

Acts 15 | Ted Tash

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[0 : 00] Well, like Jeffrey said, Happy New Year. If you're anything like me, I regard Sundays, particularly Sunday afternoon, evening, as kind of a set-aside time.

It's not like for religious reasons or anything. I just like to be set up and ready for the week. I like to have new trash bags in the trash cans, just ready to attack the week, whatever that looks like. And today kind of feels like after the whirlwind of the holidays for the last two weeks, kind of like that pent-ultimate Sunday afternoon, like ready to take on a new year.

And so, you know, kids are going back to school tomorrow, or at least in our house they are. By back to school, I mean like homeschool. But the routine is starting anew as of tomorrow, so the holidays are kind of behind us. The new year is ahead of us.

And same thing with our study here. We are going to be back in the book of Acts. We took the last two weeks off for Christmas and New Year's. And now we're back in the book of Acts. And if you remember, we're doing kind of a highlight study of the book of Acts.

[1 : 09] We're not going verse by verse. We just did that with the book of Matthew, which took a couple years. And we didn't really want to commit to another couple-year study right after Matthew.

So we're doing kind of a highlight study through the book of Acts, about 12 passages or so. And we're right in the middle of that. In fact, we're dead center in the middle of the book of Acts.

We're going to be in Acts 15 today. We've got about two months of this, and then we're going to move on to a verse-by-verse study in the book of James. So that's what's coming.

Just again to remind you, the study in Acts was not designed to be verse-by-verse. It was pick out a couple of the main passages, and then let the speaker choose what was the most interesting thing from that passage to speak on.

So today we have Acts 15. What I'm going to speak on is this meeting that has come to be known as the Jerusalem Council.

[2 : 13] There are a couple other interesting things in here. James quotes a prophecy from the book of Amos. That would have been an interesting study. At the very end of the chapter, Paul and Barnabas have a breakup.

They get in a sharp disagreement about John Mark. And so Barnabas takes John Mark with him, and Paul takes Silas with him, and then he's joined later by Timothy.

So that was kind of another candidate. But the main thing and why I think Brad chose the passage was the Jerusalem Council. So that's what we're going to talk about. So actually, if you want to turn in your Bibles to the book of Acts chapter 10.

I am going to move this out of the shirt pocket because it is woefully uncomfortable. It's like on my back. Maybe it's because of the shape of my body. I don't know, but it's not comfortable.

Okay. I'm going to give you the conclusion of the message here in the introduction because I think it's important to reveal it now and then be able to think about it throughout the message.

[3 : 21] But the conclusion is there is a freedom that comes with the righteousness that was achieved on the cross.

And that freedom was quite a bit for the early church to comprehend. So I'll say it again. There is a freedom that comes with the righteousness that was achieved on the cross.

And that freedom was quite a bit for the early church to comprehend. I think even now, 2,000 years later, it's quite a bit for us as a New Testament church to comprehend.

But especially those guys that were under the law for the first half of their lives, I think it was a really tough pill for them to swallow. The freedom that accompanied the righteousness achieved on the cross.

So with that in mind, which if you're taking notes, that's it. Just close the notebook. Acts chapter 10. This is where Peter has been staying with a guy named Simon the Tanner.

[4 : 29] There's a Gentile man named Cornelius who is going to send for Peter. And the conclusion of their meeting is that Cornelius, a Gentile, gets saved.

And the Holy Spirit comes down onto the Gentiles. And so it's really, it's not the first time the Gentile had gotten saved. But it's the first time where the Holy Spirit came down on them. It's where the floodgates of the gospel to the Gentiles really opened up.

Precursor to that, you have Peter who has this vision. And this is what I want to read. So Acts chapter 10. Let's start in verse 9. It says, It says, And from Peter's response, I think we can assume that these would have been unclean animals.

Or at least some of the animals in the group would have been unclean. Verse 13. And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter, kill and eat.

But Peter said, By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean. And the voice came to him again a second time, What God has made clean, do not call common.

[6 : 03] This happened three times. The thing was taken up at once to heaven. So this sheet comes down. Peter's already hungry as it is. There's all kinds of animals on it, including obviously some unclean animals.

And the voice says, Rise, Peter, kill and eat. And Peter says, No, no, no, no, no. No, you don't understand. I've never, I've eaten kosher my whole life. I cannot eat these unclean animals. And the voice comes again, What God has made clean, these unclean animals, God has made them clean, don't call them common.

And so the question is, how did God make these animals clean? What was the cleansing, if you will, of these animals? You know, when Jesus came down, he said that he did not come to abolish the law, but rather to fulfill it.

He didn't come to abolish the law or to destroy the law, but rather to establish or fulfill it. And so I think what has happened here is that Jesus Christ came down, lived a perfect life, fulfilled that righteous requirement of the law, which no one had been able to fulfill.

He fulfilled that righteous requirement. Then he died. He was buried, rose again. Then salvation comes to Peter and to the Gentiles by faith, or by grace through faith.

[7 : 27] And at that point of salvation, the righteousness that Jesus achieved through his perfect life, that righteousness was imputed to our account or to Peter's account or to the Gentiles' account.

And thus that righteous requirement is no longer there. Like it's already been achieved and it was achieved on the cross. And so he says, what God has made clean, do not call common. And so God is sort of revealing to Peter, hey, the dietary laws that you've followed your whole life, or at least he says, he says he has followed his whole life, you don't have to follow those anymore. God has made them clean. He's already checked all those boxes. He has fulfilled that righteous requirement for you. And so with that kind of in mind, with that as a little bit of background, we'll get into our passage.

So if you turn over to Acts 15, verse 1, this is Paul and Barnabas out on the road. And in verse 1, it says, some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.

Now if you took that verse out of context, Acts 15, 1, unless you're circumcised, you can't be saved. That would make a heck of a t-shirt, you know, to like hand out at camp or something like that.

[8 : 57] You know, you like, you go to Turkey Hill and it says, I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you'll be saved. You can do like Acts 15, 1, unless you're circumcised. I'm not saying you should do that. It's just a funny premise.

That's all. It would make altar calls a lot more funny. The deacons are sharpening their knives. Come on down. Okay, sorry. I'm done. I'm done. I had a lot. I had a lot and I'm done. When you're sharing the gospel, you can say, I have good news and bad news. Okay, I'm done.

So these men come down, they say they have to be circumcised. Obviously, Paul and Barnabas disagree. In verse 2, it says, after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, so a big dissension and debate, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles, and to the elders about this question.

Now, I do just want to interject just a quick little side point here. Everyone involved in this argument was believers at this point. And I don't think that Luke is pointing out that this debate was as a bad

thing.

[10:14] And so I just say, I think it is okay to have healthy debate about important issues with fellow believers. I think that it's a good pattern that if you can't come to a resolution within the debate to go seek older, wiser counsel like they did to go to the apostles and the elders.

There's definitely, you know, verses that say don't hang out with a guy that only wants to argue. You know, there are people that get fixated. And I can think of at least two guys that I've been around that that's all they want to do is argue about, you know, gray issues.

And the Bible says not to associate with those people. But on the whole, a little healthy debate is really good. And iron does sharpen iron. And I'll tell you, when I first came to Bethel, I mean, 12-ish years ago, some of the men's Sunday school hours, we had some, I mean, throw down debates. It was all good. But man, it really challenged you. And it really challenged me. Like, what do I really believe? Because, you know, if you got dragged into that, you wanted to know your points. And so iron does sharpen iron. And that comes with some conflict. And so nothing wrong with debate. That's all I want to say there. Okay, so they go up to Jerusalem to ask the apostles and elders about the question.

[11:29] And again, the question is, do these Gentile believers need to be circumcised? So in verse 3, so being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles and brought great joy to all the brothers.

When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church, and the apostles, and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. But some of the believers, some of the believers, who belonged to the party of the Pharisees, rose up and said, it is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.

So these are believers, emphasis added, of the party of the Pharisees. That's kind of an interesting mix of the two, especially just reading through Matthew, where you see how often the Pharisees were in opposition to Christ.

So you have believing Pharisees who have spent their whole life making their occupation, their lifestyle, and probably their personality around the fact that they are a Pharisee who keeps the law. And now they're believers, saved by grace, and they're saying, hey, we need to tell these Gentiles to be circumcised and to keep the law.

[12:52] And so that's really the heart of the debate. Turn with me, if you will, over to the book of Galatians, chapter 6. I just want to give you a little more insight to this group of Pharisees.

This is very likely the group of folks that the book of Galatians was written about. We did a study on Galatians a couple years ago. And if you remember, there's this group called the Judaizers, which is very likely who Paul's talking with there.

They were coming to the Galatians and saying, hey, you need to keep the festivals, keep the feasts, go under the law. And even Peter kind of got caught up in that. I'll let you look at that on your own time. But chapters 1 and 2, Paul talks about a rebuke that he gave to Peter saying that when the Jews from Jerusalem came, Peter himself withdrew.

But that's another story. But the whole book of Galatians is about these Judaizers trying to put the Gentile church in Galatia back under the law.

And so this is kind of Paul's summary, if you will, about those Judaizers. At the very end of chapter 6, verse 12, it says, it is those, so those Judaizers, who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised.

[14:13] That good showing in the flesh, that comes from that self-righteousness. They're essentially saying they want to boast. They want to be prideful. A good showing. They want to show off. And that self-righteousness from keeping the law or honestly like legalism from keeping the law leads to pride.

It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised. And only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.

For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised so that they may boast in your flesh.

That's what it all comes down to is they want to boast. You know, you think about Paul. He said, if anybody has a reason to boast, it's me. I was the Pharisee of Pharisees. You know, circumcised the eighth day and he goes through all his list of qualifications and all the zeal that he had for God.

And he says, but all that is trash. That's all rubbish in light of the cross. Right? And that's what he says here. Verse 14, far be it for me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[15 : 26] Because he knows that that righteousness, see Paul seems to get it. The early church had a lot of uncertainty there in the book of Acts. Paul really seems to get it. He understands that that righteousness didn't come from him.

It came from the cross. So far be it for me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world.

For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision but a new creation. Do you get that? If you want to be circumcised, that's great.

Doesn't matter. Counts for nothing. If you want to be uncircumcised, that's great. Doesn't matter. Counts for nothing in light of the cross. It's a new creation at the cross. That's where the righteousness occurred.

That's where the perfect life occurred, was at the cross. And so when you're saved by grace through faith, circumcision is nothing. Uncircumcision is nothing. And that's the case that Paul is presenting.

[16 : 25] He said, if I'm going to boast about anything, it's about the cross. And so that's kind of, you know, his maybe full rebuttal to these Judaizers. But back in Acts 15, we're going to see Peter and then James.

We might cut out James, but we'll see Peter's response to these Judaizers. So back in Acts 15, verse 6, it says, the apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter.

And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.

And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us. Remember back in Acts 10.

And here you go. Verse 9, And he made no distinction between us and them. Why? Having cleansed their hearts by faith.

[17 : 41] That's the key to it there. It goes right back to the cross. That righteousness, which comes by faith, cleansed their heart, therefore, there's no distinction between Jew or Gentile.

Again, you want to be circumcised? That's great. You want to be a Jew? That's great. You want to be uncircumcised? Great. You want to be a Gentile? Great. Doesn't matter in light of the cross. He cleansed their hearts by faith and made no distinction between us and them.

Paul says he tore down the wall that was between them. And it all comes back to the cross. That is only possible because the righteousness, the righteous requirement of the law was fulfilled on the cross.

And what's cool about that is the fulfilling of that righteous requirement, like I said at the start, leads to freedom. Look at what he says in verse 10. Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?

You're putting them back under bondage. You're putting them under this yoke of slavery of the law. They don't need that. They've already been cleansed. That requirement has been met. Why put them back under the yoke that we ourselves haven't even been able to bear?

[19 : 01] And so that righteousness leads to freedom because there's no sense to go back under bondage. And that's what Peter's saying here and then he nails it home again.

But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus just as they will. No distinction between Jew or Greek in light of the grace from the Lord.

Verse 12 says, All the assembly fell silent and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

And then from here James picks up and he says, he quotes some stuff from Amos. It's more of the same. It's basically about how salvation would come to the Gentiles.

We can skip through that. But verse 19 through 21 is kind of the conclusion of this council in Jerusalem.

[20 : 01] And what they decide is that they're going to write a letter to the Gentiles and to the Gentile churches with some instruction. So should they be circumcised? Should they go under the law? What are we going to tell them?

And so this is what happens in verse 19. It says, Therefore, my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them, and these are the four things they're going to write to them, abstain from the things polluted by idols and from sexual immorality, from what has been strangled and from blood.

For from ancient generations, Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he has read every Sabbath in the synagogues. So again, let me start with the introduction slash conclusion. The freedom that came with the righteousness accomplished on the cross took them a really long time to comprehend. Here they're saying, we're free, you don't have to be circumcised, let's not go back under bondage.

Alright, well let's write them a letter and tell them that. What should we say? Well don't, don't, don't eat things, sacrifice idols, sexual immorality, and then two other dietary laws.

[21 : 19] Like they kind of missed the boat, you know? Kevin and I were just talking about this before, in the break. They're all gung-ho about this liberty and then they hit them with like three more dietary restrictions.

You know, they kind of miss, in my opinion, they kind of miss it here. the things polluted by idols, you know, you could talk about that a little bit more. But certainly the things strangled and from blood, that's all the way back from Noah, the covenant with Noah.

And so they kind of missed the boat. And my takeaway from that is that that freedom from the law was just such a grand thing, especially for these early believing Jews, that they just kind of missed it.

It was almost too much for them to comprehend the gravity of the freedom that they had. So I do want to look just a little bit at that freedom.

I don't, you don't got to turn there. I just, that'll be your homework, is Romans 14. Romans 13 and 14. The Apostle Paul talks about the freedom. And I wrote down just a couple points or highlights from there.

[22 : 28] But this, this I think is maybe a little bit better instruction than what the council in Jerusalem had to say. And all of this, by the way, goes back to what we're studying in Sunday school about like the law of Christ.

Like we are, we're not under the Mosaic law. We're under this law of Christ which really, if you boil it down, comes to love God and love one another. Like let, love your God with all your heart, soul and mind, love your neighbor as yourself.

And Paul even talks about that in Romans in light of these. But what Paul says, which I think is maybe a little bit better instruction, is that you're free to eat. If you want to eat the things sacrificed to idols, you're free to do so if your conscience doesn't bother you.

If your conscience does bother you and you don't want to eat, you're free to do that too. You can abstain. But whichever you do, do it to the honor of the Lord. That's what he says.

He says, if you eat, eat to the honor of the Lord. If you don't eat, don't eat to the honor of the Lord. But he follows it up with everything is clean. It was clean because it was fulfilled on the cross.

[23 : 35] Then he says, whichever you choose, whether you eat or you don't eat, don't judge the opposite party. And I think that's a really good one for us as believers now, you know, under that law of Christ.

If you want to not eat, that's great, but don't judge those that do. He says in Romans that we're all individually accountable for whatever we choose to do.

You know, someday we will all stand before the Lord and have our actions judged in regards to, like, rewards. And he says, you know, just keep that in mind. You're going to be accountable for what you do.

He says to wrap it all in love. That's in chapter 13, but do it with your neighbor in mind. And then the most important thing, he says, don't hinder God's work over something as silly as food.

He says, if eating food is going to hinder God's work, I'll never eat again if I have to. So don't hinder God's work over food. I think that's maybe a little bit better advice than what the Jerusalem Council came up with.

[24 : 39] But I give them grace. They were still figuring it all out and they didn't have the whole New Testament to read into reference like we do. Peter, he gives in his letter, he gives a really good summary of the liberty we have in Christ, but he gives a caution of, don't let the liberty that you have be an opportunity for vice.

You know, don't let sin creep in because of the freedom you have. You know, I always think about, like, alcohol. Like, we are free to drink alcohol, but don't go drinking 50 beers and get behind the wheel, you know, or maybe stop at the 50 beers.

Don't even get that far. Don't let the freedom you have be an opportunity for vice, right? So we have this freedom and it all comes from the cross where Jesus fulfilled that righteous requirement.

If the musicians want to come up, turn with me, if you will, over to the book of Colossians, chapter 2. So, here I think Paul really gets to the heart of the matter that these Pharisees, believing Pharisees, probably had missed.

So in Colossians, chapter 2, in verse 6, it says, therefore, as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him. How do you receive Him?

[26 : 11] You received Him by grace, through faith, so walk in Him. Rooted and built up and established in the faith just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

See to it that no one takes you captive. Again, you don't want to go captive. You don't want to go back under the law. By philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.

With Christ comes freedom. For in Him, the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in Him, who is the head of all rule and authority.

And here's the key verse, verse 11. In Him, you were circumcised, not physically. This is allegory here. This is a figurative alliteration to a spiritual condition.

In Him, you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands. It's spiritual. By putting off the body of flesh by the circumcision of Christ.

[27 : 20] Paul's saying, you don't need physical circumcision. You already have a spiritual circumcision. That old man has been cut away. Verse 12. Having been buried with Him in baptism, that old man died, in which you were also raised.

That new man was raised with Him through faith in the powerful working of God who raised Him from the dead. And you, who were dead, again, that old man, who were dead in your trespasses, and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God has made alive together with Him, having forgiven us all of our trespasses by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands.

That righteous requirement stood against us. And we were dead in that. We were uncircumcised, dead, because of that record of debt and the legal demands of the law.

Here's the most key verse. There is the second half of 14. This, that record of debt, He set aside, nailing it to the cross.

He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame by triumphing over them in Him. That righteous requirement was fulfilled.

[28 : 40] He nailed it to the cross. That opens up the whole door of freedom. You don't need to go through with the circumcision. You don't need to go through with the dietary requirements. We are free. We are free from that because of the cross.

Father God, thank You for loving us. Thank You that You've given us Your Word. Thank You that You sent Your Son who lived a perfect life on our behalf, Lord. One that we could not, we could not do on our own.

Lord, we do pray just out of Galatians 5 where it says, for freedom Christ has set us free. Lord, I pray that we would stand fast in that freedom and not go back under a yoke of bondage.

Lord, I pray that You would protect us from legalism and from just the pride of that self-righteousness, Lord. And just thank You once again for the freedom we have in Christ.

See you soon.