

Text: Acts 15:1-35
Intended audience: All
Topic: Salvation by Grace Alone
Theme: Grace at risk.
My purpose for this message: To illustrate how endangered grace always is.
Delivered: Feb. 29, 2004 @ KEFC by Keith Rohrer

[Book Thesis: The Power of God Spreads the Gospel]

The Time Bomb Ticking Under Grace

How many of you have a serious sweet tooth? I don't mean you just like candy, I mean you gotta *have* candy. Ted, come on up here. I've got this bag of candy for you as a gift. (Ted comes up and begins to reach for it.)

You know, there really is a lot of candy in here so I probably ought to have something for it. You have a dime? "No, but I have a dollar." That will work (hands over the dollar. But as the exchange begins, the bag's withdrawn.)

Now that I think about it, it would probably be good to get a little more for it. Do you have a pen you could give me? (Ted gets one from his wife.) Again the exchange is delayed with the request for a nail trimmers. Once that's given, Ted gets his bag of candy.)

You just watched a free gift become a commodity with a purchase price. *That's what happens when grace is overrun. What used to be free, gets camouflaged by all sorts of extras; and grace is nowhere to be seen.*

GRACE. There isn't a word like it in *any* other faith. There is no concept like it in any other aspect of culture. In a world where you must invest to earn, work to be paid, or suffer to be honored, GRACE stands on a mountain peak alone trumpeting God's greatness, infinite wisdom, holiness, and mindboggling compassion. Instead of what I deserve—God's furious wrath—Grace is the gift I *get*.

In *The Passion of the Christ*, God makes our sin His Son's, and makes His Son's life-giving blood, ours. We are set free to live. Grace is the sound of handcuffs springing open, chains clattering to the floor, of ropes snapping under the blade of a knife. READ Gal.5:1

But like most freedoms, grace seems to always be in jeopardy. It is as if a ticking time bomb has been permanently fastened beneath it. From the earliest days of the Church, religious legalists have been just itching to detonate it. READ Acts 15:1-35.

PRAY.

Story

Up 'til now, Luke's been mainly telling what Jewish Christians were doing. Gentiles *were* being converted, but the key players were still Jewish, the most important church was the Jewish one in Jerusalem, and most still viewed Christianity as a Jewish sect. (Some still do. Last week I read something by a skeptic who argued that the gospel accounts are fabrications made by writers who wanted to explain Christianity's separation from Judaism.) The early days of the church, were quite Jewish.

But beginning in chapter 15, Luke says goodbye to the Jewish Christian movement, to devote the rest of his book to Paul's—really *God's*—activity in the Gentile world: like

the sin-city of Corinth, philosophy center of Athens, and Macedonia's bustling seaport, Thessalonica.

But there was a sinister movement rooted in Jerusalem muddying the gospel waters. Before Gentile work could continue in earnest, the requirements of salvation had to be settled: How is a person saved? How does someone become a child of God?

You may say, "O that's simple, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. If you confess with your mouth, Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."

But at this time, some of the *Jewish* Christians thought differently. "Repentance and faith aren't enough," they argued. "Conversion requires circumcision (if you're a male), and following Moses' laws (2 & 5)."

These guys had sent some of their *own* missionaries—without the church leaders' approval (24), to visit churches and make sure they knew this. After throwing recently planted South Galatian churches (Gal.1:6, 6:12-13) into turmoil, they came to Antioch to try the same thing. That was a mistake because it was Paul and Barnabas' home church.

V.2 describes a "sharp dispute and debate" that erupted. Eventually church leaders recognized that this had to be settled once and for all both for themselves, and for their new church plants among Gentiles. So they sent Paul, Barnabas and some church members to Jerusalem for a decision from the home office.

During a church-wide meeting, some ex-Pharisees spoke up, "These new Gentile converts must become Jews; be circumcised, obey Moses' law. They have to celebrate the Jewish feasts, do purification rituals, keep the Sabbath, blah, blah, blah, blah."

To us, it's just one story among many stories, in a book among many books. But this was one of the most pivotal moments in church history. More important than when Constantine made Christianity the national Roman religion; more important than Wycliffe's first English Bible, more important than Luther's 95 theses. Because what hung in the balance, was the church's message: the good news of grace, or the ticking time bomb of Jewish legalism.

When Peter rose to speak, the Pharisees smiled. He was their kind of guy. Even around Gentiles he conducted himself like a proper Jew. Or so they thought. Actually, he just conformed so he could try and make everyone happy. READ Gal.2:11-14. Once Paul had the courage to rebuke him, Peter rediscovered his own courage and at the meeting on this day, spoke boldly about grace before hundreds of his Jewish friends (READ v.11). "God made it crystal clear to me that the Gentiles *I* led to Christ, were acceptable as they were (without becoming Jews)."

When Peter finished, Paul and Barnabas described God's miracles among the Gentiles concluding that these signs indicated that indeed, God *did* accept them as they were.

Finally, Jerusalem's much loved pastor, James--Jesus' own brother, stood up. "Look, the OT *predicted* what is happening: there will be Gentiles who bear the Lord's name! (Amos 9:11-12). Let's not make it unnecessarily hard for them."

It is at this point that James turned the discussion from how Gentiles are saved, to how Gentiles are to act around Jewish Christians. What should they observe that will show sensitivity to their scruples? (Not, what must they do all the time, but do when they're with Jews.) They decided to ask 4 requirements:

- Don't eat meat offered to idols

- Don't be sexually promiscuous
- Don't eat meat with blood still in it
- Don't eat meat that's been strangled

3 of the 4 were Jewish ritual laws about food. The lone moral issue on this list was sexual purity. Which was a reminder to Gentiles—most of whom came from a loose moral background—that sexual purity was Christian, *and* a good testimony.

This all apparently silenced the Jewish believers. You know how it is once you think your position is out of favor? You keep quiet? I suspect that's what happened. Because though the decisions were sent by letter and emissary to Antioch and happily received, it did not end the stealth attempt at making Gentile churches Jewish. It did not extinguish the ticking time bomb under grace. READ Tit.1:10-11.

Concl:

Some of you who grew up in Christian homes are performance artists. Today as adults you desperately try but fail over and over, to meet certain performance expectations that have been drilled into you:

- Attend church this much
- Be involved in ministry this much
- Share your faith this much
- Go to this many Bible studies
- Be this nice to everybody

Nothing wrong with any of those things, except that without realizing it, we can let these good things become obligations, rituals, in effect, become the *price* for something God offers us freely: grace. Instead of a gift to receive, salvation haunts us as a commodity to buy. And because the price is so steep, we live in fear, guilt, and self-loathing because we can't measure up. READ Rom.11:5-6: *⁵So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. ⁶And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.*