Niki’s talk

No Greater Burden

Good morning Falkirk Vineyard. This morning we are continuing our series on the book of Acts and we find ourselves in Acts chapter 15.

 I’ll let you into a little secret and that is that Kenny, Andrew and Lorraine( I’m actually not sure who is entirely responsible) , but anyway one or all of them decide who will be preaching which chapter/subject and they let you know in plenty of time in advance so you can think about what God has to say and you can study for your sermon. When I got through my dates and subject for this Sunday I read through the verses and from what I could decipher they were all having a bit of an argument about something.

I was slightly nervous about how today would go as when Ryan asked me what I was preaching on - I said I’m preaching on ‘ circumcision’. He looked slightly bit queasy! So, I was sort of dreading it a little bit because really, who wants to stand up in a room full of people and talk about circumcision??? Well, it turns out, I do!

Because This chapter could really have a whole sermon series written on it . There is a LOT going on, it was hard to get it down to one sermon, but I really feel the Holy Spirit connected with me when preparing to speak to you all in such a tangible way. In fact, I found deeply impacted when confronted with the kindness and grace of Jesus once again and I really am excited to share this with you today.

So here goes, here is my ‘circumcision’ sermon!

Acts 15 1-4 (NLT)

###  The Council at Jerusalem

**15 While Paul and Barnabas were at Antioch of Syria, some men from Judea arrived and began to teach the believers[**[**a**](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts+15&version=NLT#fen-NLT-27408a)**]: “Unless you are circumcised as required by the law of Moses, you cannot be saved.” 2Paul and Barnabas** **disagreed with them, arguing vehemently. Finally, the church decided to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem, accompanied by some local believers, to talk to the apostles and elders about this question. 3The church sent the delegates to Jerusalem, and they stopped along the way in Phoenicia and Samaria to visit the believers. They told them—much to everyone’s joy—that the Gentiles, too, were being converted.**

Here we see the early church experiencing some conflict and they are grappling with a big question. The question that is being asked here is,

**Is there something other than faith that is required in order to be saved?**

Is there something we need to do? It’s the same question that many people are still asking today. Its also something that I think many Christians are still confused about.

It’s a salvation issue that’s the basis for argument here. This is very important to get right.

I love the bible. It takes you down so many rabbit holes and adventures. You start reading in one verse and it peaks your interest and you find yourself jumping all over the bible finding out new things. In order to understand what’s happening here we have to go back.

Christianity began in Jerusalem with Jews who followed the way of Jesus Everyone who is not a Jew is called a Gentile. Most people in this room today will be Gentiles. Christianity began to spread very quickly to all people which is what we have seen happening in the book of Acts. It starts in Jerusalem then spreads to Judea, Samaria and here we find it has spread to a church in Antioch. In these verses we read about a situation where we have many Jewish Christians and non-Jewish Christians in the same church. For the Jewish people this is so counter cultural. Even walking near a Gentile house would have been strange. Certainly eating and socialising with them would be scandalous as they would have been seen as unclean.being with them would have made them unclean too. To help us understand their feelings towards the Gentiles and put this in perspective for us today this is a prayer that the Jewish men said **daily**,

*Blessed are you, o god king of the universe, who has not made me a Gentile, a slave or a woman.*

Historically the coveneant people of God were one ethnic group called the Jews and they were **set apart** … these people were from the nation called Israel. The Jewish people were a chosen people called by Gods name, blessed with Gods presence and entrusted to carry Gods promise to the world. They were desended from Abraham. We can read all about their story throughout the Old Testament.

They were to be set apart and they were given laws by Moses. There are over 600 laws in total that are recorded in the bible. When Israel entered a covenant relationship with God these laws were the terms of that covenant. God would protect them they were to keep the laws. To understand this part we need to know that Many of the laws are like ancient ritual symbols that set Israel apart from other nations to make them holy. One of those things was male circumcision but there were many different things like eating kosher, not wearing clothes made from two types of material, not cutting your hair. etc. if you want to read about this start in the middle of Exodus and keep reading to Deutoronomy. And what you will find consistently is that God gives the laws and the people of Israel break the laws. They can’t seem to keep them.

Here in Acts we read that many Jewish people felt that in order for the Gentiles to be saved and become part of Gods family they MUST become Jewish and obey the laws of the Torah in particular they are talking about circumcision of the male non-Jewish Christians here. This is what **they** have done and this is what they been taught to do their whole lives and what they are telling the Gentiles is unless you keep these laws you are not truly saved. Basically, claiming there is something we need to do in order to earn our salvation.

We read about Paul and Barnabas in verse two and it says they . **disagreed with these people, arguing vehemently** in other bible translations says they had a sharp dispute or a serious argument. sometimes when ryan and I are arguing in the car in front of the kids and they say , Stop arguing! And we say we are not arguing we are having a discussion. The bibles not like that- it doesn’t mince its words here. This is a major clash of opinions. So what they decide to do is send Paul and Barnabas and some other people from the church in Antioch back to Jerusalem to discuss the matter. thats kind of a big deal- its not a small journey. I checked on google maps and it was a 146 hour walk to Jerusalem from Antioch. Once they are in Jerusalem again the question of circumcision and ‘law keeping’ is raised by Jesus-following Pharisees.

We pick it up again in **Acts 15 v4-6**

**4When they arrived in Jerusalem, Barnabas and Paul were welcomed by the whole church, including the apostles and elders. They reported everything God had done through them. 5But then some of the believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and insisted, “The Gentile converts must be circumcised and required to follow the law of Moses.” 6So the apostles and elders met together to resolve this issue.**

So we have this scene where we have everyone gathered together in Jerusalem and Paul and Barnabas are welcomed in. telling their stories of their mission trips. But this is where they are going to sort this issue of circumcison they have been arguing about together.

Next we read about three men who give speeches to the elders and people gathered about their thoughts.

First up is one of my favourite guys in the bible, Peter.

**Acts 15v7-11NLT**

**7At the meeting, after a long discussion, Peter stood and addressed them as follows: “Brothers, you all know that God chose me from among you some time ago to preach to the Gentiles so that they could hear the Good News and believe. 8God knows people’s hearts, and he confirmed that he accepts Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. 9He made no distinction between us and them, for he cleansed their hearts through faith. 10So why are you now challenging God by burdening the Gentile believers[**[**b**](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts+15&version=NLT#fen-NLT-27417b)**] with a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear? 11We believe that we are all saved the same way, by the undeserved grace of the Lord Jesus.”**

He tells the group gathered that he was chosen to preach to the gentiles so they too could believe and become part of the family of God. His point is that God knows people’s hearts. He brings it straight to a heart issue, God has always been interested in the heart. In

**1 Samuel 16:7** when God was anointing king David as a boy Samuel says,

**For the Lord sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance but the Lord looks on the heart.**

Peter also points out that God accepts the Gentiles and a sign of this is they have already received the Holy Spirit (Hes saying to the Jews they are no different to us) and it is not through the law but through **faith** in Jesus that they are saved asking the question, Who are we to say any different? its when they believe that God makes their heart pure.

And his last point which would have been a bit of a blow to the pride of the Pharisees is that they are,

**V10**

**“burdening the Gentile believers with a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear”**

Basically he’s pointing out that no one from the chosen people (accept from Jesus) were even able to keep the law anyway. No one.

**Galatians 3:10**

**But those who depend on the law to make them right with God are under his curse, for the Scriptures say, “ cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the commands that are written in Gods book of the law.”**

Have you ever met that type of person who is keen for you to do things perfectly but kind of blur over their failings in when it come to the same thing. Like get upset at you for you not keeping in contact and phoning them when.. they’ve not phoned you! If you’ve never met one of those people - you’re looking at one right now. I must admit it reminded me of the times that I criticize my husband for poor parenting choices and his handling of situations in ‘not the best manner’ or my personal bug bear not using a great “tone” when speaking. I find myself demanding perfection However, I often do feel slightly guilty when the next day I may not have used the best tone myself with my kids?!

Listen, I’m a rule keeper, I get it! If I’ve kept the rules and stood in a queue and someone skips in and get the same outcome its infuriating. It can ruin my day if I let it. This is what the pharisees are feeling. We’ve done all this stuff since we were born. If you want to be part of this family you have got to do all this too in order to earn the love of the father. It reminded me of the big brother in the prodigal son parable in the bible. He was not happy that his brother was receiving grace when he had in his eyes kept all the rules all along.

Next up to say his bit is Paul along with barnabas.

**Acts 15v12**

**12Everyone listened quietly as Barnabas and Paul told about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.**

He agrees with Peter His speech is about the testimonies and real life experience of Gods miraculous power moving among the Gentiles during his travels. His point is he has personal experience of God moving amongst non-circumcised Gentlies. Its more than just theory for him it his real life experience. Something he has seen with his own eyes. We can read and theorise about God and other peoples experiences but when you truly have an encounter with God for yourself it can change everything. A song I like puts it like this, “*sometimes the real thing is better than a photograph*” Paul has much more to say about it in the other books of the bible he has written. If you want to read more about his thoughts on this this I suggest you read Galatians this week.

And lastly we meet the guy who seems to be in charge here at this meeting. What he has to say carries a lot of weight. His name is James. Now we know that this is not James who one of the twelve because he was killed before this. So who is this James? Well we can read in Galatians 1:19 about who this James is. Paul reports

**The only other apostle I met at the time was James, the Lords brother.**

So this is actually Jesus’ brother we are talking about here. The guy who grew up in the same house, with the same family of Jesus. He would have spent a lot of time with him wouldn’t he?

Later in Galatians Paul also describes James as **“a pillar of the church”**

So what has James got to say about this disagreement?

**Acts 15:13-19**

**13When they had finished, James stood and said,**

**“Brothers, listen to me. 14Peter[**[**c**](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts+15&version=NLT#fen-NLT-27421c)**] has told you about the time God first visited the Gentiles to take from them a people for himself. 15And this conversion of Gentiles is exactly what the prophets predicted. As it is written:**

**16‘Afterward I will return
    and restore the fallen house[**[**d**](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts+15&version=NLT#fen-NLT-27423d)**] of David.
I will rebuild its ruins
    and restore it,
17so that the rest of humanity might seek the Lord,
    including the Gentiles—
    all those I have called to be mine.
The Lord has spoken—
18    he who made these things known so long ago.’[**[**e**](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts+15&version=NLT#fen-NLT-27425e)**]**

**19“And so my judgment is that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God**

He says that this was always Gods plan all along! The plan was always from ages past that all nations would bear his name. he does a few things that are quite clever. He quotes from the Torah itself- something the Pharisees know inside out. he also uses this term **bear his name** as that is a term that would have been meaningful to the jews and they would have been familiar with that wording in reference to them, the chosen people. A people that **bear his name**. then he does something very interesting. He quotes directly from the prophet Amos. He looks to scripture for an answer. Very wise thing to do. His point is that it was always in Gods mind to include every nation in his family. That includes all of us. He says this is a plan for all of humanity that we might be called his.

So what has changed to make this happen?

Well, ~~the Law was always meant to be temporary.~~ it was like the law was holding a magnifying glass up to Israels sin as they constantly rebelled against Gods law. The law is **good** but it ended up pronouncing them guilty and all humanity with them - it imprisoned them in the power of sin and as we have read it acted like a curse.

The people just couldn’t keep it. The bible says it Acted like a school teacher that kept Israel in line but they kept failing.

But **Jesus** came. Jesus- the offspring of Abraham was the one who fulfilled the law on our behalf. He didn’t come to abolish it but to keep the spirit of the law- he kept it perfectly and He was the faithful covenant partner that Israel and all of humanity was made to be but failed to be. He told us that the whole law is fulfilled when you love God and your neighbour as yourself.

and now because of him, God’s blessing can come to all people regardless of ethnicity, social status or gender. Requiring Torah observence makes absolutely no sense-its acting as if Jesus didn’t fufill the law and neglects the new freedom found through Jesus and the Holy spirit and limits the blessing to one people group.

Romans 2:29 in the message says it like this says it perfectly

**Circumcision, the surgical ritual that marks you as a Jew, is great if you live in accord with God’s law. But if you don’t, it’s worse than not being circumcised. The reverse is also true: The uncircumcised who keep God’s ways are as good as the circumcised—in fact, better. Better to keep God’s law uncircumcised than break it circumcised. Don’t you see: It’s not the cut of a knife that makes a Jew. You become a Jew by who you *are*. It’s the mark of God on your heart, not of a knife on your skin, that makes a Jew. And recognition comes from God, not legalistic critics**

So if you believe and have faith in Jesus you are saved and have him living in you and now through the power of the HS he can renew our minds and we can follow his ways.

If we look in Acts 15;24-28 we can read the letter that James writes to the believers to inform them of their decision.

**24“We understand that some men from here have troubled you and upset you with their teaching, but we did not send them! 25So we decided, having come to complete agreement, to send you official representatives, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27We are sending Judas and Silas to confirm what we have decided concerning your question.**

**28“For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay no greater burden on you than these few requirements: 29You must abstain from eating food offered to idols, from consuming blood or the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality. If you do this, you will do well. Farewell.”**

V28 says it seems good to the HS and to us to lay *no greater burden* on them than a few requirements. These requirements or pointers were connected to idol worship in those days. He’s giving them good advice to stay away from worshiping idols- he says they will do well to do so but the crux of the matter is he is telling them you do not need to become a proper Jew to become a Christian. This is important because the freedom of the gospel is what is at stake here. It was for everyone then and it is for everyone now. You don’t have to clean yourself up to come to Jesus. You don’t have to wait till you tick all the boxes- the gift of the Jesus Christ is for everyone and we shouldn’t put any greater burden than that on anyone. Nobody needs to be like us whatever us is. You don’t need to be vineyard, Baptist, catholic, Pentecostal, brethren to be a proper Christian but Faith in Jesus is enough. We should never put stipulations or add anything to that message. Come as you are.

And this council decided that a person is not justified by the law but instead you are justified by faith in Jesus Christ through grace. faith gives all the glory to God. It cannot take any credit for itself- it’s the unspeakable gift.

Grace! That is what the Pharisees were not understanding. The Unmerited favour of god. It’s nothing they could do for themselves. The bible says there is no one righteous, not one. Our Salvation is a free gift but it wasn’t free- it was won at a great cost but it was Jesus who gave himself for our sins.

So none of us can boast and say look at how great I am look what im doing or I’ve done. Or none of us should look around and say what are they doing here.

I want show you something in these verses that I have never seen before. There is another place in the bible that talks of these three men of the men who stood up in that meeting. It is found in 1 corinthians15v5-9 and it is telling us about when Jesus appeared to people after his death and resurrection it says,

**He was seen by Peter[**[**c**](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+corinthians+15+&version=NLT#fen-NLT-28684c)**] and then by the Twelve. 6After that, he was seen by more than 500 of his followers[**[**d**](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+corinthians+15+&version=NLT#fen-NLT-28685d)**] at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. 7Then he was seen by James and later by all the apostles. 8Last of all, as though I had been born at the wrong time, I also saw him. 9For I am the least of all the apostles. In fact, I’m not even worthy to be called an apostle after the way I persecuted God’s church.**

It talks of the three men who we have looked at giving their thoughts on the circumcision matter this morning. All three of them were Jewish and would have kept the laws themselves growing up so why were their hearts softened and their minds different. I want to put it to you the reason they thought differently was because they had experienced first-hand the overwhelming grace of God. And its in these verses in 1 Corinthians we might skip over that we see it.

Lots of us will know about Peter and the story of him denying Jesus three times. heres the devastating scene just after Peter had done this in Luke 22:61-62

**61At that moment the Lord turned and looked at Peter. Suddenly, the Lord’s words flashed through Peter’s mind: “Before the rooster crows tomorrow morning, you will deny three times that you even know me.” 62And Peter left the courtyard, weeping bitterly.**

And many of us know the beautiful moment of redemption when Jesus extended his grace towards peter after he appeared to him and gave him three chances to tell Jesus he loved him. Three chances because of his three denials. Grace upon grace. And **this** is the man who Jesus called ‘rock’ and said on whom he would build his church. More grace.

And the then the next person it mentions by name to whom Jesus appeared to is James. This is the same James we have been talking about. What is special about that mention. Well we get a little more of James, Jesus’ brothers story In **John 7:5** this is happening before Jesus crucifixion and during his ministry on earth. it says of Jesus ,

**Not even his brothers believed in him**

The holy spirit broke me when I saw this. James, the Lords’ own brother did not believe in Jesus. He was rejected by his own brother. Those of us who have felt the pain of family rejection can bear witness to the heartache that this causes. Well, Jesus felt this too. So, when Jesus shows himself to James all I see is his grace. I could only imagine the emotion of that reunion and the love and restoration that would have taken place. And this James, the one who missed the boat to follow him when he was on earth, and rejected his own brother and savior became a **pillar of the church**. Again such grace.

And lastly Jesus appeared to the man who wrote these verses in 1 Corinthians, Paul. He knew who he was. He calls himself the chief of sinners yet he was probably the man who most strictly obeyed and knew the law. He said it himself, he persecuted the very people he is now giving his life for.

The theologian, Charles Spurgeon says this about Paul,

*Look at Saul of tarsus, who foamed at the mouth against Gods servants. Like a hungry wolf, he worried the lambs and the sheep right and left. And yet God struck him down on the road to Demascus and changed his heart. God so fully justified him that, before long, this man became the greatest preacher of justification by faith who ever lived. He often must have marvelled that he was justified by faith in Christ Jesus, for he was once a determined stickler for salvation by the works of the law. None but God ever would have thought of justifying such a man as Paul the persecutor. Yet the Lord God is glorious in grace.*

*Pauls story reminds us that no-one is beyond the reach of the love and grace of God.*

All three men rejected jesus and fell terribly short and yet look what God gives them in return. Grace and mercy and then uses them anyway.

They know how far they have fallen short of keeping the law and its only through faith in Jesus that they have been justified. This is so important. That’s why they are speaking out on this issue.

 *We have all rejected Jesus though haven’t we? We have all fallen terribly short. If you have ever thought to yourself there may have been something you have done or something done to you in the past that would keep you from being used by God. Look at these three testimonies. We see that God not only forgives and brings freedom to you but also just because he is God he can use you greatly! In fact it think he delights in doing it.*

*He’s been so kind to me and he has dramatically changed my thinking on this matter too.*

*Here is a picture of me- I think I was roughly 4 or 5. The age I told Jesus I wanted to spend eternity with him. I loved him so but when I look into the eyes of this little girl I feel a little sad. Because, I didn’t, for whatever reason understand the grace of god and from this age on I remember desperately trying to do good things to make God like and accept me. Even at this age I was filled with a sense of shame. I knew I wasn’t good enough for God and so began my journey of hard work trying to please him. The sad thing is all along he loved me and was pleased with me. I was his daughter in whom he was well pleased. As soon as I believed in him through faith, which I really did at this tender age I was his. I was a saint. I was redeemed. He already accepted me because of Jesus.*

*This is another picture. This was one of the very first homegroups in Falkirk vineyard. I remember this night very clearly. This was the age I was when I got a first hand got a glimpse of the grace of god. I remember it so well. We were doing a study on sharing the gospel with our neighbours and Andrew asked a question at the beginning of the night after watching a video about what stood out. I remember saying something along the lines of what stood out to me was that I had to work harder because I was falling short and failing. And one of the men in our homegroup looked at me and said. There’s nothing you have to do Niki to earn the love of God he loves you regardless. Thats it thats what all he said- and it was a Holy Spirit moment because the Holy Spirit used that man to speak truth over me that pierced my heart. I know I have heard that before and I believed it in my head but it had never seeped into my heart and I saw my life for what it was in that moment. One big performance to get a God to love me who already so desperately did and so I started to cry.*

 *It wasn’t pretty it was loud it was inconvenient, to be honest, because it was at the start of the small group.(it was the first question) And as the reality of being saved by grace kicked in it made me cry louder and louder and somewhere deep in my soul it clicked as much as I think it can ever click. The height and depth of Gods love for me and the grace through which I was saved. Poor Andrew tried to continue the small group with me wailing in the corner. After a long time I managed to compose myself and to my horror someone wanted to take a picture of us all that night for some strange reason. We didn’t normally take pictures at small group, but Im kind of glad they did now. Not just for the guys dodgy haircuts to be immortalised forever (although bill in the front rows haircut is the exact same) but so I have a reminder of that night. A memory of The night I received in my heart the grace of god. Not by anything I did or didn’t do but all because of what he did. You see Salvation from Jesus saved me and I was freed from my sin, guilt and shame but also freed from justification by works of the law. But because I now know this to be true it is out of my great love for the Father that I want to follow his ways. That’s living in true freedom. Not because I think those things will save me or make me acceptable but because I want to be the best version of the daughter he created me to be.*

*So back to the question we asked at the beginning…* Is there something other than faith that is required in order to be saved? no!

So if you have never made that choice to follow Jesus and are waiting for the opportune moment now is that moment. You don’t need to do or be anything else to be more acceptable to God. If that’s you we will give you a chance to pray with someone today to begin the journey with God.

*do you know there is nothing you can do to earn Gods love or your salvation. You cant earn it, you don’t deserve it, yet he gives it to you anyway.you can put down the burden of comparison or trying to make God like you because he adores you and not because of what you do, whose child you are or who your are or aren’t married to or because of your children or social status or anything to do with if you are male or female. Its free. Its undeserved but its here for you today. For those who strive- I want to give you the chance to be free of that today.*

*I touched on family rejection. If you are experiencing rejection especially by family or those close to you. Maybe a brother sister or father, mother. Please come for prayer - there is grace for healing there today.*