

PROTECTING THE HOLY GRAIL  
ACTS 15

INTRODUCTION:

- A. If you've seen Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade, you know that the Holy Grail was exceedingly well guarded. By the way, the Holy Grail is the name given the cup that Jesus used during the Last Supper with His disciples and supposedly given to Joseph of Arimathea. It was much sought after by medieval knights who believed the Holy Grail was associated special powers. The term, Holy Grail, is also used to mean any greatly desired or sought after object. This morning we are using the word in that sense. We're talking about the Holy Grail of grace. God's grace is much sought after: both by good-hearted spiritual pilgrims and by hostile spiritual predators. And it is associated with special powers: it is the power of God to salvation for all who believe.
    - If you possess it, it will take you to heaven. If you miss it, you will fall into hell.
    - If you possess it, you have the gift of abundant life from Jesus. If you miss it, you walk in spiritual darkness.
  - B. This Holy Grail of grace needs protection. Just like anything that is terribly important, there is always somebody trying to mess with it. Grace gets messed with a lot. It suffers at the hands of its enemies and its friends.
  - C. Mr. Johnson, in Garrison Keillor's *Lake Wobegon Days*, preached a sermon against women's slacks from Deuteronomy 22:5, *The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do are an abomination unto the Lord thy God.* Garrison reflects...*My mother never wore slacks, though she did dress my sister in leggings, which troubled Grandpa. "It's not the leggings so much as what they represent and what they could lead to," he told her. He thoughts that baby boys should not wear sleepers unless they were the kind with snaps up the elgs. Mother pointed out that the infant Jesus was wrapped up in swaddling clothes. "That doesn't mean he wore a dress," Grandpa said. "They probably wrapped his legs separately.* (page 132)
  - D. This tongue-in-cheek story illustrates what we call legalism: it's not a word you'll find in your Bible, although the problem of legalism is well documented in God's Word. Legalism is the archenemy of grace – it is the imposition of non-biblical demands on people as a condition of salvation or a condition of spirituality. In other words, legalism is human rules to gain God's approval.
  - E. The Apostle Paul fought to protect grace in every city where he preached. He fought for it in Turkey and he fought for it in Rome. The legalists were hot on his trail everywhere he went in the Mediterranean world and sometimes they got to town before he did. Till the day a Roman sword cut off his head, he never gave up protecting the Holy Grail of grace.
  - F. Now the mantle falls upon our shoulders. How do we carry on the quest? What si there for us to do in protecting the message of grace?
- I. CONTEND FOR GRACE (Verse 2, *This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them.*)
- A. Why?
    - 1. Because of the hounds of legalism. The church at Antioch was doing famously
      - Flash back to Acts 11:19 for the story:

*19 Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. 20 Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and **began to speak to Greeks also**, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. 21 The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. 22 News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 23 When he arrived and saw the evidence of the **grace** of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to*

*remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. 24 He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. 25 Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 26 and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.*

- ❑ Now back to **Acts 15:1**. Sure enough, anywhere God's grace is sprouting and flowering, expect the legalists to show up with their toxic spiritual herbicides. *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."* Their fuller message is revealed in verse 5, *"The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses."*

2. What they do.

- ❑ First, they mess up salvation. They make salvation something that you have to earn by the good things you do.
- ❑ Second, they mess up Christian living. They make living for Jesus something you have to do rather than something you want to do. They reduce a vital, loving relationship with Jesus to a lifeless list of do's and don'ts.

Let's take these one at a time.

- ❑ What legalists do to salvation. The New Testament is crystal clear on how sinners get saved.
  - Point One: it's a gift. Ephesians 2:8, *For it is by **grace** you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.*
  - Point Two: it's by a sacrifice. II Corinthians 5:21, *God made him who had no sin to be **sin for us**, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*
  - Point Three: it's through faith. John 3:16, *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

But the legalists say, *Not so fast. It's a little more complicated than that. You can't just believe. There are some criteria you have to meet first.* In Bible times it was the Law of Moses:

- ❑ No work or cooking or long walks on the Sabbath
- ❑ Animal sacrifices
- ❑ Rituals of ceremonial cleansing
- ❑ Circumcision
- ❑ Taboo foods
- ❑ Forbidden clothing fiber blends

Today legalists have different things on the list:

- ❑ Charitable giving
- ❑ Regular attendance at church or mass
- ❑ Confession
- ❑ Door-to-door witnessing for Jehovah
- ❑ Volunteerism
- ❑ Or simply being a really good person, better than most. *You know, I've lived a pretty good life. If anybody gets to heaven, I'm sure I will!*

- ❑ What legalists do to Christian living. They say...*OK, we'll grant you that you can't get to heaven by doing good works. You just have faith in Jesus. BUT, if you don't keep this list of rules, you will lose your salvation. If you don't keep this list, you won't be a good Christian!*

- ❑ Paul confronted the Galatians on this. He called them foolish in Galatians 3:1. Their foolishness was that they believed in Jesus for their salvation, but believed in themselves for their sanctification. They believed that Jesus got you to heaven but good works got you holiness. **Verse 3**, *Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?*

3. Why it's so bad

- ❑ Legalism fools sinners into Hell. How tragic to think that there are people who have worked so hard to get to heaven who won't get there. Matthew 7:21, *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' 23 Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"*

- ❑ Legalism robs saints of the joy of truly loving Jesus Christ.
  - A husband comes to me and says, *Pastor, something's missing in my marriage. We're drifting further and further apart. There's no affection. We're irritable with each other. More and more it's just like we're living separate lives. We sort of just live in the same house. What can I do?*

ANSWER: Take this list home and do exactly and everything it says:

- ❑ Take at least one shower every day.
- ❑ Tote the trash out every Friday morning before 7 a.m.
- ❑ Go to church 3 out of 4 Sundays.
- ❑ Buy her flowers weekly.
- ❑ Don't yell at her or hit her.
- ❑ Mow the lawn.
- ❑ Put your dirty clothes in the hamper.
- ❑ Spend time every day with the kids.
- ❑ Make sure the gas tank's full.

What's wrong with that counsel? Nothing and everything. It's all good stuff. It's all stuff any loving husband should do. But it's missing something.

Try this...

*Fiddler on the Roof*

*Tevye has just given permission to his daughter, Huttie, to be engaged. Golda protests, "He's poor. He has nothing!" But Tevye reflects, "Huttie loves him. So what can we do? It's a new world. Love!"*

*Golda, do you love me?*

*Do I what?*

*Do you love me?*

*Do I love you?*

*With our daughters getting married*

*And there's trouble in the town,*

*You're upset, you're worn out,*

*Go inside, go lie down,*

*Maybe it's indigestion.*

*Goldy, I'm asking you a question. Do you love me?*

*You're a fool!*

*I know. But do you love me?*

Do I love you?  
 Well?  
 For 25 years I've washed your clothes,  
 Cooked your meals,  
 Cleaned your house,  
 Given you children,  
 Milked the cow,  
 After 25 years, why talk about love right now?  
 Goldy, the first time I met you was on our wedding day. I was sacred.  
 I was shy.  
 I was nervous.  
 So was I.  
 But my father and my mother said we'd learn to love each other and now I'm asking,  
 Goldy, Do you love me?  
     I'm your wife!  
 I know. But do you love me?  
 Do I love him?  
 Well?  
 For 25 years I've lived with him, fought with him, starved with him, 25 years my bed is  
 his – if that's not love, what is?  
 Then you love me?  
 I suppose I do.  
 And I suppose I love you too!

*It doesn't change a thing...but even so, after 25 years, it's nice to know!*

**Legalism says**...to be a good Christian you have to keep the list. The stuff is the main thing.

**Grace says**...to be a good Christian you need to love Jesus with all your heart. The relationship is the main thing. The stuff follows naturally.

Christian...do you love Him?!

B. How?

1. Meet legalism head-on
  - ❑ **Galatians 1:6**, *I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel-- 7 which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!*
  - ❑ **Galatians 2:11**, *When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong.*
2. Have your arguments ready
  - ❑ Legalism can't save. **Acts 15:10**, *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? 11 No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."*
  - ❑ Legalism can't make you a good Christian. **Colossians 2:23**, *Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their **harsh treatment** of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.*

II. CONTROL GRACE (Verse 28, *It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following...*)

A. To Bring Others Along

1. This chapter reminds us that Christians are free from the Old Testament Law. They could eat whatever food they wanted. They could do whatever they wanted on the Sabbath. They could circumcise or not circumcise. Whatever. But “can” doesn’t always mean “should.” There are some other values at work here. The Council of Jerusalem has come down hard on the grace side for salvation. But on the grace side for Christian living, they have a few comments. They’re all for grace-living, but there are some cautions. Here they are in Verses 28-29, *It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: 29 You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.*
  2. The value of peace. See Verse 21, *For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.”* The Antiochian church was a strong mix of Jewish and Gentile believers. There were some Gentile behaviors that were so offensive to Jews, even Christian Jews, that it would be like fingernails on a chalkboard relationally in the church. Every Jew had been trained to stay away from idol meat, bloody meat and strangled meat. Even today, if I had lunch with a Hebrew Christian friend, I wouldn’t order a ham sandwich unless I knew how he felt about it. Today, the sensitivity among believers isn’t about meat things; it’s about things like alcohol, tobacco, entertainment choices, body piercings and music styles.
    - ❑ **Romans 12:18**, *If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*
    - ❑ **Romans 14:19**, *Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.*
  3. The value of edification (building others up)
    - ❑ **Romans 14:20**, *Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. 21 It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.*
    - ❑ **Cf. I Corinthians 8:9-13**
  4. Notice: This is a judgment call based on local issues of sensitivity. It’s an important judgment call. It was made by the godliest leaders the church possessed, and they were leaders who were sold out to grace. Note also that it was more than a human judgment call, good as it was. It also packed the heat of the Holy Spirit: Verse 28. But we also need to realize that these are not timeless truths for the church. We don’t even have idol meat in America. But there are timeless principles here about keeping peace in the body of believers and making sure that my freedom doesn’t rip the heart out of a younger believers conscience.
- B. To Protect Myself
1. Sometimes we confuse grace-living with sinful-living. I believe that’s why sex is listed in this passage. It stands in an entirely different category than the Jewish food prohibitions. Why is it here? It seems like a no-brainer. Why did the Jerusalem Council have to point out to the Gentile Christians that they needed to abstain from sexual immorality? I believe it is because the Gentile society was so pagan that they no longer thought of sexual immorality as immorality. They had lost all moral conscience about sex. It was just another physical appetite to satisfy, like taking a drink when you’re thirsty. That really shouldn’t be so hard for us to understand. Have you noticed how many Christians are getting divorces that lack biblical warrant? Have you noticed how many Christian young adults are moving in with their boyfriends and girlfriends as if it was a non-issue?
    - ❑ **Jude 1:4**, *For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the*

*grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.*

- ❑ **Galatians 5:13**, *You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.*
- ❑ **Titus 2:11**, *For the **grace** of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. 12 It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age,*
- 2. Sometimes we translate grace into addiction or distraction. **I Corinthians 6:12**, *"Everything is permissible for me"-- but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible for me"-- but I will not be mastered by anything.*
- 3. Chuck Swindoll asks and answers a probing question: *Why is grace risky? Because it has fewer boundaries than a legalistic system. And to live grace to the extreme means that some will take advantage of it. Some refer to grace as though it is the God-given pervasive covering for their outright disobedience which they call amazing grace. I call it abusing grace.*

### III. CELEBRATE GRACE (Verse 31, *The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message.*)

#### A. It's About Freedom

- 1. Legalism doesn't work (Verse 10, an unbearable yoke)  
*A **plumb line** can only prove that a crooked wall is crooked. No matter how you use it, a plumb line can't make a crooked wall straight. The law was God's plumb line, designed to show all people that they are crooked, or sinful. It was never intended to make us straight or righteous – and indeed it never could.*
- 2. Grace encourages
  - ❑ It wins my heart
    - **Ephesians 2:6**, *in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his **grace**, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.*
  - ❑ It changes my heart: *a new creation*
  - ❑ I Peter 5:12, *With the help of Silas, whom I regard as a faithful brother, I have written to you briefly, encouraging you and testifying that this is the true **grace** of God. Stand fast in it.*

#### B. It's About Strength

- 1. Law weakens
  - ❑ It can't justify
  - ❑ It can't sanctify
  - ❑ It can't forgive
  - ❑
- 2. Grace enables
  - ❑ **2 Timothy 2:1**, *You then, my son, be **strong in** the grace that is in Christ Jesus.*
  - ❑ **Hebrews 13:9**, *Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by **grace**, not by ceremonial foods, which are of no value to those who eat them.*
  - ❑ **II Thessalonians 2:16**, *May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his **grace** gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, 17 encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.*
  - ❑ **Colossians 1:5**, *the gospel 6 that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's **grace** in all its truth.*
  - ❑ I used to think that the way to raise good Christian kids was to lay down the law.
    - Take them to church and Sunday School

- Expect instant obedience to every command
- Lay out clear and consistent expectations and predictable consequences
- Keep the bar high
- Keep raising the bar
- You know what I learned? I learned that I was missing something. I was missing grace. I learned that you don't raise good kids or a good lawn with just weed killer. You need good fertilizer, too.
- God raises good Christians just like we raise good Christian kids. With lots of grace.

CONCLUSION:

A. Ortberg story about the sofa, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1997, 119-120

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