

Words and Deeds: Burdens
By Jason Huff
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Luke 11:37-46; 1 John 5:1-5; Acts 15:1-21

Our final Scripture reading this morning comes from Acts 15:1-21. May God's richest blessings be on the reading of His holy and perfect Word. "Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." 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. 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 brothers very glad. 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. 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 obey the law of Moses." The apostles and elders met to consider this question. 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. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are." The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. When they finished, James spoke up: "Brothers, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: "After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things' that have been known for ages. It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."

Everyone here has broken the law. Most of us won't freely admit it, but there's no getting around it. If you have driven a car, you have gone over the speed limit, even if unintentionally. If by some strange occurrence you haven't done that, you've not turned on your turn signal at the right time, didn't have your vehicle thoroughly cleared of ice and snow from the windshield, or not come to a full and complete stop at every stop sign you have encountered.

Even our children are lawbreakers. Selling lemonade on the street without a license. Biking on the wrong side of the road. Connecting to a Wi-Fi network, even if there's no password, without permission. (That's technically a felony!) Singing "Happy Birthday," which is still under copyright! From birth, we break laws – laws our parents set, laws the state sets.

On average, Congress makes something a criminal offense once a week – there are over 5,000 federal criminal laws, with an estimated 100,000- 300,000 regulations, so many no one knows how many there are. That doesn't count state and city laws. In comparison, the Jewish understanding of the Old Testament says there are 613 laws in the law of Moses – 365 negative laws not to do, and 248 positive laws to do.

Today's Scripture lesson is one of the most important in all of the New Testament for understanding how we as Christians relate to the Old Testament law. Because we're law-breakers, we need to know what God's expectations are for us now: are we under the Old Testament restrictions, or is something new in place? It's so important that it's the only time we know of when the three major authors of the New Testament letters – Peter, Paul, and James the brother of Jesus – are in the same place at the same time, with all the other disciples and elders of the churches throughout the world. If there is one passage you should know when someone today confronts you about what to make of the Old Testament law, this is it.

So what's going on? Paul and Barnabas returned to Syrian Antioch and stayed a while as they reported on their missionary journey. Word about the Gentile awakening has not only spread to Jerusalem, but there was considerable debate about it. And the church starts to divide. Specifically, some Jews from Judea come north preaching that the only way to become a Christian and be saved is to also become Jewish through and through.

They make a big deal about circumcision because that was the entry point into the covenant of Israel for all males, usually done eight days after birth. But the practice was not only extremely painful for adult men, it also offended Gentile sensibilities. The argument isn't just about physical circumcision, though. These Jewish teachers thought that the only way to be saved was to follow the Jewish law thoroughly.

The Jewish law has plenty to say about moral and ethical issues, issues that are the basis of law in American society. But the Jewish law also has a lot of regulations meant not to teach morality but to set the Jewish people apart from all of their neighbors. God gave them these rules so they would be holy for Him, a light in the darkness. Everything about them was to stand out as different to show God's own uniqueness. The question is, are all the rules timeless moral laws that all people must follow? Or does God have something else in mind?

As the Jewish people understood it, the Law told you what to eat, what to wear and how to dress, how to work (and when not to work), what was considered clean and unclean, and many other things that have little to do with what we think of as ethics. Every part of Jewish life was dictated in some way by their understanding of the law of Moses.

There was even an oral law – never fully written down until after the time of Jesus – that was the result of centuries of debate on how to keep the law completely. The Jewish believers aligned with the Pharisee party believed they needed to do all of it. And they are the ones spearheading the debate. They were officially known as the Judaizers.

The issue at hand for the Judaizers is not whether Gentiles can enter God's Kingdom. It's the question of how. The signs and wonders show that God is working amongst the Gentiles. They can't question it. But the Jewish law is so important to them, it's so central to their understanding of God, that they believe every Christian must follow it to be saved. They believe Gentiles must become Jews and follow the Jewish laws to reach the Kingdom.

It became such a huge issue that even the key leadership of the church started to give in to the demands of the Judaizers. Paul wrote to the church in Galatia about this issue. What Luke doesn't tell us here is that Paul had to confront Peter directly about how he had begun living like a Gentile and ate with Gentile believers. But when the Judaizers made a fuss, he stopped associating with Gentiles for fear of them! It got so bad that even Barnabas the encourager was led astray into thinking he had to do this too! Paul showed Peter his own hypocrisy – and to Peter's credit, he reversed his way of thinking.

Peter puts it in a nutshell. God has purified the Gentiles by faith, the same as the Jewish believers, and He makes no distinction between them. And who can stand under the Law? No one except Jesus has ever been able to bear the Law since the day it was given! Why burden the Gentiles with the unbearable weight of the Law that our ancestors couldn't handle? The grace of the Lord Jesus saves all of us – not keeping the Law.

After hearing Paul and Barnabas share all that happened to them on their missionary journey, James, the brother of Jesus, backs Peter up. The Old Testament prophets taught us that God had always intended to make a people for Himself out of the Gentiles too. Why make it more difficult for them to enter God's Kingdom than God Himself makes it? James has the idea of writing to the Gentiles about rules they should follow. That letter and those rules will come in next week's passage.

The message of this passage is central to our understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ. *We are no longer under law but under grace.* Every single person who was, is, and will be a part of the Kingdom of God, past, present, future, is saved by grace. Even those who were under the Law were saved by grace. No one anywhere, at any time, was saved by works done under the Law. The law taught us what was good and what God expected of His people Israel. The law was a powerful way of restraining evil and shaping God's people – it was perfect in doing what God intended it to do. But salvation comes through Jesus and Jesus alone.

Why does this matter so much? If we are still under God's law, we have no hope. None! Only one person in history has kept God's law in its perfection, and that was Jesus. No one else has done it. Read the Law of Israel carefully. You will find no promises in it that God will save those who keeps His law "pretty well." The Old Testament mentions Sheol, the underworld, but there is little talk of an afterlife and even less talk of going to heaven when you die. There is a day of judgment coming when all will be judged, and at that time there is hope for Israel's redemption and salvation. There is a mention of resurrection. But even scholars of the day debated whether the Law gave them any hope of a life with God after death.

The Law expects that people will break it. The entire sacrificial system in the Old Testament is there so that you could come into God's presence after breaking the Law, after becoming ritually unclean or doing something that was impure in God's sight. For several major sins, there was no sacrifice, no way to atone. You commit murder or adultery, there's no sacrifice for that. Under the Old Testament Law, for intentional and willful sins, only the blood of the guilty would satisfy God's justice. It wasn't that God was unkind, but that His justice demanded that certain offenses be severely punished in this life.

Jesus offers us grace. More than that, He promises us a place by His side, with Him in paradise at death and a home when the new heaven and new earth come. And these come not through following the law but by accepting His grace, by acknowledging that we have no means to satisfy God ourselves and so we throw ourselves on the mercy of the court. By that faith in the court, we are saved and justified so that God sees no sin in us at all.

But Jesus' teachings also warn us that if we try to live under the Law instead, we will wind up doomed. The Pharisees argued about insignificant things, like whether or not your gift to the temple should include a tenth of all the herbs and spices you grow in your garden. But Jesus says, "If you hate your brother, you've committed murder in your heart and broken the law. If you lust after a woman, you've committed adultery in your heart and broken the law. If you give in public or pray in public, your only reward will be the public acclaim, not any merit before your Father in Heaven."

Paul puts it bluntly in Galatians 2:16 – "No one will be justified by observing the law." Because the Law is far more hardcore than even the most observant Jew ever thought. And James 2:10 says, "Anyone who keeps the whole of the Law but trips up on a single point, is still guilty of breaking it all." Everyone's busted – everyone's guilty. So either we stand condemned under the law of God or we stand declared righteous by the grace of God through faith in Jesus.

So live in grace. Because of Jesus, you are no longer in bondage to sin. You can be free of it. And when you slip back into old habits and patterns, it's not cause to think that God isn't there. Give yourself grace – because Jesus already has. Find yourself gossiping about a co-worker? Stop, and give yourself grace. Find yourself drawn to websites or books or magazines that aren't good for your spiritual life? Stop, and give yourself grace. Yell at the kids? Argue with your spouse? Stop, and give yourself grace.

Every sin you have committed died on the cross with Jesus. It doesn't give us reason to keep doing them, but you may give yourself grace. Christ did. There are moral and ethical laws we still follow – we'll talk about them next week – but we see them in the context of grace. Jesus said the whole of the Law was summed up by "love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." Live under that law Jesus gave us, and you don't have to worry about following an extra list of rules and restrictions imposed by religion that no one can truly keep.

The second meaning of this passage is just as important: *if through Christ we are under grace, we must show grace to others, especially the undeserving.* Every week in the Lord's Prayer, we recite, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." It's the only part of the prayer that sets a condition for our behavior as part of God's response. Would we like the prayer to be, "forgive us our debts and lead us not into temptation"? Of course. But to be forgiven, we *must* forgive.

Our first reaction might be, "If you only knew..." And you're right. Many of us have devastating things in our past where it is very difficult to forgive someone. Where showing grace is the last thing we want to do. Especially because sometimes, they've never said they were wrong! They've never asked for forgiveness. It's crazy difficult. My friend, comedian Derrick Tennant, says when God sent Jesus, He made the law simple – not easy. Forgiving an attacker, an abuser, someone who made your life awful for years – not easy. That's grace. It's the grace that only comes when Jesus is in control of your life.

The early church modeled this. Jesus forgave His murderers as they hung Him on the cross. Stephen, the first martyr, forgave his murderers as they stoned him. Countless Christians throughout history have willingly gone to their deaths forgiving those that slaughtered them.

How do we do that? How do we live lives where we show grace to those who stand opposed to us politically and spiritually, who harass us, harm us, burden us? Let's think about the example of Corrie ten Boom. She hid Jewish families in the Netherlands during World War II. She was eventually arrested by the Nazis and placed in solitary confinement. She and her sister were sent to Ravensbruck concentration camp, where her sister Betsie died. It was Betsie's dream that they create a home for people to heal spiritually after the war. That's what Corrie did.

Two years after the war, she preached at a church in Germany about forgiveness. After the service, a man came up and asked to shake her hand. He had been an SS officer at Ravensbruck who found Jesus after the war. He heard Corrie preach that night that through faith, all his old sins were thrown into the sea. What he didn't know is that Corrie remembered him. It was the first time she had been face to face with one of her captors. After several seconds, she remembered that as she was forgiven, so she had to forgive. She prayed for the power to extend her hand. Tears came as Jesus filled her with forgiveness for this man.

In her own words, Corrie said, "I wish I could say that merciful and charitable thoughts just naturally flowed from me from then on. But they didn't...If there's one thing I've learned at 80 years of age, it's that I can't store up good feelings and behavior but only draw them fresh from God each day. Maybe I'm glad it's that way. For every time I go to Him, He teaches me something else."¹

Grace doesn't come easy – for us or for other people. But that's the reality we live in now as Christians. We have been given a way past the old law – a law that was beautiful and perfect in its own way, but ultimately proved our inability to follow God's ways in any meaningful way on our own. Jesus' grace is the reason we can be assured of eternal life with Him. May we live with grace towards others each day as our way of showing we belong to Him.

¹ <https://www.guideposts.org/better-living/positive-living/guideposts-classics-corrie-ten-boom-on-forgiveness>.