bottom. But first, I think we ought to remember that the truth of the gospel is worth defending.

That actually the gospel cannot be compromised, including the key truth that it's the grace of the Lord Jesus that saves. Not our works, not our goodness, only the work of Jesus.

And therefore, it's grace alone. Now, on the flip side, however, if it's the grace of the Lord Jesus that saves, then we ought to be gracious and generous in how we treat one another.

Where our differences don't amount to undermining the gospel, then let's bear with one another's weaknesses. Let's learn to live together and not insist on always just doing things our own way.

Even as we feel sometimes this is a matter of principle for me, let's think about how we need to be gracious to one another as long as it does not undermine the truth of the gospel. Now, for us, the issue is probably not about food polluted by idols, but there are still differences in how we practice our faith, isn't it?

[27 : 54] We're an Anglican church, but I know many of you come from other churches as well, so you all have, quote unquote, we all have baggage, don't we, that we need to just try and understand of each other.

It's not baggage, I'm not trying to bag anyone out, but we bring different backgrounds, don't we? So if we become aware of something about our brother or sister, then let's individually and collectively think about foregoing our freedom.

Remember, it's a freedom, it's not a right, foregoing our freedom for their sake, the sake of also winning others to Christ. Now you might be wondering, okay, what examples might Mark be thinking of here?

Well, consider a person who may have struggled in the past with alcohol, let's say, or pornography, or gambling addiction, or, I know only for you younger guys, computer gaming, maybe even violent computer games, or perhaps you might have belonged to another religion or a cult.

When we do things together, we should consider what we do, isn't it? That it doesn't hurt or undermine the faith of those other brothers and sisters.

[29 : 05] So for example, if you know someone who's had a gambling addiction, and you want to invite them to your party, maybe don't book that party in that hotel that's next to the pokies, right?

Or if you're choosing a movie night, and you know someone's had issues with pornography, then maybe don't choose certain types of movies. Forgo those, even though it might be the best movie of the season.

Or if they belong to a cult previously and come out from it, then we know to be sensitive to some of the trauma that they might have experienced. And even though we might be free to do certain things, choose not to do them, right?

But I want to stress again that none of these is about creating a new set of rules that we then say, every one of us, we have to do that. No, no, can't do this, can't do that. Because to do that is again to create a new law, isn't it?

And that's not what God wants. That's not the grace of the gospel, is it? These are not conditions for salvation. Instead, it's about reading and understanding the situations and circumstances as they arise.

[30 : 11] And then wisely and lovingly deciding how we will act and treat one another and care for each other so that we display the grace of the gospel and ultimately protect this precious unity that we have in Christ's body.

Friends, you all know that it takes something as big as the sun in our solar system to keep all the planets together in orbit. Well, in the same way, only the grace of God is strong enough and big enough to hold us together despite our differences and diversity.

That's what the gospel is about. Saved only by the grace of the Lord Jesus. But in turn, knowing that we're saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus, we need to live out that great stone in how we love and care for one another.

It's no good just preaching grace and not practicing it. there's no point just defending the truth and then not expressing it in our lives through our actions and our deeds.

So, as we close, let me pray that God will teach us to do both. Defend the truth of the gospel, but also express the truth in our actions. Let's pray.

[31 : 35] Father, thank you that it's the grace of the Lord Jesus that saves. Help us to remember to hold on to this and to defend the truth of the gospel. Lord, also give us the strength then to show grace to one another so that we protect the unity of the gospel, all for the sake of the Lord Jesus who saved us, in whose name we pray.

Amen.