

Read also Isaiah 45:18-25

Paul and Barnabas were back in Antioch and . . . READ Acts 15:1-2 (All readings from *The Message*). Here are some other interpretations: “great dissension; major argument; sharp dispute; arguing vehemently.

Disagreements. Sometimes we find ourselves in external disagreements – troubles or difficulties that attack people and families from the outside.

More difficult are internal disagreements – fights between mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, siblings, those take a toll more than others. Ever been so mad at someone that words like those in this passage describe your feelings? These are dispiriting; they weaken the family. Tomorrow is Valentines; you want to get over it so you can give that card!

The Bible is very real. It tells us the truth that sometimes people disagree. In the church, internal disagreements happen too and they are devastating. Our own denomination has been fighting for 30 years over morality issues. The church has been weakened.

Disagreements, dissension – how do we resolve them?

Let’s see what the early church did. READ ACTS 15:2b-7a.

Now begins the debate. You will notice as I read that sufficient time was allowed for the debate, and there was an attitude of respect and patience as each party said their piece. Now that’s a standard which would serve us well today.

Here’s the debate: READ Acts 7b-11

So what are the two sides?

The Pharisees said it takes faith in Jesus AND keeping the law to be saved. Peter, Paul, and Barnabas said FAITH ALONE saves us.

Peter had thought this problem through. He saw the Gentile Cornelius turn to Christ. But then later, Galatians tells us, when dissension over this issue started, he got a little weak kneed. Peter doesn’t like conflict, remember; and so when the Jews first arrived in Antioch, in fear he withdrew from eating with the Gentiles. According to the law, you weren’t supposed to fellowship with people who didn’t keep the law and weren’t circumcised. But Paul writes, “I opposed Peter to his face.” (Gal 2:11-14).

Paul, you see, saw the issue clearly. Paul knew if the Gentiles were required to follow the law, it meant the gospel would have been absorbed into Judaism. What Jesus had done would have become meaningless and there would be no Christianity. Christ’s gift would have been for nothing. We would have missed it. When Paul confronted Peter, Peter saw it.

Did you hear how Peter said it? “Jesus amazingly and out of sheer generosity moved to save us.”

So our salvation is a gift. It's free! It can't get any better!

Gifts with "no strings attached" are rare and so we are wary. It's like that phone call. "You've just won a . . ." We usually hang up before the sentence is finished. But God's gift is absolutely free with no strings attached. Do you realize that?

What Jesus did for us is absolutely sufficient; a gift of sheer generosity - "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God-- not the result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph 2:8-9).

So this is a big statement! This is amazing. But I bet you are thinking of strings right now. We almost create "strings" ourselves when it comes to God's gift.

For we all know the Bible is full of rules like the Ten Commandments and that we are to be holy as God is holy. Yet, Peter and Paul say, *faith in Jesus is enough*.

How did they know faith is enough? READ Acts 15:12-13

They saw God's activity.

Peter said, "The Holy Spirit come upon the Gentiles." He told them about Jesus and they responded to the message. They began to love God; to have faith; to see God; they began to desire to know and please God, to be in relationship with God. That's what the Holy Spirit does. They got baptized. They were hugely joyful.

With grace, there is joy. Jesus said, "For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Mt 11:30). Is being a Christian burdensome for you?

Let go of the burdens and just love Jesus. Stop trying to please Him and simply get to know Him.

Now, something else happened. Paul said, "God gave us signs and wonders." God started giving them miracles, just like Jesus did. They asked in Jesus' name and God healed people, validating their message. So they saw what God was doing. They didn't have the New Testament yet; they were living it and then they would write it, so they were right in there following God's activity. So that's why they were in awe; that's why you could hear a pin drop.

READ Acts 15:14-18.

The third thing they did was to look at the Scripture they did have, and they realized what was happening confirmed what had been prophesied. James saw it right away. Prophecy, he explained is not valid until it comes true. God's reaching out to all nations. Yes, it was God's plan! Now we can see it James said! And that's how they moved into this new era of Christian faith, Christ-centered faith.

Not that the church was separate from Israel, superseding it, not that the church became a part of Israel but that God saves Jews and Gentiles alike through grace.

So, what exactly is grace? I saw a play called “First Baptist Church of Ivy Gap.” The story goes like this. It was WWII and six ladies gathered to roll bandages for soldiers. Five of them were members of the church. The sixth was a newcomer, a non-Christian from the wrong side of the tracks. As she joined in, one woman, a widow named Luby, shunned her. But Sammy is embraced by the others. She decides to become a Christian.

Soon we learn Luby has but one son, and he is injured in the war and dies. She is devastated and blames Sammy.

Well, 25 years passes and the church is celebrating its 100th anniversary. All these women come back and they are reunited. And we learn that Luby has become a bitter recluse. She continues to blame Sammy for her son’s death. As they are talking, the truth comes out. When her son was 17, he wanted to enlist. But, because this was her only son, she refused to sign the papers. Then her son met this young woman, Sammy, and fell in love, and planned to marry. Well, that was even worse than losing him to war; she could not let that happen so Luby signed the papers for him to enlist. When he died, that’s why it was Sammy’s fault.

She held that grudge, hating Sammy, blaming her for her son’s death. In despair, she told Sammy, “I can never forgive you.” And as the women heard this confession and just kind of stood there horrified, not knowing what to say, Sammy with tears, went over to her, took her hands and said to Luby, “I am a Christian now. No matter how you feel about me, I don’t blame you. Even though you hate me, I forgive you.”

That’s grace.

That’s what Jesus did for us. While we were bitter, angry, reclusive from Him, He loved us and said, “I don’t blame you; I forgive you.” He broke the power of our sin by forgiveness.

James got it. Do you get it? No matter what, Jesus extends His love to you.

Based on that, James made a decision. READ Acts 15:19-21.

When we become a Christian we enter a new kingdom, so we actually enter it! Before, the Gentiles were identified by their actions with idol worship. And so the disciples said essentially, *Our lives need to reflect the kingdom of God so people know who you belong to.* Our lives are a witness.

All those things listed – related to idol worship – meat offered to idols, sexual immorality and promiscuousness – that’s what unbelievers do. Idol worship involved sexual immorality and feeding lusts. Sexual morality was a sign then, and is a sign now, of not following your lusts but of living in fidelity to God and your spouse, whether future or present.

Grace. Is that truly all it takes? Yes, that’s all it takes, because the gift of Jesus Christ is absolutely, fully, and completely sufficient. Hallelujah!

AMEN