

August 23, 2015  
Church Planting  
*Saved by Grace!*  
Acts 15:1-11

**Opening words:** I love this story. A young Billy Graham was driving through a small southern town, when he was pulled over by a policeman and charged with speeding. Graham admitted his guilt, but was told by the officer that he would have to appear in court. At first, the judge did not recognize Graham. He asked, "Guilty, or not guilty?" When Graham pleaded guilty, the judge replied, "That'll be ten dollars -- a dollar for every mile you went over the limit." Suddenly, the judge recognized the famous minister. "You have violated the law," he said. "The fine must be paid--but I am going to pay it for you." He took a ten dollar bill from his own wallet, attached it to the ticket, and then took Graham out and bought him a steak dinner!" Later, Billy Graham said, "That is how God treats repentant sinners! My story is a story of true grace!" If you can understand that simple story, then you can understand this morning's message.

This is sermon number thirty-two in my sermon series called *Church Planting*. During the summer months, I have been preaching through the Book of Acts. This is no small task, because Acts has so much to offer. I believe the Holy Spirit is vital to our future success. Human effort and determination are not enough to revive the church. It is the Holy Spirit who created the church originally, and it must be the Holy Spirit who revives the church again. With this understanding, let us look at our scripture lesson for today, Acts 15:1-11. Let me call this message *Saved by Grace!*

**Acts 15:1-11** <sup>1</sup>Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." <sup>2</sup>This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. <sup>3</sup>The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad. <sup>4</sup>When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. <sup>5</sup>Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses."

<sup>6</sup>The apostles and elders met to consider this question. <sup>7</sup>After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. <sup>8</sup>God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. <sup>9</sup>He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. <sup>10</sup>Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? <sup>11</sup>No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

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It is one of the great hymns of the church. You may know the story of *Amazing Grace*. It was written by John Newton, who was born in 1725. He grew up without any religious conviction. As a young man he was pressed into the Royal Navy. After the service he got involved in the Atlantic slave trade. The practice was just as sinister as it sounds. West Africans were captured and sold into slavery in the Americas. As many as 20% died en route. In 1748, when Newton was 23 years old, his ship encountered a terrible storm off the coast of Ireland and Newton cried out to God for mercy. That experience marked his Christian conversion. He stayed in the slave industry for another six or seven years, then he began to study Christian theology. The hymn, *Amazing Grace*, came from his own personal experience. Read the words; he couldn't believe God could save such a sinner as he. How many times have you sung *Amazing Grace*? When was the first time you experienced God's amazing grace?

It has been said there are two groups that wrestle with God's grace. The first group sees themselves as too sinful. Like Newton, they see themselves as too far gone. Not even God's grace is that powerful. The other group sees themselves as too good. They really don't need God's grace because they aren't that bad. They can save themselves. Let me say this clearly. We all need God's grace. Jesus is our only hope of salvation. If you believe Jesus is your only hope of salvation, say, "**Amen!**" With this in mind, let us look at this morning's scripture lesson together.

We are in the fifteenth chapter of Acts. Paul and Barnabas have just completed their first missionary journey. It should have been a happy time because so many new converts were added to the fold. Everyone says they want church growth, but this is the problem. Church growth always leads to change and most people don't care for change. You know it is true. Historically, the church has never cared for change. You can find the tension in this passage. The first converts to the church were Jews. That means they came from a common background - Judaism. The new converts to the church are Gentiles; non-Jews. They come from a variety of backgrounds. Most of them, I believe, have very little interest in the old Jewish ways. The only thing they care about is Jesus. The original Jewish converts had a problem. The issue that had to be addressed is the Old Testament law. Is it necessary for these new Gentile converts to follow the laws of the Old Testament? To be more exact, do the new Gentile converts have to be circumcised? (If you do not know what circumcision is, then we have to talk privately later.) You know it is true. It is true in any church debate. Everyone chooses a side and everyone has emotional opinions to support their side.

Like drawing a line in the sand, the two sides are parted. On the one side are the characters mentioned in verse one. They insist the new members must be circumcised. Many believe their numbers were made up of converted Pharisees who valued and upheld the law. Their voices carried some weight in the past, but the times are changing. The spokesmen for the other side were Paul and Barnabas. They said the law, circumcision, had nothing to do with salvation. They said, we are saved by grace and by grace alone. They said Jesus's sacrificial death was enough; the Old Testament law, including circumcision, was pointless. The Gentile men must have stood with Paul and Barnabas.

I have never met a single adult man who wanted to be circumcised. It must be painful; I don't even want to think about it. However, I do want you to remember this Bible verse, Ephesians 2:8-9, "*For it is by grace that you have been saved - and this is not from yourself, it is a gift of God - not by works, so that we cannot boast.*" Paul's side won the debate, so let me say it clearly: WE ARE SAVED BY GRACE! If you will accept the fact that you are saved by grace, say, "**Amen!**" It sounds simple, but it is really quite hard for people to completely accept.

We are saved by grace, not **Political Correctness!** Several years ago, I preached a sermon series called *Christianity and World Religions*. It was not original; it was originally created by Adam Hamilton, who is the pastor of the Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas. Each week we examined a different world religion and explained why it was different from Christianity. Each week, I discovered a new reason I was thankful to be a Christian. However, before I looked at any other religions, I looked at the three responses Christians have about other world religions. I gave my opinion. I try not to judge anyone, but, I do believe Jesus is our only hope of salvation. You couldn't have been surprised. This is a Christian church and I am ordained in the Christian faith. It is just basic Christian theology. The next week, I emailed that message out to the congregation. I only got one response, from an inactive church member. He did not care for my message. He called me narrow-minded and judgmental. He said people like me are the reason so many wars have happened throughout history. He said there are many paths to heaven and Christianity is only one. Do you know of anyone who has tried to explain away the differences in world religion using this path theory? That "pathway to heaven" theme is very politically correct, but it will not save your soul. Let me say it again. Our only hope of salvation is Jesus, we are saved by grace! If you can remember political correctness is not good enough, say, "**Amen!**"

We are saved by grace, not **Osmosis!** The saddest story in the news lately is the terminal illness of former President Jimmy Carter. He became our 39<sup>th</sup> president during my college years. I don't care what you think about his time in the Oval Office. I don't care if you are a red person or a blue person, his story is amazing. Last week, he told the world that he had liver cancer. This week, he told the world that his cancer had spread to his brain. At 91 years old there isn't much hope, yet Carter continues to live! At an interview this past Thursday, he answered all kind of questions about his life. He was candid about his death. I find his faith to be incredible. Staring death in the face, he shows no sign of fear. If you knew you only had a short time to live, how would you respond? What would you do with the time that you had left? Do you know what Jimmy Carter is doing this morning? It is the same thing he has been doing on Sunday mornings for years, teaching Sunday school at the Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Georgia. I think that is amazing. Jimmy Carter, Baptist Sunday school teacher, would tell you that God has no grandchildren, only children. It doesn't matter what your father thought about Jesus. It doesn't matter what your grandmother thought about Jesus. It doesn't matter what your preacher says about Jesus. The only thing that matters is you. Do you know Jesus as your Lord and Savior? Have you been washed clean by his precious blood? Our only hope of salvation is Jesus;

we are saved by grace. Osmosis has nothing to do with it. If you can remember osmosis has nothing to do with salvation, say, **"Amen!"**

We are saved by grace, not the **law!** Annually, at the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve, hundreds of new laws go into effect around the country. They cover a wide variety of issues. For example, in New York State, it became illegal to tattoo your dog for any reason, except a medical treatment. (Why would anyone want to tattoo their dog?) I know this dog tattooing law is legit because I found it on the internet. I didn't really want to find out about tattooing dogs. I really wanted to find how many laws there are in the United States of America. Do you know how many laws there are in our country? Too many. There are so many laws, I couldn't even find a number. We have an endless supply of federal, state and municipal laws. Every organization has their own laws, including the church. It has always been that way. In the scripture for today, the law said every male must be circumcised. I do not want to shock you, but I am not a big law or rule person. Generally, I am against church laws or rules that protect property or exclude people. I don't care if you put your food in the refrigerator. I don't care if you drip wax on the pews on Christmas Eve. If the pews are that valuable, we shouldn't have bought them. However, I am for rules that protect people. I am against smoking because it will cut your life short. I am against drinking and driving because you may take someone else's life. I am against extramarital sex because people, usually the young, get hurt. I guess rules and laws do have their place, but they are not going to save your soul. Our only hope of salvation is Jesus; we are saved by grace. If you think we have too many laws or rules, say, **"Amen!"**

I want to end with a story that I have told you in the past, several times. Let me say, it is hard to be original after so much time. And, let me say, the story makes the point crystal clear. It is not my story. It is George Lee's story. He is the pastor of the West Austintown United Methodist Church. According to him, he had a woman in one of his churches who spent many long hours in the church kitchen. She was a good soul and supported the church in many ways. She never missed worship and served on every church committee twice. However, her passion was the kitchen. If you have ever worked in a church kitchen then you know it is true. Everyone has a job. If you are a long time kitchen worker, you get the same job. Her job was to peel the potatoes. Only the Lord knows how many potatoes she peeled through the years. She never had to be asked, she just peeled the potatoes. It became her identity within the church. One day George was told the potato peeling lady was feeling sick and went to the doctor. The doctor sent her for tests, and the tests revealed several weeks later, she was terminal. George is a wonderful pastor and supported her as the disease progressed. As the end drew near, George was with her. From her deathbed she looked at George and said, "George, have I peeled enough potatoes to get into heaven?" George said he was heartbroken. The good woman had spent her entire life in the church and never heard the most important thing. Our only hope of salvation is Jesus. We are saved by grace. There are simply not enough potatoes! The apostle Paul said it best, *"For it is by grace that you have been saved - and this is not from yourself, it is a gift of God."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**