

Saved by Grace

Acts 15:1-11

“We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” (Acts 15:11)

You know a book is really important if everyone knows about it and *a lot* of people read it. But you know that a book is really, *really* important, if everyone knows about it but no one actually reads it anymore. For example, Copernicus’ book *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* is considered one of the most important books in the history of Western thought—but hardly anyone bothers to read it anymore. Why? Because hardly anyone is still arguing about whether the planets revolve around the sun. The issue is so settled that it feels less relevant.

It’s easy for us to feel the same way about the Jerusalem Council recorded in Acts 15. The issue they were arguing about—whether male circumcision and other Jewish customs are necessary for a person to be right with God—is pretty much settled. So why does this chapter deserve our attention? There are many reasons, but here’s just one: although the *particulars* of the debate are antiquated, the *attitudes* behind the debate are still very much with us today.

We need Acts 15 because of what it teaches us about the gospel—specifically, that the gospel is **(1) important, (2) broad, (3) narrow, and (4) powerful.**

1. The Gospel Is Important (15:1-7)

It must be accurately understood. Like DNA, a tiny change in the doctrine of the gospel could be the difference between healthy growth and cancerous mutation.

Some people, when they hear the word “doctrine,” suddenly stifle the impulse to yawn. Others go so far as to say that “doctrine divides.” “*What we believe,*” they argue, “is less important than *how we live.*” Thankfully, this dismissive perspective on the importance of right doctrine is rapidly vanishing, as it should. Our culture is increasingly willing to affirm that beliefs (doctrines) really are the foundation of behavior. Since this is the case, we dare not be dismissive of Christian doctrine, nor oblivious to the many doctrines that are being mediated through our culture.

2. The Gospel is Broad (15:7-11)

It is a message for everyone of every culture. The Jews had to realize that the message of salvation did not come with any cultural requirements. Christianity was not a sect of Judaism, but the fulfillment—for everyone!—of the promises God had made to the Jewish people. The old identity boundaries between Jews and non-Jews—circumcision, dietary laws, and sacred days—were transcended by a new identity: allegiance to King Jesus. No one would have to become a Jew—or embrace any particular culture, for that matter—to be saved.

It is still astonishing to historians and sociologists that the Christianity (a) penetrates any culture, (b) remains itself unchanged, and yet (c) transforms aspects of those cultures, while leaving many aspects of culture unscathed. For example, British missionary Hudson Taylor provoked controversy among his fellow missionaries when he decided to adopt the Chinese practice of wearing his hair in a queue (shaved in the front with a long braid down the back). At the same time, another missionary, Gladys Alward, helped overturn the cruel practice of footbinding, which, as a standard of female beauty in Chinese culture, also mutilated and crippled women. The point is that the Christian message, when properly understood and applied, does not force one culture upon another. But neither does it uncritically embrace any culture. Rather, it is broad enough to enter into any culture to affirm, confront, and transform it.

But how can the gospel be so broad? Only because of what we learn next.

3. The Gospel Is Narrow.

It presents only one way of salvation. When Peter declared, “We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will,” he was making a radical statement. Both Jews and non-Jews are saved the same way, and it has nothing to do with what people do to distinguish themselves (that is, *religion*). Rather, it has everything to do with what God has done (that is, *grace*). But this is a narrow way, as Peter had preached earlier as well: “There is salvation in *no one else*, for there is *no other name* under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12, emphasis added).

At this point people begin to worry about the radical breadth and narrowness of the gospel. If it is so narrow, doesn’t that lead to small-minded bias? But if it is so broad, doesn’t that lead to looseness and blurry boundaries? The answer is given in the final thing we learn about the gospel.

4. The Gospel Is Powerful.

The gospel unburdens us from legalism and frees us for a new kind of obedience. Notice the language of “burden” and “trouble” in 15:10, 19, 24, and 29. The Apostles knew that these cultural-religious boundaries, instead of freeing and uniting people, actually burden and divide them. But this is the essence of religion: it gives you more to do. It burdens you. Moreover, it gives you a measuring stick which may be used to demonstrate your superiority (or inferiority) to others. The gospel is a different message entirely; it tells us not what we must do, but what God has done. That is grace.

But there is a different kind of burden from which the gospel frees people. If, on the one hand, some have a tendency to absolutize their *standards*, others have, on the other hand, the tendency to absolutize their *freedom*. One person makes their standards everything and so lives by the “rules;” another person makes their *freedom* from standards everything, and so breaks the “rules;” both people think they have arrived. But neither will find what they are looking for. The one person’s so-called “freedom” will burden her as much as (if not more than) the person who loves rules. Your rules cannot make you holy, and your so-called “freedom” cannot set you free. The gospel offers something entirely different: it tells you that Jesus has fulfilled the law *on your behalf*; and gives you the power to obey.

*Run, John, run, the law commands
But gives us neither feet nor hands,
Far better news the gospel brings:
It bids us fly and gives us wings.*

Discussion Questions

1. *Indoctrination.* Where do we see “doctrine” in our culture, and what messages are often being communicated? Why is it important to be alert to these doctrines? What specific ways can we (and our children) stay alert to these doctrines?
2. *The gospel and culture.* What (morally neutral) aspects of our culture do we tend to turn into absolutes, which may be simply American expressions of Christianity? Should we throw these away simply because they are cultural? If not, how should we treat these features of our culture?
3. *The narrowness and breadth of the gospel.* What about the gospel makes it so “narrow”? Why is the narrowness of the gospel the very thing that makes it so broad?
4. *The power of the gospel.* What is the mistake of the person who treasures personal authenticity or freedom from standards? What is the mistake of the person who treasures his or her personal standards or cultural distinctiveness? How does the gospel address both kinds of people?