

Lesson 19- Acts 15:1-35

Grace Alone? Or Works Too?

What do you think of when you hear the word “grace”? The dictionary lists multiple meanings. A table prayer is sometimes referred to as grace. The word may be used to describe the elegant movements of a figure skater. Some girls are even named Grace.

The word grace is used many times in Scripture, where it has a much more powerful meaning than the uses noted above. Grace is a word attached to salvation. One of Martin Luther’s primary teachings was salvation by grace through faith alone. In our lesson today, we will see Paul’s teaching to the believers about grace—grace alone.

God’s Grace

*Luther’s Small Catechism** describes grace as:

1. Unmerited or undeserved love.
2. The attribute of God whereby He desires to save sinners.
3. The favor and mercy of God that comes to us through His Son Jesus Christ, and through His Word.

Grace cannot be fully understood apart from the Law and the Gospel. If we don’t understand the power of the Law to condemn sinners and the burden that comes from the guilt of sin, then we won’t understand the freedom that comes through the Gospel.

This is illustrated in Psalm 32:1-5 where David struggles with unconfessed sin. When he does not confess his sin, he experiences the power of the Law that condemns him, and his guilt is destroying his health. But when he confessed his sin to the Lord, God forgave him the guilt of his sin.

No matter how great our sin, God’s grace is always greater than our sin (Romans 5:20-21)

**Luther’s Small Catechism and Explanation* (Minneapolis, MN: Ambassador Publications, 2007), 153.

Into the Word: Acts 15:1-35

Paul and Barnabas had been working with the Gentile believers in Antioch when men from Judea came and confused the brethren. They taught that believers had to follow the Law of Moses for salvation. This was in contrast to the message of salvation by grace that Paul and Barnabas were preaching (read Acts 13:38-39).

1. Hoping to resolve the issue, *Paul* and *Barnabas* were sent with a few others from Antioch to get answers from the apostles and elders in the church at Jerusalem (Acts 15:2).

Once in Jerusalem, they were received by the church. However, they soon realized that some of the new believers there were Pharisees who also taught that salvation required following the Law of Moses.

2. The apostles and elders met and debated the issue. Then Peter spoke (vv.7-11). He counseled:
 - God chose that the Gentiles should *hear* the Gospel and *believe*
 - God gave the *Holy Spirit* to the Gentiles just as He did the Jews
 - God cleansed the hearts of both Jew and Gentile by *faith*
 - The Jews themselves were too heavily burdened by the *law*
 - Both Jew and Gentile are saved through *grace of the Lord Jesus*

Peter's speech quieted the crowd, and they listened to Paul and Barnabas share God's wonders and ministry among the Gentiles.

3. Then James spoke up (vv.13-21).

- Quoting Amos 9:11-12, he reminded the people that it was God's intention that the Gentiles would *seek the Lord*
- James cautioned that they should not trouble or place extra burdens on the new believers. He recommended *writing a letter* encouraging the Gentile believers to avoid offending Jewish believers by abstaining from the things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, and from eating meat from an animal that was not properly bled out.

4. After James finished speaking, it seemed good to the apostles and the elders to send word to Antioch. How did they communicate the message?

- v.22: They sent *Judas called Barsabas* and *Silas*, leading men among the brethren
- v.23: They wrote a *letter* for them to bring with to the *brethren in Antioch*.
- v.28: The believers in Jerusalem assured the church in Antioch that they *had no intention of placing unnecessary burdens on Gentile believers*.

God's grace removes the burden of fulfilling the Law because Christ has fulfilled the Law in our place.

When the Gentiles in Antioch read the letter, they rejoiced and were encouraged.

5. What did each man do after the letter was delivered? vv.30-35

- Judas : *encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a sermon, then returned to Jerusalem on good terms,*
- Silas: *encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a sermon, then stayed on in Antioch,*
- Paul: *stayed in Antioch teaching and preaching the Word of the Lord.*
- Barnabas: *also stayed in Antioch teaching and preaching the Word of the Lord.*

New Ideas: Yoke of Slavery

Through the centuries, the Jews had become proud of who they were as God's chosen people. They came to consider all other people (Gentiles) as worthless and unworthy of God's blessing. As a result, they added many more laws and traditions of their own to set them apart.

The Early Church soon discovered these deeply-rooted traditions caused controversy among new believers. The apostles and elders gathered in Jerusalem to settle the issue: is salvation only complete by following traditional Jewish laws? Galatians 2 records Paul's explanation of his conflict with Peter, which shows how difficult it was for devout Jews to shed their laws and traditions and embrace the freedom of the Gospel.

Peter was sent with the Gospel to the Gentiles (Cornelius), yet he still tried to obey Jewish laws when he was with them. Paul calls Peter a hypocrite. He would eat with the Gentiles, but when Jews were present he would follow Jewish practices.

When the weight of keeping God's Law is placed upon a person, Paul called this a "yoke of slavery" because "It was for freedom that Christ set us free" (Galatians 5:1). By grace, God lifts the yoke of slavery (Law) resulting in freedom.

Memory Verse

"But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."
Acts 15:11

Extra Memory Challenge *Galatians 2:19*

For through the Law I died to the Law, that I might live to God.

Discussion Questions

Each teacher should encourage, as much as time permits, discussion and inquiry on the part of students. Not every aspect of the following questions is addressed here, and students may have thoughts related to but not mentioned in this guide. The obligation of the teacher, then, is to understand as deeply as possible the Scriptures that are being discussed, in order to answer as well as possible any questions a student might have.

1. When James spoke in Acts 15:20 about what the Gentile believers should do, how was he showing his concern for these new believers? Read I Corinthians 8:8-13. What does it mean for us today to live in the freedom of grace (v.8)? How can we encourage new believers without becoming a stumbling block to them?

He did not want them to become discouraged by having to learn and keep all the Laws of Moses. He wanted them to understand that through grace they were free from the bonds and restrictions of the Law of Moses for their salvation. Further though he understood that their culture was rampant with sexual immorality and that food that had been offered to idols was available for personal use. He warns them about refraining from sexual misconduct and food that was unclean due to the processing of it and also if it had been offered to idols. We need to remember that we also are not under the law but free in Christ. We need to consider that this results in a delicate balance between legalism often bound in tradition and total disregard for Godly living. In our lives as believers, we are to live Godly lives, to set an example for others by our conduct and conversation. Paul challenged the Corinthian believers to consider all their actions in light of how this might hinder or damage the spiritual life of a less mature believer.

[TM note: v.13 – Paul’s freedom allows him to refrain from eating meat.]

2. Read Titus 3:4-7 and think about what you have learned. What do these verses say about God’s grace and God’s love? What do these verses mean for us? How can we who are heirs according to the hope of eternal life extend God’s grace to others?

We learn that God’s grace and love come to us not because of who we are but because of who God is. We are washed and renewed by God through His means of grace (Word and Sacraments) so that we might be confident of God’s gift of forgiveness and eternal life. We who believe have been given God’s wonderful gift of faith through hearing God’s Word (Romans 10:17. We can extend God’s grace to others by sharing the message of the Gospel also with them. They need to hear the wonderful news that we have heard.

Daily Devotions

Sunday:	Galatians 1:3-9
Monday:	Galatians 2:1-10
Tuesday:	Galatians 2:16-21
Wednesday:	Galatians 3:1-9
Thursday:	Galatians 3:13-18
Friday:	Galatians 3:19-24
Saturday:	Galatians 4:21-26

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH: THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF THE AFLC

* Fundamental Principle 6

According to Fundamental Principle 6, spiritual gifts are of “crucial importance for the development of a free congregation.” (Fevold) Georg Sverdrup said the congregation is a fellowship of “believing, praying, and working people, who have been equipped by the Lord with all that they need for their responsibilities” as his servants.

1. What are some of the gifts listed in Romans 12:6-8?

The gifts listed are: prophecy, service, teaching, exhorting, giving, leading, showing mercy. Since the primary work of the congregation is for the eternal souls of people, all the spiritual gifts should be used to that end. Prophecy is the telling forth of God's Word, especially regarding the way of salvation. Service is serving others as a deacon or trustee or elder who in love help the needy either spiritually or physically. Teaching is helping believers grow in grace and knowledge of Christ by explaining God's Word. Exhorting is coming along side of another for the purpose of encouraging and helping one another on the way to eternal life. Giving is using our spiritual and physical blessings to expand and extend the kingdom of God locally and beyond. Leading is diligently helping a congregation to fulfill its calling and purpose. Showing mercy is cheerfully caring for those hurting and needy.

2. According to I Peter 4:10-11, what is the purpose of spiritual gifts?

The spiritual gifts God provides are for the purpose of building up or edifying the congregation in its ministry and to bring glory to God.