

“Saved through Grace”
(Acts 15:6-12)

I. Introduction.

A. Orientation.

1. The Bible tells us that salvation is by *grace* through faith. Grace is a word we talk about a great deal; but do we know what it means?
 - a. We usually use three words when speaking about God’s dealings with us as Judge: Justice, mercy and grace.
 - (i) When God gives us justice, He gives us what we deserve.
 - (a) This is important to remember: God is just.
 - (b) Since He is, He must deal with all men justly.
 - (c) He can never deny Himself.
 - (ii) When He gives us mercy, He is not giving us what we deserve.
 - (a) We all deserve to be judged immediately and fully for our sins.
 - (b) But God doesn’t deal with us in this way: He gives time, time to repent, time to come to Christ.
 - (iii) And when He gives us grace, He gives something we don’t deserve.
 - b. Of course, when we say that grace is giving us what we don’t deserve, we always use this in a positive sense.
 - (i) We deserve judgment, but God gives us mercy.
 - (ii) We deserve hell, but God gives us heaven.
 - (iii) God gives us good things *we* don’t deserve.
 - (iv) But just because we don’t deserve it, doesn’t mean there isn’t anyone who does.
 - (a) Jesus obeyed perfectly, according to God’s perfect standard of what is right.
 - (b) He also died on the cross to satisfy God’s justice due to us for our sins.
 - (c) He has earned eternal life; He has merited heaven.
 - (d) In the Covenant of Grace, we are saved by works, but not our works, we’re saved by the works of Christ.
2. Last week, we asked the question, Is faith enough? And what was the answer? Yes and no.
 - a. No, in that the faith we have must be accompanied by works as the evidence that we are true believers. (We’ll see more about this this evening).
 - b. But yes, in that faith is the means by which we appropriate what Jesus has done for us.
 - (i) Faith lays hold of Christ.
 - (ii) It receives the grace He has for us.
 - (iii) Grace can only be received in this way – any other way would include some work on our part which would destroy grace – by definition, it cannot be earned.

B. Preview.

1. This morning, we're continuing to see how the early church defended this position against the Judaizers.
 - a. We saw a dispute break out in the church at Antioch.
 - (i) Some men from Jerusalem had arrived and were teaching the Gentile converts that they needed to be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses in order to be saved.
 - (ii) Paul and Barnabas argued strongly against them since they knew this teaching destroyed the Gospel.
 - b. But when these men couldn't be convinced, seeing the potential that existed for division in the church as a whole, the church at Antioch sent Paul, Barnabas and some other brethren back to the source:
 - (i) To where the issue originated.
 - (ii) To where the authority lay to resolve the issue.
 - (iii) To Jerusalem.
2. At Jerusalem, the apostles and elders met together to consider the matter.
 - a. They debated among themselves and the Judaizers.
 - b. Peter gave his testimony on how the Gentiles received the Gospel without circumcision and the Mosaic Law.
 - c. Paul and Barnabas gave their testimony as well, as they continued to drive toward the inevitable conclusion that salvation is by grace alone.
 - d. The issue was not about what any man thinks, but about what God had told them and was telling them through His work among the Gentiles.
3. This morning, we'll consider two things:
 - a. First, Peter's argument that salvation is by grace alone.
 - b. Second, Paul and Barnabas' argument to the same effect.

II. Sermon.

A. First, let's consider Peter's argument.

1. The first thing we see is that "the apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter" (v. 6).
 - a. The issue was important, as we've seen.
 - (i) Not only was the issue of God's glory at stake – since any works based salvation takes away from the glory of His grace – the issues of eternal life and the unity of the church – even its being – were also.
 - (ii) To be mistaken about this, humanly speaking, would mean the Gospel would be hidden, the elect would not be gathered (God works through the truth, not error) and many would perish forever.
 - (iii) And so taking their call to maintain the peace and purity of Christ's church seriously, they met to consider the arguments.
 - b. We read first that there was much debate.
 - (i) It's very likely they allowed the Judaizers time to present their arguments, even though they must have believed their arguments were false.
 - (ii) These beliefs/sentiments must have existed in the church for a while, but now were being soundly dealt with.

2. After this had gone on for a while, Peter stood up to make his defense (v. 7).
 - a. His argument was not based on Scripture.
 - (i) Ours must be, because it is the only standard we have.
 - (ii) We must not accept or believe anything to be God's truth that is not found in His Word.
 - (iii) In Peter's day, there was another source: direct revelation.
 - (a) That revelation ended in the days of the apostles.
 - (b) But it too is included in the Scripture.
 - b. Peter's argument had to do with the Lord using him to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles in the first place.
 - (i) "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe" (v. 7).
 - (a) He's referring here to his ministry to Cornelius and his household.
 - (b) The angel appeared to Cornelius, telling him to send for Peter.
 - (c) The Lord gave Peter a vision to prepare him to receive Cornelius' messengers.
 - (d) Peter went with them and preached the Gospel to Cornelius and his family, with the result they were saved.
 - (ii) How did Peter know they actually were saved? "And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith" (vv. 8-9).
 - (a) He knew because of God's testimony.
 - (1) God knew their hearts – He could see their sincerity.
 - (2) He knew their hearts were clean because He was the One who purposed it in eternity and accomplished it in time.
 - (b) But how did Peter know what God's judgment was?
 - (1) He knew it when he saw the gift of the Spirit being poured out on them: the same Spirit the Lord gave them on Pentecost.
 - (2) One of the main reasons the Spirit was given in the way He was, was to show those doing evangelism that the Lord had received them.
 - (3) This was especially important when the Lord began breaching different people groups – when He began to show grace to those outside of Israel – to the Gentiles.
 - (4) Also, He only granted the Spirit when the apostles were present to keep the church unified for that time with the Jerusalem church, until the foundation had been laid – the complete revelation of God.
 - (5) The Lord still wills that we be united – that we be one – both in belief and in practice, but we've fallen a long way and have a long way to get back there.
 - (iii) Now if God granted them His Spirit, showing that He had cleansed their hearts by faith, apart from circumcision, apart from the Law of Moses, then how can the

Judaizers rightly argue that the Gentiles must be circumcised and observe that Law in order to inherit eternal life?

- (a) How can they place them under this yoke, that was very difficult to maintain, and was merely a schoolmaster/tutor to lead them to Christ, that had now been fulfilled in Christ?
- (b) To do so would be to put God to the test – or to prove Him wrong.
- (c) But as Paul says, “Let God be found true, though every man be found a liar” (Rom. 3:4).

- (iv) What’s more, Peter continued, the Jews are saved in exactly the same way.
 - (a) There isn’t one way of salvation for Jews and another for Gentiles.
 - (b) “But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are” (v. 11).
 - (c) *We are saved by grace and not by works, otherwise grace is no longer grace* (Cf. Rom. 11:6).
 - (d) Peter’s argument is valid and very forceful: If God saved the Gentiles through His grace by their simply believing, how can circumcision and submission to the Ceremonial Law be necessary? It can’t.
 - (e) This isn’t how Jews are saved either.

B. Second, let’s briefly consider Paul and Barnabas’ testimony to the same effect. “All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles” (v. 12).

1. They also ministered the Gospel to the Gentiles.
 - a. As they did, the Lord performed many signs and wonders through them.
 - b. These also confirmed to them, as well as to others, that the message they were preaching was God’s Word, since He wouldn’t have endorsed a message that was false.
2. The force of the argument is that salvation is by grace alone.
 - a. This was the message they preached, this is the message God endorsed, this is the message that resulted in the blessing of the Spirit.
 - b. And it was apart from circumcision and the Ceremonial Law.
 - c. Paul sums up this argument in Galatians 3:5, by asking, “So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?”
 - (i) The answer is obviously hearing by faith.
 - (ii) We are saved by grace alone through faith alone.
 - (iii) We are not saved by circumcision, observance of the Ceremonial Law, or obedience to the Moral Law.
 - (iv) Obedience to the Moral Law will follow, but it does not justify us.
 - d. Next week, we’ll consider the testimony of James as he adds an argument based on prophecy.
 - e. But for now, let’s consider that our salvation is purely by the grace of God and give Him all the glory for it. Amen.