

By Grace Alone

Acts 15.1-35

We all have the tendency and temptation to try to get our assurance from something we do rather than from what Jesus did for us in our place.

"I've never taken any law courses in my entire life, but there is a little lawyer inside me who is excellent at trying to evade my own guilt. I'm always trying to justify myself at some level, even as a Christian. We don't always notice we're doing it, but we have a built-in resistance to this idea of just how much we need Jesus week by week." Sam Alberry

"While I was a monk, I no sooner felt assailed by any temptation than I cried out—'I am lost!' Immediately I had recourse to a thousand methods to stifle the cries of my conscience. I went everyday to confession, but that was of no use to me." Martin Luther

"Hereby it appears that the doctrine of the gospel (which of all others is most sweet and full of most singular consolation) speaks nothing of our works or of the works of the law, but of the inscrutable mercy and love of God towards most wretched and miserable sinners. " Martin Luther

How do I find assurance that I am truly at peace with a holy God?

I. The False Assertion: Jesus + the Law of Moses. Acts 15.1-5

"But 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.**' And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them..." Acts 15:1-2

"When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. But some 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.'" Acts 15:4-5

The gospel is radical not only in that it accepts unworthy sinners as full-fledged citizens of the kingdom by faith alone but it disqualifies highly religious people who trust in their religious ceremonies instead of and in addition to the saving sacrifice of Jesus.

Jesus plus anything = another gospel

"He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised." Romans 4:11-12

"Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin." Romans 4:7-8

"The righteousness that God requires for our justification is not a righteousness that we perform, even by sovereign grace, but it is the righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed to us by God. It's called an alien righteousness." John Piper

II. The First Assembly: What Does God Say? Acts 15.6-21

"The apostles and the elders gathered to consider this matter." Acts 15:6

"A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established." Deuteronomy 17:6

- **Peter's Testimony – God bore witness to the Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit.**

"We believe that we will be saved through the grace of our Lord Jesus, just as they will." Acts 15:11

"Salvation by grace is an issue of Christian truth that is not to be compromised. No particular work of the law was added as a requirement for salvation or membership in the new community. Salvation cannot be a matter of human works. It is about receiving God's grace from start to finish. Faith means relying only on what God has provided in terms of forgiveness and the benefits of salvation that come with it." Darrell Bock

- **Paul and Barnabas' Testimony: God's attested to the truthfulness of the gospel by doing signs and wonders.**

"And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles." Acts 15:12

- **James' Testimony: The Prophets tell us God will bring the Gentiles to himself.**

"After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tents of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, and the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old.'" Acts 15:15-17

"God will build his eschatological kingdom not with stone, brick, and wood, but rather Gentiles and Jews." Patrick Schreiner

Conclusion: Gentiles are full citizens of the kingdom of God along with the Jewish Christians by faith alone in Christ alone.

"Therefore, my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God." Acts 15:19

We need to remind ourselves that salvation is offered in Christ through faith alone. It is only ever God's grace in Christ that saves anyone.

III. The Final Agreement: No Burden But Love. Acts 15.22-35

"For it has seemed good to the Holy spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: that you abstain from food sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell." Acts 15:28-29

"Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak... And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died." 1 Corinthians 8:8-11

"For though I am free from all, I have made myself the servant to all, that I may win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew in order to win Jews.... To those outside the law (not being outside the law of God under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside that law...I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some." 1 Corinthians 9:19-22

The question is no longer what must I do to be saved but how shall I live so others might be saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

Study Questions: "How Do I Find Assurance That I Am Truly at Peace With a Holy God?"

Introductory Reflection:

1. According to Sam Alberry and Martin Luther, why is it so difficult for us to rest in the work of Christ alone for our assurance?
 2. What are some subtle ways people (even Christians) try to justify themselves before God?
 3. What does it mean to have a “built-in resistance” to grace? Can you identify that tendency in your own life?
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I. The False Assertion: Jesus + the Law of Moses (Acts 15:1–5)

1. What was the main issue being debated in Acts 15:1–5?
 2. Why is the addition of any requirement (like circumcision) to faith in Jesus considered a “different gospel”?
 3. How does Romans 4:11–12 clarify the relationship between faith and outward religious signs?
 4. What is meant by the term “alien righteousness,” and how does it provide comfort to those seeking assurance?
 5. According to John Piper, why can't even “Spirit-empowered good works” be the basis of our justification?
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II. The First Assembly: What Does God Say? (Acts 15:6–21)

1. What role does the testimony of Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and James play in affirming the truth of the gospel?
 2. How does Acts 15:11 summarize the core of the gospel message?
 3. Why is the issue of grace alone through faith alone “not to be compromised” (according to Darrell Bock)?
 4. How do the Old Testament prophecies support the inclusion of Gentiles in God's kingdom?
 5. What does James conclude about the Gentiles' standing in the church, and what does this tell us about the nature of salvation?
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III. The Final Agreement: No Burden But Love (Acts 15:22–35)

1. What was the purpose behind the final instructions given to Gentile believers (Acts 15:28–29)?
2. How does 1 Corinthians 8:8–11 help us understand the spirit behind the restrictions?

3. In what way is Christian freedom meant to serve the mission of the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:19–22)?
 4. Why is the focus shifted from “what must I do to be saved” to “how shall I live so others might be saved”?
 5. What does this passage teach us about balancing liberty and love in the Christian life?
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Personal Application:

1. Where are you tempted to add something to Jesus’ work in order to feel “right” with God?
2. How would resting more fully in Christ’s finished work impact your day-to-day faith and spiritual life?
3. What are practical ways you can live out your freedom in Christ in love for others — especially those who are weaker or still exploring the faith?