

We live in a highly conditional world, where there are conditions on everything. Every contract has screeds of conditions that must be agreed to. Each social group has its own unspoken conditions; if you want to be our friends then you should be like us. So much in our life is based on conditions. This is nothing new and the early church was just the same. The notion that God's mercy and grace was a free offering to anyone who accepted Christ, was a difficult concept for the early church. They had to place conditions on belonging to Christ and the main condition was that any prospective convert had to be Jewish. No sooner had the early church established itself that it replaced the standards that God had set, with its own conditions on membership!

Excepting of the odd setback, things had been going well with Paul and Barnabas. They were journeying through Asia Minor preaching salvation through the crucified and resurrected Christ. Then men came along who wanted to move away from the simplicity of the gospel message and apply their own conditions. It all began over a discussion by men in Jerusalem who'd arrived in Antioch, and they were insisting that circumcision was essential to Christian salvation. This would make God's grace subject to Jewish law, and make Christ himself subject to Moses. These Jews thought that gentiles had to become Jews first, and only then could they convert to Christianity.

The Christian leaders met and they decided that gentiles were equal to Jews, for all are dependent upon the grace of God in Jesus Christ for salvation, and circumcision was not necessary because God's grace alone brings our salvation! This was an important decision because from this point on, Christianity was not limited to becoming a small Jewish sect, but a worldwide independent faith which grew into the New Testament church. Our text from Acts 15 contains the formal letter that was drawn up announcing this important decision, and Paul and Barnabas who were well known in the early church, took the letter to the churches throughout Asia Minor.

This letter contained teaching for the new gentile Christians, but these lessons would be helpful to Jew and Gentile alike; in that they would guide these new Christians away from pagan forms of worship. These same lessons are also applicable for us in today's church and the first lesson for us is that ***Grace is not dependant of what we do!*** Acts 15 deals with something that continues to be a stumbling block for the Christian gospel. Some people believe that salvation is possible through Jesus Christ plus something that they do, which is a mistake. Salvation is through grace and grace alone.

We can see how this error came about. The Jewish Christians, up to their conversion to Christianity, had followed a religion based on a list of laws and their religion was something *they did*. Now they're told that Christian faith comes from the heart and that it's not an external act. This inner work is accomplished by the Holy Spirit and their belonging to Christ isn't dependant on circumcision or any other good work. Only God can give redemption. Paul had to correct the Roman and Galatian churches belief that their faith came through works repeatedly. Paul had to keep preaching that Christian freedom is in Christ, and not through the work of man: ***For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor un-circumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. (Gal 5:6).***

This erroneous thinking continued into the mid sixteenth century with the Church in Rome making believers adhere to their rules, regulations and the purchasing of indulgences to *buy favour* with God. Luther, Calvin and Knox who brought about the reformation of the Church, said that it was impossible to gain acceptance from God through works. The Reformers taught that salvation can only come through the glorious liberating truth of grace alone. And yet, there are some today who still try to *do something* to be saved. They work so hard at being *good enough* and hope that this makes them acceptable to God. When I came to faith I thought that God couldn't accept me, and so I wasted two years on working hard to *be better!*

Despite my hard work, my faith didn't grow and I was miserable. I couldn't understand how others experienced God working in them while I got nowhere. My minister told me to relax and to stop trying to be so virtuous! He said there was nothing wrong in living a good life but it couldn't earn God's favour because we were sinners, and nothing could change that. He suggested that instead of striving to gain God's acceptance; that I put as much effort into praying to become closer to God. What wonderful advice and it was liberating to be delivered from that belief of faith through works. When I realized that I was justified and forgiven; not because of what I did but because of divine grace; my faith began to develop and life changed.

It's through Christ alone that we're forgiven and we must trust in Him who earned our forgiveness on the cross. We can't earn our forgiveness because it's already been given and can only be accepted by faith. ***The Christian faith is not about us doing our best, it's about letting God do his best for us, and He did this at the cross!*** We keep working on externals but God wants to work on the internal. We try to whitewash ourselves but only God can wash us white!

The second lesson we learn from Paul's letter to the Gentiles, is ***Grace Is What Christ Has Done***. Salvation is not what we can do; *but what Christ has already done!* God purifies the heart by faith and when God looks at us, he doesn't see us; he sees Christ. Remember Genesis 1:26. *And now we will make human beings; they will be like us and resemble us.* We are created in Christ's image and through His sacrifice on the cross, we are redeemed by his blood. Jesus had paid for our sins. The guilt of our past is covered with blood too precious to have ever been spilled in vain for us. We call this justification by grace a process of coming to a real living faith in Jesus Christ. Some describe this process as being born again, a new birth in Jesus. We are sealed in the waters of Christian baptism and become new creatures in Christ Jesus. We can't do anything to earn the grace of God for the price for our eternal life has been paid in full.

William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury and theologian; once said: *It is no good giving me a play like Hamlet, or King Lear, and telling me to write a play like that. Shakespeare could do it; but I can't. And it is no good showing me a life like the life of Jesus and telling me to live a life like that: Jesus could do it but I can't. But, if the genius of Shakespeare could come and live in me, then I could write plays like that. And if the Spirit of Jesus could come and live in me, then I could live a life like that!* This is the only way Christian's can live in imitation of Jesus; through being open to the Holy Spirit's influence in all parts of our life. No amount of good works or religious rules can earn us anything. All we have comes from what Christ does in us!

And the third and last lesson from Acts 15 is ***Now do as He commands!*** But what about works? Are we not to do some good deeds? Well yes; these early Christians were given some restrictions and guidelines that were to be kept. But they were not to be kept in order to become Christians. They kept to these guidelines and restrictions *because they were Christians!* They lived in imitation of Jesus out of a heart of gratitude and love for all that Christ has done for us.

We naturally live well and do good works as a reaction to what Christ has done for us. When we live in the Spirit, the natural outgrowth is good works. The letter of the law required holiness but the Holy Spirit imparts holiness. Jesus didn't come to teach a new philosophy but to bring a new life. He didn't come with new rules, but a new Spirit and a new attitude. The Old Covenant is the written law while the New Covenant is Spirit. The law was an external matter while grace is an internal matter and it works by faith. Through the Holy Spirit; Jesus Christ is with us all the time. We are in a relationship with Him and Christ lives within us! The Apostle Paul had Christ in him whether he was in the pulpit or in jail, and so do we. And when Christ is in us good works are a natural fruit, and evidence of his presence.

I hope this passage from Acts 15, helps us see the difference between faith and works. Works cannot earn or buy us our salvation. Salvation comes through the work of Christ at Calvary, and through Him alone. We respond to Christ's call to repentance and faith, and we are justified by grace through faith. *Our sanctification is the living out of that faith in good works, but these good works are done in response to Christ's love and grace.*

Good works do not make us Christians, they identify us as Christians. Love for Christ is what makes us want to keep his commandments, and bring us to a place of confession. Love for Christ makes us want to give our Lord our best. In the words of the hymn: *The price is paid, Hallelujah! Amen.*

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