

Five Forks Church  
Sermon: "Challenging Truth and Grace"  
Series: *The Truth of the Matter*  
Text: Acts 15:1-11  
Brian Black  
Traditional Services: October 21, 2018

## INTRODUCTION: MY PERSONAL FAITH CRISIS – AND WHAT I LEARNED

**"We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."** – *The Apostle Peter, Acts 15:11*

There it is – stated explicitly for you – the central tenet, the key point, of this morning's message. "We will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." Peter's words, prompted by Jewish men who had challenged the idea of salvation by grace alone. In first-century Jerusalem, church leaders had met in council to respond to the challenge. In that council, they all reconnected with the truth they had been taught by the Lord Jesus Himself. Coming face-to-face once again with the truth of the gospel of grace, they affirmed their faith together. And the church grew in strength because of it. That's the story we want to talk about today.

The sermon series this month is ***The Truth of the Matter***. We're looking at stories from the book of Acts where people encounter truth in some fashion and respond to it. That's what transpires in today's account. In this case, the truth encountered by Jesus' disciples is truth which they have already believed – but they're taking another look at it. The simple way to say it is that they have been reminded of that truth. That truth, which came through Jesus, is being challenged by ancient beliefs that are very near and dear to the Jewish culture, the culture in which these disciples of Jesus had grown up. In the disciples' response to *this* challenge, they *in turn* challenge their culture by holding fast to the truth Jesus had taught them. And their faith in that truth of Jesus is confirmed as a result. As we've done in the previous two sermons, we want to observe how folks respond to truth and glean what we can from their examples. From today's account, we want to ask, how do we respond when our Christian faith is challenged?

I'm sure you've heard about young adults today unhitching themselves from the religion in which they grew up. Statistics are available on that, and, for those who like statistics, you can easily find the research online. I'm going to avoid the numbers this morning and simply give you a statement I found in an article on why young people leave their church....

***The reasons Americans leave their childhood religion are varied, but a lack of belief in teaching of religion was the most commonly cited reason for disaffiliation.***

“Lack of belief in the teaching of religion.” Do you see what that suggests? A time came in a young person’s life where she took a harder look at what she’d been taught through her childhood belief system. And she concluded, “No, I just can’t believe any of that anymore.” A lack of belief regarding the teachings of her family’s religious system. At least, that’s what “disaffiliated” young people are telling the pollsters when they ask the young people why they’ve left their religious beliefs.

I remember the faith crisis I had when I was probably about 21 or 22 years old. I was in a place where I was generally disillusioned about my life anyway. Not sure what I was supposed to be doing. About that time, I watched a special PBS series called *Cosmos*. The guy on the program, a scientist named Carl Sagan, said, “The cosmos is all that is, all that ever was, and all that ever will be.”

That certainly sounded to me like a deliberate effort to remove God from the picture of reality. Now, I knew enough at the time to know that Carl Sagan had no way of knowing for certain that what he’d just said about the cosmos was a fact. He *believed* it. Still, as the series of programs unfolded, he had a lot of observable, repeatable, testable science in his presentation. (He also borrowed a lot of stuff from Hinduism for his show, but that’s another story!) And the slickness of the science and his seemingly reasoned speculations, along with my general dissatisfaction with my personal life, combined to make me start to doubt what I had been taught in the church in which I’d grown up.

In my case, I decided to go right to the root of the faith. To ask the question I wouldn’t have dared consider just a few years previous. What if God does not exist? I figured that, if He did exist, it was safe to ask the question.

But I will tell you this; as I pondered the notion of God not existing, it was as though, in my mind’s eye, I could see myself turning my back on Him, turning completely around 180 degrees. Then, all I could see laid out before me was a deep, dark, endless black expanse of nothingness. If, as Carl Sagan said, “The cosmos was all there was”, then the cosmos was absolutely meaningless and empty and void and totally without purpose. The situation was utterly hopeless.

And the atheistic version of the cosmos was insane. Apart from the existence of a Creator, the only other option for the origin of everything was that the cosmos had arisen totally by chance – no thought put into it, no purpose, no intent. So, then, why would the cosmos give birth to a race of

living, sentient, thinking beings, endowed with a strong sense of purpose, which leads us to create marvelous and wonderful things just for the sake of their beauty alone, when the cosmos itself was a meaningless collection of empty nothingness? For me, the question became this: If God does not exist, then what does that say about the point of my own existence?

At that point, God made a whole lot more sense to me. But I also learned throughout this whole faith crisis of my youth that life was much more than simply giving myself over to human reasoning. Human reasoning is not enough. Human reason has limits. It is likewise subject to influence by human passions and personal desires. Human reasoning had led Carl Sagan to conclude that our planet filled with billions of people is nothing more than an insignificant speck in the vast cosmos of infinite time and ever-expanding space. You follow that viewpoint to its logical conclusions, and you'll see something akin to the black void I experienced. Life is more than logic. Life is also meaning and beauty and balance and harmony and purpose and relationships and fairness and love itself. An atheistic view of the cosmos, when followed to its logical conclusion, ultimately saps the life right out of a person.

God, on the other hand, *is* a Person. And He made us in His image, as persons ourselves. And that makes all the *difference* in the cosmos!

And for me personally, in my early twenties, when confronted with a challenge to what I believed, a challenge coming from the anti-God belief system that seems to dominate the academic culture of our time, the God of *my* belief system – the God of the Bible – met that challenge and conquered it at every turn!

## **I. THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL'S CHALLENGE**

So I decided to remain a believer in the Lord! It made the most sense. But, for now, enough about my life! Back to the council in Jerusalem. What happens when these Jewish men are faced with a challenge to what they believe, and that challenge is actually coming from the dominant belief system of their Jewish culture? A belief system which *they* had once held near and dear! How do they respond? Let's look at the Scripture passage from Acts 15....

**Acts 15:1-2 – 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.”<sup>2</sup> And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and**

**some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.** <sup>1</sup>

Now, at the end of chapter 14, we can read that this happens at the church in Antioch, Syria, which was north of Israel. Some Jewish men, from Judea in southern Israel around Jerusalem, show up, teaching that gentile believers had to commit to the law of Moses in order to follow Christ. The sign of that commitment for the men was circumcision, as required by Jewish law. Paul and Barnabas, who had just returned from a missionary effort where many gentiles came to Christ, energetically defended the view that no one needed to convert to Judaism to follow Jesus!

Paul had been preaching that salvation came by the grace of God alone. Keeping Jewish law did nothing to *earn* salvation from God's hand. Paul and Barnabas, along with some others, were appointed by the church in Antioch to head to Jerusalem for clarification on this matter from the other apostles....

**Acts 15:3-5 – So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. <sup>4</sup>When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. <sup>5</sup>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.”** <sup>2</sup>

I've heard some say that Christians shouldn't argue. To clarify what the Bible says on that, we are not to spend time needlessly on “foolish and unlearned questions, knowing that they do engender strife (2 Tim. 2:23).” Acts 15:1, from our text this morning, said that Paul and Barnabas had “no small dissension and debate” with these men who were teaching it was necessary to keep the Law to be saved. That's not a foolish and unlearned question; that's a matter of truth, confronting the truth of salvation by grace alone – that we can do nothing to earn God's favor.

False teaching, that salvation needed to be earned through right behavior, was spreading throughout the early Jewish church. We see here that promoters of this false doctrine had gone to the church in Antioch to promote their view there. And, when Paul and Barnabas came to Jerusalem from Antioch

---

<sup>1</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ac 15:1-2). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

<sup>2</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ac 15:3-5). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

about this very question, in the Jerusalem assembly, “some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, ‘It is necessary to circumcise [the Gentiles] and to order them to keep the law of Moses.’” These Pharisees believed they had the truth on their side; they were making truth claims about salvation which they believed would apply to all people everywhere. And they were determined to propagate their views throughout the churches. They were in Jerusalem, they went to Antioch, and later Paul would encounter them in Galatia. So these truth claims they were making were gaining a foothold in the church of the time.

Our series theme, “The Truth of the Matter”, directs us to look at how people respond when they are confronted by truth claims, so we can gain insight for our own encounters with the truth claims of others in our time. We find here in today’s lesson that a strong response was called for among the early believers. They met to discuss the issue at hand. And they met under the leadership of the authority of the apostles.

Now, keeping the Law of Moses undoubtedly seemed to be a vital necessity among the Jews. We’d be hard pressed to find anything more sacred to Jewish minds and hearts than the Law of Moses. The apostles faced a very significant challenge to the teaching of God’s grace. They were Jews, too, raised in Jewish homes, in a Jewish culture, and trained in Moses’ Law. It was upon the doorposts of their homes, it was bound upon the foreheads of the devout and righteous in their hometowns. They, too, were raised to hold the Law of Moses sacred.

But the apostles had also encountered Jesus! They had heard firsthand His teachings. They had witnessed His miracles and signs and wonders. They had seen Him crucified; they had seen Him dead; and they had seen Him alive again! They believed His claim to be the Son of man, the Jewish Messiah God had promised to Israel. His resurrection vindicated that claim!

And they had seen Jesus ascend into heaven. And before He ascended, Jesus had commissioned them to be His witnesses – to tell others about Him in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth! They knew Jesus was alive again and they knew Him as the way, the truth, and the life – the only way for all humanity to get to the Father.

Jesus had said that He did not come to destroy the Law of Moses, but to fulfill its requirements as only He could! His righteousness meets the requirements of the Law that our self-righteous efforts never can! No matter how right it might sound to say, “If you’re good enough, God will accept you!”, the truth of the matter is, we are wholly incapable of keeping the Law. We can’t make ourselves

righteous enough for God! Only Christ is sufficient; only God's grace makes Christ's sufficiency available to all.

## II. THE TRUTH ABOUT GRACE

At this Council of Jerusalem described in Acts 15, the apostles and elders struggled with this challenge to their faith in salvation by grace alone. Watch now what Peter says....

**Acts 15:6-11 – The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter.**

**<sup>7</sup> And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. <sup>8</sup> And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as He did to us, <sup>9</sup> and He made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. <sup>10</sup> Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? <sup>11</sup> But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” <sup>3</sup>**

Some of the Pharisees who were believers in the church were saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses”. Compare that to Peter's comment in Acts 15:10: “Why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of these Gentile disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?” What does Peter mean by a yoke? Well, if a man was circumcised by Jewish ritual, he was then obligated to keep the whole Jewish law. Paul proclaimed this to the believers in Galatia....

**Galatians 5:2-3 – Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. <sup>3</sup> I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law.<sup>4</sup>**

Paul said a commitment to the Law of Moses obligated one to keep the whole Law. And Peter admits that “neither our fathers before us, nor we ourselves, have ever been able to keep the Law!” In the apostles' day, the Pharisees were the ones most likely to qualify with their strict adherence to the Law. But, even of them, Jesus said at the beginning of His ministry....

---

<sup>3</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version\*](#). (2016). (Ac 15:6-11). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

<sup>4</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version\*](#). (2016). (Ga 5:2-3). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

**Matthew 5:20 – For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. <sup>5</sup>**

The truth of the matter is, no one can keep the Law! We need Christ to meet the requirements for us!

And here is where Peter's response to the challenge of requiring the Law for salvation stands so strong....

**Acts 15:11 – We believe that we [Jews] will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as [the Gentiles] will.**

We are saved by grace alone! We gain no favor from God by trying to keep a set of rules.

## **CONCLUSION**

And the Apostle John wrote in his Gospel...

**John 1:14,17 - And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.... <sup>17</sup> For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup>**

The apostles and elders and disciples of the first-century church were challenged in their beliefs about the truth of Jesus and His grace. Their response was to stand upon what they had heard and seen in Jesus. We need to do the same today.

They faced this challenge to their truth, a challenge composed of truth claims coming from the dominant culture of their time. They stood upon Jesus and His claims to face that challenge head on. The challenge they faced said, "Regardless of their background or their beliefs, for human beings everywhere, in order to be saved, they must keep the Law of Moses."

You know, it's worth noting any other truth claims today, which challenge the truth and grace Gospel of Jesus, likewise teach that human actions are needed to save the human race. Even a group of atheists from the American Humanist Association once said, in their document, the *Humanist Manifesto II*....

---

<sup>5</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Mt 5:20). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

<sup>6</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Jn 1:14-17). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

***Traditional religions often offer solace to humans, but, as often, they inhibit humans from helping themselves or experiencing their full potentialities. Such institutions, creeds, and rituals often impede the will to serve others. Too often traditional faiths encourage dependence rather than independence, obedience rather than affirmation, fear rather than courage. More recently they have generated concerned social action, with many signs of relevance appearing in the wake of the “God Is Dead” theologies. But we can discover no divine purpose or providence for the human species. While there is much that we do not know, humans are responsible for what we are or will become. No deity will save us; we must save ourselves.*** [Please post the underlined section in the slideshow.]

Interesting how they critique conventional religions for requiring obedience to codes of conduct and then turn around and call for human beings to adhere to some human-designed code of conduct to save humanity. All belief systems in our time recognize that humanity is in trouble. All belief systems in our time, other than biblical Christianity, call for adherence to a set of laws or codes or prescribed actions in order to save humans from the trouble we’re in. Only the Bible tells us we can’t be saved by our own doing, but only through God’s grace....

**Ephesians 2:8-9 – For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, <sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast.<sup>7</sup>**

As we began this morning, I read to you: “The reasons Americans leave their childhood religion are varied, but a lack of belief in teaching of religion was the most commonly cited reason for disaffiliation.” Young people today stop believing in the belief system of their childhood because some other set of truth claims comes along and challenges them – and they choose to believe those claims instead.

I noticed that the early disciples of Jesus, when similarly challenged, did not try to make their message more palatable by changing their truth to make it fit better with the claims of their challengers. They didn’t alter things to try and make their message more appealing. They recognized the reality of Jesus Himself, and what they had seen and heard in Him – and that was enough. They rested upon the authority of Jesus alone and, as a result, kept untainted and unspoiled their own pure message of hope for the world in which they were His witnesses.

---

<sup>7</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Eph 2:8-9). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

Today, we are witnesses to Jesus, to His truth and His grace. Yes, truth and grace is being challenged in our time. Looking to how those early believers met the challenge of other truth claims they encountered, to meet similar challenges today, our wisest course of action is to stay the course. To hold fast to the truth. The apostle Paul said it well....

**2 Timothy 1:12 - I am not ashamed, for I know Whom I have believed, and I am convinced that He is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me.<sup>8</sup>**

May we, with our challenges today, hold fast to His truth that His grace may abound unto all!

---

<sup>8</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version\*](#). (2016). (2 Ti 1:12). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.