

International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
November 8, 2015

Lesson Text: Acts 15:1-12

Lesson Title: No Difference in God's Sight

Introduction

Acts 14 records the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas in the region known today as central Turkey. Their travels led them to the city of Iconium where they entered the synagogue of the Jews to preach the gospel (Acts 14:1-2). The unbelieving Jews in Iconium opposed Paul and Barnabas and stirred up dissension among the people. The end result was a city divided (Acts 14:4). In spite of the mounting dissension and hostility toward Paul and Barnabas, they continued to preach the gospel (Acts 14:7).

After leaving Iconium, Paul and Barnabas traveled to Lystra where Paul healed a lame man (Acts 14:8). The people respond to this miracle by attempting to make Paul and Barnabas gods. Paul and Barnabas were horrified at the thought of the people of Lystra making them gods (Acts 14:14-15). They are just two men spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ and seeking to glorify God.

As Acts 14 closes, Paul and Barnabas sail back to Antioch to give a report of the events of their first missionary journey (Acts 14:27-28). Part of their report included how the Lord was saving Gentiles and the church was growing. As always, when souls are saved and the church is growing, trouble is just around the corner.

The Contention (Acts 15:1-3)

Verse 1

“And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.”

Things were going well in the church at Antioch in Syria. The gospel had been preached boldly there and souls were saved (Acts 11:19-21). Apparently, those who preached the gospel in Antioch said nothing about the Jewish law, but simply told the people to repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior.

When “certain men from Judaea” heard about these Gentile conversions, they “came down” from Jerusalem and “taught the brethren.” The “brethren” are the Christians in the church at Antioch. They taught “except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.” They are saying Gentiles must

adhere to the physical act of circumcision as Moses commanded in the law in order to be saved. They were not teaching Gentiles could not be saved. They were teaching their salvation was not genuine without circumcision. This teaching continued throughout Paul's ministry and is addressed in his epistles.

Verse 2

“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.”

The issue of circumcision being required for salvation was no laughing matter. It was by far the most serious that had yet confronted the early church. The very life of the early church was in danger of being suffocated in the blanket of legalism. This issue caused “no small dissension and disputation” between Paul and Barnabas and the men from Jerusalem. The word “dissension” means “great strife.” The word “disputation” may be rendered “debate.” This issue had the potential of splitting the early church in half.

“They” refers to leaders in the church at Antioch. “They determined” or concluded “Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostle and elders about this question.” These men were wise enough to see the issue clearly. Paul and Barnabas had founded numerous Gentile churches on their first missionary journey, without requiring Gentile converts to be circumcised. Because the Judaizers “came down from Jerusalem” Paul and Barnabas must go “up to Jerusalem,” most likely with the Judaizers to address this problem.

Verse 3

“And being brought on their way by the church, they passed through Phenice and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles: and they caused great joy unto all the brethren.”

“Their” and “they” is a reference to Paul and Barnabas. The text seems to indicate the “church” provided these men and their traveling companions the necessary support to make the journey from Antioch to Jerusalem. On their way to Jerusalem they passed through “Phenice,” which is modern day Lebanon and Samaria. This means they traveled several hundred miles, most likely on foot.

“Declaring the conversion of the Gentiles” is an interesting statement. Although this was a hot button issue, Paul and Barnabas did not remain silent while they traveled. Instead, they kept on “declaring the conversion of Gentiles.” The word “declaring” means “telling in detail.” As they traveled how God saved Gentiles and it is possible they told any Gentiles they met on the way, how the

Lord could save them. What was the result? Not controversy, as came through the teaching of the Judaizers when they came to Antioch, but “great joy unto all the brethren.”

Legalism and man-made rules results in strife and division. The preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ results in “joy.”

The Congregation (Acts 15:4-5)

Verse 4

“And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church, and of the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them.”

Paul, Barnabas, and the party traveling with them “were received of the church” in Jerusalem “and of the apostles and elders.” “Received” means “fully welcomed.” It indicates news of the first missionary journey had reached Jerusalem and the church there was eager to hear more about God’s salvation among the Gentiles.

Upon arrival, Paul and Barnabas “declared what God had done” through them. The word “declared” is the same Greek word as “rehearsed” in Acts 14:27. There it means “bring back word, report.” That is, Paul and Barnabas reported back to the home church that sent them out.

Verse 5

“But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.”

Many of the early Jewish converts to Christianity belonged to the “sect of the Pharisees.” Pharisees demanded strict adherence to the law. These men did not see Christianity as a new life. Rather, they had accepted Jesus as the long awaited Messiah of the Jews. They believed one had to be a good Jew in order to be a Christian.

These Pharisaic Christians believed there were two demands that must be made of all Gentiles who accepted Christ. One, they must submit to circumcision. This was the physical sign of a covenant relationship between God and man. Two, Gentile converts must “keep the law of Moses.” It would be practically impossible for Gentile converts to “keep the law of Moses.” Such requirement would have stopped the gospel message in its tracks and paralyzed the church.

It is possible for a person to be a true Christian and get trapped into legalism. But it is not possible for a person to be a true Christian and believe works are required for salvation (Romans 11:6; Galatians 2:16). The Bible does not teach salvation by works and legalistic living. Both are the works of the flesh and have no part in God's gracious salvation.

The Council (Acts 15:6-12)

Verse 6

“And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter.”

Paul, Barnabas, and the delegation from Antioch had been warmly received by the church at Jerusalem, but hearing Paul and Barnabas tell about Gentiles being saved was not enough to settle the question. A special meeting of “the apostles and elders” was called to carefully “consider this matter.”

The “apostles and elders” were the leaders of the church. They, not the congregation, would hear this divisive issue and make a decision regarding it.

Verse 7

“And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe.”

After “much disputing” and discussion, “Peter” came to the rescue of Gentile freedom. Peter had received a special vision on the housetop at Joppa, so his thinking on this subject is very clear (Acts 10:9-20). He stands up and says, “Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe.”

“A good while ago” means “from day one in the Christian movement.” From day one, God had “chosen” Peter to be the first to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. “Chosen” is the Greek word *eklego* {ek-leg-om-ahee) meaning “selected, picked out.” Through the vision in Joppa and events in the house of Cornelius (Acts 10), Peter knew God hand picked him to preach Christ to the Gentiles. The results of his obedience was Gentiles “believed.”

Verse 8-9

“And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us; And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.”

God “knew the hearts” of the Gentile believers gathered in the house of Cornelius. God knew they were sincere and truly sought to be saved by grace. God “bare the witness” by “giving them the Holy Ghost” in the same way He gave the Holy Ghost to Peter and the apostles. God gives the Holy Spirit to all believers at the moment of salvation. God would not have given these Gentiles the Holy Spirit if they were not truly saved. Peter wants the council to know God “put no difference between” Jews and Gentiles. If God made no distinction, what right did the Pharisaic Christians have?

“Purifying their hearts by faith” is God’s answer to the circumcision of the flesh demanded by the Judaizers. “Faith” is what makes a man right with God, not fleshy works (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Peter’s point is not just that Gentiles “believed,” but they “believed” and were saved without being circumcised and without keeping the law (Acts 10:44-48). The Pharisees and council members had no biblical grounds to require of the Gentiles what God had not. As far as Peter is concerned, this matter may be discussed by council members in Jerusalem, but it was already settled in heaven!

Question: Is it possible we are discussing matters pertaining to salvation and being right with God that is already settled in heaven?

Verse 10

“Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?”

Peter asked the council, “Why tempt ye God?” To “tempt God” in this context is to question His will and His Word. Peter is stating facts to the council. He knows God called him to preach to the Gentiles. He knows God saved Gentiles at the house of Cornelius and gave them the Holy Spirit.

Since God has placed His stamp of approval on the salvation of the Gentiles, why “put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?” The “yoke” signifies something burdensome and oppressive. By requiring these Gentile believers to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses, the council was placing them under a heavy and oppressive weight the Jewish people themselves could not keep (Galatians 5:1).

Some people have a legalistic Christianity which has much the same effect. They are gloriously saved by grace but some preacher, congregation, or individual puts a man-made “yoke” or rules and requirements that has no biblical basis. God wants His children to *enjoy* salvation, not *endure* religion!

He wants them to live and serve in the true liberty of the Holy Spirit found only in Jesus Christ (Matthew 11:28-30; Romans 10:4).

Verse 11

“But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they.”

Peter “believes” that Jews and Gentiles are saved the same way, “through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.” “Jesus Christ” fulfilled the law and brought to and became the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who would believe (Colossians 2:9-10). There has always been and always will be one way of salvation, Jesus Christ!

Verse 12

“Then all the multitude kept silence, and gave audience to Barnabas and Paul, declaring what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them.”

“All the multitude” indicates a crowd had gathered in Jerusalem to hear the discussion of the council. It is hard to keep a crowd “silent” when you are discussing a divisive subject. The “silence” of this crowd signifies it was hard to argue with Peter’s message.

The “silence” reverently gave way to the voices of “Barnabas and Paul.” They “declared the miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles” through their ministry. “Paul and Barnabas” had witnessed the same things Peter had witnessed as they preached the gospel of grace and ministered among the Gentiles. In other word, Barnabas and Paul said, “Amen” to Peter’s preaching!

Conclusion

It was difficult for the Jew to accept salvation based on believing instead of circumcision and obeying the law. It is still difficult for some to accept the truth that man brings no fleshly works to the table when it comes to salvation. Sinful man likes to think he can live righteousness or do something to earn it and keep it. Salvation does not work that way.

The message of the cross is freedom in Jesus Christ. God knew some would try to take advantage of this new freedom in Christ. So He visited Peter on the housetop in Joppa and showed him salvation was for all men, both Jew and Gentile. He inspired Paul to write, “...*use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh,*” or, as an opportunity to sin. Christian liberty through the gospel of grace does not mean the believer in Christ can live any way he wants to live.

That is not what Peter was declaring to the council in Jerusalem. He was declaring that receiving salvation does not require works or adherence to the law. Christian liberty means the believer who has trusted Christ for salvation is free from the bondage of sin (John 8:34-36). He is out from under the heavy load of sin and is free to follow Christ and live according to God's Word.

There will always be legalists and people with prejudices and preferences in and around the church. These people will often attempt to elevate their preferences to the level of biblical truth. Do not allow legalists to prevent you from enjoying life in Jesus Christ. Stay with the word of God and biblical truth. Remember verse 11, "...then all the multitude kept silence." Legalism has nothing to say in the face of biblical truth!

Amen.