

Lesson 2 | June 11, 2023

Guarding the Gospel

Study Text: Acts 15:1–35

Central Truth: The Church is to guard the gospel for the sake of the lost, the unity of the Church, and the edification of the saints.

Key Verse: Reference

For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things (KJV).

“For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay no greater burden on you than these few requirements” (NLT).

Learning Objectives

- Students will recognize false teaching that attempts to add to or take away from the gospel.
- Students will value the gospel as the only message that brings salvation to all who believe.
- Students will work to guard the message of Christ from those who would distort it.

Introducing the Study

Say: When it comes to the question of salvation—“What must I do to be saved?”—how important is it to give the right answer? The Early Church faced the challenge of some who wanted to add conditions for salvation, and they guarded the purity of the message Jesus gave them to share with the entire world.

Opening Activity—Measuring Up

Ask. Why do amusement parks have height requirements for certain rides? How does a child (or adult!) feel when he or she is turned down for not measuring up? (Allow time for responses.) Riders who know they’re not tall enough may spike their hair, put lifts in their shoes, or even try to stand on their tiptoes to “cheat” their way onto a ride. For safety’s sake, of course, they should wait until they grow—or find another ride!

Say: In His Word, God tells us the requirements for salvation. Some have tried, however, to add to the gospel, making it difficult for others to understand and accept. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

On the Day of Pentecost, the first Christians spoke in a variety of languages as the Holy Spirit enabled them. This confirmed that the Spirit was poured out so the Church would have power to obey Jesus’ commission to tell the nations of the world about Him. The first Christians were Jews, but according to God’s plan, the gospel was carried also to the Gentiles. This gave rise to an important question: Could Gentiles fully know God without also following the Old Testament Law?

Part 1—The Gospel Made Clear

The Gospel Is Challenged

Acts 15:1–6

Say: After Paul and Barnabas had returned from their ministry journey, false teachers from Judea arrived in Antioch and began to claim that Gentile Christians must undergo circumcision to be saved (Acts 15:1). Circumcision was first instituted for Abraham and his household; it was later reinforced in the law of Moses (Genesis 17:10; Leviticus 12:3). (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Having seen God’s grace in the lives of Gentiles, Paul and Barnabas argued strongly against requiring them to conform to Old Testament Law (Acts 15:2). They were sent, along with others from the church at Antioch, to consult the leadership of the church at Jerusalem. The apostles—the first to be entrusted with the truth of Christ—would be trusted to interpret this controversy in the light of that truth.

This delegation stopped along the way to share with other Jewish believers how God had brought Gentiles into His covenant family (verse 3). Unlike the false teachers at Antioch, these believers took joy at the news of Gentile conversion. This shows us that those who have received Christ themselves should be motivated to share the gospel with others both from personal responsibility and from the joy which comes when others give their lives to Christ.

Paul and Barnabas were welcomed by the apostles, particularly James, Peter, and John (verse 4; see Galatians 2:9). They reported God’s actions through their ministry, highlighting the response of the Gentiles to the good news of Christ (see Acts 14:27). Present also in this meeting were believers who, like Paul, were Pharisees (15:5; see 23:6). But unlike Paul, they asserted that “Gentile converts must be circumcised and required to follow the law of Moses” (15:5, NLT). Paul had talked with those in leadership privately; now the question would be discussed openly (verse 6; see Galatians 2:2).

Discuss

? What are some barriers added by believers today that hinder others from coming to Christ?

? How can your pastor and other church leaders help you detect and overcome false teaching?

Grace for Jew and Gentile

Acts 15:7–12

Say: The importance of the matter created a “long discussion” (Acts 15:7, NLT), or “disputing” (KJV). At stake was the definition of the gospel itself and how the gospel applied to the lives of non-Jews. Jesus focused mainly on the Jewish people during His earthly ministry, and the first converts after His death and resurrection were Jews (see

Matthew 15:24, Acts 2:5). However, God's grace reached out through the apostle Peter to the family of a Roman centurion (see Acts 10). The sign that God had accepted these believing Gentiles was an outpouring of His Holy Spirit, evidenced by their speaking in tongues, as the Jewish believers had at Pentecost (Acts 15:8; see 2:4; 10:45–46). (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Since God accepted Gentile Christians exactly as He accepted Jewish Christians, Peter asked these Pharisees why the Gentiles should be burdened with Jewish law (Acts 15:9–10). Peter used a common piece of farming equipment—a yoke—to describe the Law's weight on an individual.

We are not offered multiple plans for salvation—only one. Peter stated the truth that he and all the Jewish Christians he was addressing were saved by the grace of Jesus Christ—not by meticulously observing the Law (verse 11). The same grace brought salvation to every non-Jewish person who accepted the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, independent of keeping the Jewish law.

The testimony of Paul and Barnabas, like Peter's testimony about the household of Cornelius, served to reinforce the truth that God accepted Gentiles into His kingdom (verse 12). Just as He had given miraculous evidence when Cornelius's household received the gospel, God did the same in the places Paul and Barnabas preached to the Gentiles (see Galatians 3:5). God will also perform miracles in the lives of those we preach the gospel to today.

Resource Packet Item 1: The Gospel for Everyone

Hand out the information sheet and ask for a volunteer to read the points. Discuss our equal standing before God, based on His work through the sacrifice of Christ.

Discuss

? Give a simple, one-sentence definition of the gospel of Christ. Is there someone in your life who needs to hear this definition?

? God accepts all who commit themselves to Christ. How does this challenge believers who reject new converts based on additional standards?

Part 2—Commending the Gospel to Gentiles

Gentile Salvation Foretold

Acts 15:13–18

Say: The second—and final—speaker we can identify brings the discussion to its conclusion. James, the brother of Jesus, was now a leader in the church at Jerusalem (see Matthew 13:55). James spoke of God visiting the Gentiles (Acts 15:13–14). Elsewhere in Luke's writings, Zechariah praised God for visiting Israel through the birth (and coming ministry) of his son, John the Baptist (Luke 1:76–79, KJV), and the people of Nain praised God for His visitation through the ministry of Christ, who raised the

widow's son (Luke 7:11–17). And here in Acts 15, James called the dramatic conversion of the household of Cornelius through Peter's ministry a visitation of God. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Resource Packet Item 2: Visited by God

Distribute Hand out the worksheet and allow time for class members to record responses. Have several testify of God's work in their lives and its effect on others around them.

The Gentiles' turning to God fulfilled His word to the prophet Amos (Acts 15:15–18; Amos 9:11–12). In promising to restore the house of David, God was speaking of the spiritual kingdom that He would build through the person and work of His Son, Jesus Christ. God promised David a kingdom that would endure forever; He brought that promise to pass through Jesus as a descendent of David (2 Samuel 7:16–17).

God's purpose was (and still is) evangelism; He worked with the intent that "the rest of humanity"—all those outside Israel—would seek Him (Acts 15:17, NLT). Although He prepared the world for the coming Messiah through His words and actions toward the nation of Israel, God's plan has always been to extend His salvation to all who will believe (Romans 15:7–12).

Discuss

? What national or international events of the last year may point to God's efforts to lead people to Jesus Christ?

? Name some of the things God did for Israel that paved the way for Christ.

Assisting the Gentiles

Acts 15:19–21

Say: God's grace resulted in many of the Gentiles turning rapidly to Him (Acts 15:19). James recognized what God was doing and gave his judgment to the church at Jerusalem. Based on God's supernatural visitation to the Gentiles and His prophetic promise to include them in His covenant, Jewish Christians should not impose the entirety of the Law upon their Gentile counterparts. Grace and the right to distribute it belong to God alone. Those who already know Christ should not "make it difficult" for others to accept Him (verse 19, NLT).

(Share your highlights from the following text.)

James suggested four prohibitions given in the law of Moses that would help Gentile Christians respect the sensibilities of Jewish Christians (Acts 15:20).

1. Eating food sacrificed to idols. Such meat was commonly available for purchase. Jewish Christians might believe those consuming it were still practicing idolatry, which was forbidden to Jews in all its forms (Exodus 20:3–6).

2. Sexual immorality. Such sin was common among Gentiles, who viewed it with indifference. In fact, prostitution was an element of idol worship. Popular Gentile involvement could tempt new converts to fall back into immorality (see Exodus 20:14).

3. Consumption of the meat of strangled animals.

4. Consumption of blood (Genesis 9:4). Greeks and Romans used blood in cooking; those who abstained, or who absented themselves from a meal including blood, would be conspicuous to others.

James concluded by reasoning with his fellow Jewish Christians that these four prohibitions would not be entirely new nor surprising to Gentile believers. Mosaic law had been preached far and wide for generations and would already be familiar to many Gentiles (Acts 15:21).

Discuss

? What are some ways the church today can create a welcoming atmosphere for new believers and help them live for God?

? Why do you suppose sexual immorality has been a frequent and powerful sin all through human history?

? Read Romans 14:14–15. What areas of your behavior should you limit or modify to help you not to “distress” (NLT) or “grieve” (KJV) other believers?

Part 3—An Encouraging Message

Acceptance and Avoidance

Acts 15:22–29

Say: The church at Jerusalem decided to send delegates to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas to confirm their message (Acts 15:22). This would counter any suspicion that Paul and Barnabas were trying to defraud the church at Antioch. Judas, also called Barsabbas (possibly the brother of the Joseph of Acts 1:23), and Silas, who afterwards traveled with Paul in his work (Acts 15:40), were chosen as representatives. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

The letter Judas and Silas took with them began by identifying the family relationship of the Jewish church leaders at Jerusalem to the Gentile Christians at Antioch and the nearby territory (Acts 15:23). These leaders continued by explaining the problem at hand: The Gentile Christians at Antioch were troubled in their faith by teachers who insisted they must follow the Mosaic law in order to be saved (verse 24).

No subject is so important—and so potentially troubling—to people than their eternal salvation. The Jerusalem leaders made it clear that they had not sent these false teachers who had upset the Antioch Christians. Instead, having deliberated and “come to complete agreement,” the leaders in Jerusalem sent a delegation back to Antioch to deliver their directions (verse 25, NLT).

The leaders commended Barnabas and Paul for their devotion to Christ in the face of danger to their lives (verse 26). Barnabas is named first; he was known as a believer to both the church at Jerusalem and the church at Antioch before Paul was (see 4:36–37; 11:22–26). The authority of the letter would also be confirmed by Judas and Silas (15:27).

The church at Jerusalem, with the direct help of the Holy Spirit, limited their directions to the Gentile Christians to four areas. Three of them dealt with dietary matters concerning idolatry and other prohibitions, and one of them was a particular problem among Gentile populations—sexual immorality (verses 28–29). Avoiding these practices would enable Gentile Christians to have positive and conciliatory relationships with Jewish Christians.

Discuss

? Read 2 Corinthians 8:20–21. Why is it important to avoid any behavior that could bring an accusation of fraud or other wrongdoing against the church?

? Can God use you to bring comfort to those struggling to believe they are saved?

? Do you know anyone who has risked his or her life for Christ? Explain.

Built Up in Faith

Acts 15:30–35

Say: The letter from the leaders of the church at Jerusalem fulfilled its objective of countering the false teaching the Gentile believers at Antioch had been subjected to (Acts 15:30–31). These believers had great joy knowing they were accepted by God and their Jewish brethren, freed from the burden of Mosaic law, and in strong fellowship with other believers in Christ. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Resource Packet Item 3: Letter to New Believers

Hand out the worksheet and allow time to record responses. Encourage class members to communicate with new believers to strengthen and build them up in the faith.

Their faith was also encouraged and strengthened by the prophetic ministry of Judas and Silas (verses 32–34). Prophecy among God’s people serves to strengthen, encourage, and comfort them (1 Corinthians 14:3). Judas and Silas may have strengthened the believers in Syrian Antioch by giving inspired explanations of passages of the Old Testament, including those cited by James in Acts 15:16–18 and other passages concerning Jesus Christ.

Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching (verse 35). Luke records the presence of “many others” there who preached and taught also (NLT). These may have included believers who came after Stephen’s martyrdom (11:19), prophets from Jerusalem (verse 27), and others mentioned in 13:1.

We can also experience the joy of knowing we are accepted by God and fellow believers around us. And we can strengthen the faith of those nearby who may be struggling to understand the difference between the messages of false teachers and biblically sound teachers. Watch for believers around you who may need encouragement to follow only teachers whose teachings line up with the Word of God.

Discuss

? Describe the joy in your own heart knowing God has made you His child.

? Why are many tempted to reject the ministry of prophecy? How can 1 Thessalonians 5:19–22 resolve this?

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: Our faith is built on a foundation of truth—the facts of Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection so that we may be born again. The Church must reject every idea, philosophy, or message that adds to or takes away from God’s plan to save all who believe. The Early Church, by study of the Old Testament and with the help of the Holy Spirit, stood firm against those who were placing unnecessary regulations on Gentiles who had accepted Jesus Christ. In the same way, believers today must reject every alteration that people attempt to make to the gospel, and churches must stand ready to help new believers who struggle with areas that cause them to doubt in their relationship with Christ.

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

- Test yourself: Do you find yourself slipping at times into thinking salvation depends on personal works?
- Ask God to help you correctly represent the truth of the gospel to those around you, causing no confusion and sending no mixed messages.
- Ask God to lead you to those who have gone astray concerning the message of salvation and to help you share the truth in love.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

Moses Preserves God’s Word.
Exodus 34:27–29

Tuesday:

God’s Word Endures Forever.
Isaiah 40:1–8

Wednesday:

God’s Word Is Indestructible.
Jeremiah 36:27–32

Thursday:

Charge to Guard God’s Word.
1 Timothy 6:11–12,20–21

Friday:

Contend for the Faith.

Jude 1–4

Saturday:

Warning to Keep God's Word.

Revelation 22:18–21