

Religion vs Christianity

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[0 : 0 0] Well, some questions. How does God accept people? How does God accept people? Or how do you get to heaven? Or how are you saved? These questions are essentially asking the same thing. They're all about the way of salvation, about how you enter into the kingdom of God, or about how you join and become a member of God's family. I wonder what your answer would be. How does God accept people?

How do you get to heaven? How can you be saved? Well, I guess some people might respond by saying things like, well, I'm such a good person. I have been a good person all my life. In fact, I'm one of the nicest people in my street. You've got a long way to find someone nicer than me. I love my family. My family love me. I don't lie. I don't steal. I don't cheat. I've never been a murderer.

I don't commit adultery. I give to charity. Sometimes I give blood. I go to church, and I've been baptized. All good things, of course, not knocking any of these, but all of these answers essentially miss the point. Because there is a fundamental difference between religion on the one hand and Christianity on the other. Religion tells you that you can be saved through your own efforts, by the things that you do through your good religious performance. It's all about what you've done.

It's all about you and how good you are. Whereas Christianity tells you that you are saved by grace alone. Whereas it's all about what God has done for you through Jesus Christ. Because God doesn't accept us by the things that we do. God accepts us through what Jesus has done for us. And there is a fundamental difference, isn't there? And that's essentially what this controversy is all about in Acts chapter 15. It's about a dispute in the early church. And you might have been thinking as you were reading this, hey, I didn't come to church on a Sunday afternoon to hear all about circumcision, let alone read it or hear a sermon on it. Well, it's not about circumcision per se, although it is.

That is a surface issue, circumcision. But the source issue is essentially the way of salvation. How we're saved, how we join God's family, how we become a Christian. And it's interesting because it's central in the book of Acts. We're halfway through in our series. But it's also central to the message of Acts. Because it's in reality central to our lives and how we relate to the God who made us.

[3 : 0 5] And so it's a debate essentially about the nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It's about salvation. Because as human beings, the default mode of our heart is to try and save ourselves by what we do, by our performance, by our good works. And yet Christianity tells us that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone. And so I'd like us to think about this idea of grace and what it is under three headings this afternoon. So first of all, we'll think about a debate over grace, verse 1 to 5. Secondly, a declaration about grace, verse 6 to 18. And then thirdly, a decision from grace, verse 19 to 25. So a debate, a declaration, and a decision. First of all, a debate over grace in verse 1 to verse 5. Now there was a debate in the church because the gospel of Jesus Christ was at stake. The very message of Christianity

Christianity was the issue. And it started essentially because more and more Gentiles were coming to faith in Jesus. But some, some Jews were saying these Gentiles needed to be circumcised in order for them to be proper Christians. So verse 1 says, So this group, even if they were sincere in what they were teaching, were wrong. So who were they?

Well, they were Jewish believers, obviously, who later became known as Judaizers. So that is conservative Jewish Christians who believed that Gentiles had to become like Jews if they were to be genuine Christians. And they weren't just dropping this into the conversation, you know, in coffee time after church, eating a donut. They were actually teaching this. They were making circumcision a requirement for salvation, saying in effect that faith in Jesus isn't enough. It's Jesus plus circumcision.

And that's why it was such a big deal for the early church, because the nature of the gospel, the way of salvation was at stake. So it was an issue that had to be dealt with.

They just couldn't let this one go. And that's why verse 2 we read, they brought Paul and Barnabas. This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them.

[5 : 55] 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. So because this was a salvation issue, they needed to meet together, debate, discuss, dispute in order to get it right. Because, as verse 24 tells us, this was disturbing the new Gentile believers. In fact, the apostle Paul addresses this very issue in his letter to the Galatians. It's all about this, and it was written about the same time, because the very heart of the Christian gospel was being challenged.

A group were teaching a message that was opposed to the gospel message. And so it was extremely dangerous. And even after Paul and Barnabas arrived, we read verse 5, similar to verse 1, 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 keep the law of Moses. So the church needed to debate the issue. Now we might think having a dispute in a church is a bad thing. I mean, doesn't it destroy the peace and unity of the church? But debate is always necessary when people are wrong. And here, the people were wrong, even if they were sincere. In all other walks of life, if somebody is wrong, they need to be corrected. At school, children, when sums are wrong, the teacher needs to tell them, hey, Johnny, that sum is wrong. You need to get it right. Or doctor, a doctor needs to give their patient the correct medication. You can't just get it wrong and think, oh, it doesn't really matter. Of course it matters if lives are at stake. And so how much more when it comes to the way of salvation, when our very relationship with God is at stake, does it need to be put right? Even more harm will be done if issues aren't addressed. And so that's what's going on here. Because any message that strays from the gospel of Jesus Christ, from true Christianity, is not going to save anyone.

Only the gospel can save men and women and boys and girls like us. That's why the church needed to be clear on the message, the message of the grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And so that's the first point. It's about grace. So what exactly is grace? Well, secondly, we see a declaration about grace in verse 6 to 18.

So the apostles and leaders of the council needed to make a clear declaration. And they did. So Peter spoke first, then Paul and Barnabas, and finally James. So after this discussion, verse 6 to 11, Peter reminds the council of three facts. The first fact, verse 6 and 7, is that God wanted the Gentiles to hear the gospel and believe. All through the scriptures, the message of salvation was not just for the Jews, it was also for the Gentiles. So that's people like us. Secondly, verse 8, God gave the Gentiles the Holy Spirit, just like he did the Jews on the day of Pentecost. And so for the Gentiles, their experience of salvation was the same as the Jews. In other words, they weren't saved because they were circumcised. They were saved by grace. And then third, verse 10, the Jews had never been able to keep the law anyway because nobody can fully obey all of God's law. So Peter's saying you shouldn't have this burden placed on the Gentiles because it's actually a burden that we aren't able to bear ourselves. And that's why Peter highlights the obvious. And this is the key verse, verse 11 of

Acts chapter 15. No, we believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved just as they are. So he's saying if anyone is saved, they're saved by grace. And this is the key to understanding the whole passage. So Jews are saved by grace. Gentiles are saved by grace. Anyone, all of us are saved by grace. God accepts people. Not because they're circumcised, not because they obey the law, because we can't fully obey the law anyway, but through grace. As the following Peter and then Paul and Barnabas, James then comes, finally verse 13, to say the scriptures, the Bible agrees with this.

[10 : 42] Verse 13 to 15, he says, When they finished, James spoke up. Brothers, he said, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this as it is written. So what's James saying? He's saying, guys, you need to read your Bible to find the answer there. God accepts people not because they're circumcised, but it's grace. God always had a plan to include the Gentiles as his people. And so James is saying, what you're saying, what we're discussing is backed up with what is already written about in the scriptures. And so he quotes Amos chapter 9, verse 16, After this, I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent, its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things, things known from long ago. So what's he saying? He's saying that the inclusion of the Gentiles as God's people was something God had already promised. God had intended to rebuild and restore the kingdom of David. It would be made up of Jews, of course. Here comes the thunder that was promised in the forecast. This kingdom made up of Jews, but it would also include Gentiles. So Jews and Gentiles together would constitute the new people of God. So they're saying Gentiles are the real deal.

They are also included as God's people. And that's why they don't need to be circumcised to be saved and join God's family. Because that's not how you become a part of God's family, which should be a relief for you if you aren't a Jew. The only way you can be saved is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone. God accepts us because of what Jesus has done for us through his work on the cross, and not by anything that we can do ourselves. And that is the true nature of Christianity, which is the polar opposite of religion. And it goes against the way our human instincts. Because we like to think that we earn our acceptance with people by the things that we do. Think of relationships. If I perform well, if I'm good, maybe I can find a way into a relationship with this person based on my good performance.

That's how we operate in life generally. Relationships, or at work, or at school. We earn acceptance by the things that we do, or by how well we perform. And we think that in our hearts, well, if we perform well, surely they'll accept us. If we don't perform well, then they will reject us.

We feel we've got to prove ourselves to show how good we are. And yet the good news of Christianity Christianity is that God accepts us, not because of what we do, or based on our religious performance, but that God accepts us based on what Jesus has done, and on his performance on the cross. We're saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus. And so trying to add anything to this message of grace turns it into a message of works. Instead of saying, this is what God has done, it's saying, this is what you must do. And so it's no longer gospel. It's no longer good news, because it changes our salvation to be something that instead of it being what we receive from God, it's what we think we can do for God by way of earning his acceptance. And so, of course, today we would never add circumcision to faith in Jesus as a requirement for salvation. And yet there can be plenty other human contributions that we think we should add. And so even if it's not Jesus plus circumcision, it might be Jesus plus this spiritual experience, or Jesus plus baptism by full immersion, or Jesus plus speaking in tongues, or Jesus plus this particular version of the Bible, Jesus plus teetotalism, Jesus plus this particular church, or this particular denomination, or this way of worshiping. And of course, it would never be as explicitly stated in that way. But if the implication is ever Jesus plus something to make you a proper

Christian, then it's a move away from the grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And so it's dangerous, because it's implying that Jesus is not enough for your salvation. Yes, have faith in Jesus, but also you need this. You need to do it this way. It needs to be in this particular form.

[16 : 14] And then you are better than these people who don't do it that way or have that thing. It's dangerous, because it's never Jesus plus anything to be a genuine believer. And while we might grasp this in our heads, we might fail to believe it in our hearts if we try to earn God's acceptance by the things that we do. And this can happen subconsciously, even if we've been a Christian for a long, long time, we can think we're more acceptable to God because of the way that we live for the particular things that we do. So we might be a full-time Christian worker, or a minister, or a missionary. We might serve in a particular area of ministry in the church, or have a particular title in the church. We might do more stuff than other Christians do. We might give more money than other people do. We might have a family where everybody is a Christian believer. We might feel we're more committed than other people are. Or, well, I've not messed up as much as these people have, and so we think we are more acceptable to God. But if that's what we're thinking, even deep down inside, even if we never see it, then have we really grasped the gospel of God's grace. Sometimes it's described as trying to earn our justification through our sanctification, thinking that we are more justified before God because of the kind of way that we are living. And yet it's a failure to realize that we are, if we are, professing to be a

Christian, we are nothing more than a sinner saved by grace. And so Acts 15 is declaring loudly and clearly that salvation is through the grace of our Lord Jesus. That's what the church leaders in Acts want to declare. Salvation is through grace. Okay, so a debate over grace, a declaration about grace, and thirdly, a decision from grace. So a decision was needed in the church, the early church, and the decision was made because the Gentiles needed to know that becoming a Christian wasn't a complicated thing. Becoming a Christian today is never a complicated thing. You don't have to jump through a number of hoops, like back then circumcision being one of them, in order to be accepted by God.

It's really easy. It's receiving this gift of grace, the gift of salvation in Jesus Christ and responding and taking it, grabbing it by faith. And so these Gentiles didn't need to go under the knife and be circumcised. And that's why James says there, verse 19, it is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. So having established this fundamental point that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, it was still necessary to teach the Gentile believers how to live as followers of Jesus. Because the Gentiles who turned to God didn't need to become Jewish, they needed to become Christian. And that's why they're told to abstain from certain things. Verse 20, 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.

Why these four specific things? Well, it's because if you take them all together, they describe pagan worship in their Gentile culture. Idolatry, blood, strangled animals, and sexual immorality were the things that happened, the things that went on in their pagan temples, which was all a part of Gentile life and culture. And so the Gentile believers had to flee from idolatry, flee from sexual immorality, because those things characterized their cultures. So it was faith in Jesus, but it also required a different way of living life. So all of these activities were associated with pagan worship.

Therefore, they aren't appropriate for followers of Jesus, for Christians. So for Gentiles, as for anyone who's going to be a Christian today, turning to God means turning away from the past, their pagan past, or our unbelieving past, our old lifestyle. We don't turn into Jews, but we turn away from sin. And so this applies to everyone who wants to become a Christian today. You don't need to be circumcised. You don't need to do a number of things before God will accept you, but you do need to turn away from a certain lifestyle. Because of course, there are certain aspects of our culture today that mirror Gentile culture back then, with its idolatry and with its sexual immorality. These are things that we must avoid if we're to be a Christian. So turning to Jesus does mean turning away from sin. It means turning away from sinful habits. It means turning away from a sinful lifestyle. It means avoiding some things, and it means adopting other things. Whether that be the idols in our hearts that we can be attached to, sex, relationships, money, power, that become more important to us than God, they're idols in that case, or sexual immorality that makes us think that we can express ourselves sexually any way we want, instead of obey God's best, God's good design for our flourishing as human beings. And so salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, through faith alone, but that faith is never alone, because it works itself out into each and every area of our lives as a believer, because we want to obey the Lord Jesus. And so turning to him obviously means turning away from the sin that is so offensive to God. And so that's how we respond to the grace that God has shown to us. So put it this way, there's nothing that you can do, any of us, to get into the family of God. But when you're part of the family, then you want to live. You want to live as part of the family, which means displaying the family likeness in the way that children look like their parents. Unfortunate, in my case, that my boys look a bit like me. Children also, of course, live out the family values. They display that family likeness. And sometimes you can tell when you know the adult and you haven't met their child by the behavior of the child who their mum or dad is. It's because of the family resemblance, the family likeness. And so there will be some things we will do as part of the family of God. And there will be some things that we don't do. A lifestyle we will pursue and a lifestyle we will avoid. So Christianity is never, I obey, therefore I'm accepted. It is always, I'm accepted, therefore I obey. I don't think this is more vividly illustrated than in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, which is a great book, great work of literature. Also a good musical. And I'm sure you're familiar with the story of Jean Valjean, who's the main character, and he's a bitter ex-convict who's convicted because he stole a loaf of bread. So he's sent to prison for 19 years. But after he's released, he's taken in by a bishop who gives him a meal and he gives him a bed for the night. But in the middle of the night, Valjean decides he's going to steal the

[24 : 47] bishop's silver. And then he steals it, he runs off, and he's caught by the local police. And they find the silver on him. And so he's arrested and he's taken back to the bishop's home. And the bishop, all he had to do was to say, yes, this man took my silver. And then the police would take Valjean straight back to prison. But the bishop tells the police to let him go and says, my friend, before you go, here are your candlesticks. Take them. And so he gives Valjean two silver candlesticks and says, go in peace. And Valjean is absolutely stunned. He cannot believe what is going on. And the bishop says, do not forget, never forget that you have promised to use this money in becoming an honest man. And that really is the moment of redemption on which the whole story hinges. And the bishop continues, Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I buy from you. I withdraw it from black thoughts and the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God.

And then in the next chapter of Les Miserables, Victor Hugo spells out just how threatening this grace is to Valjean and says, he was indistinctly conscious that the pardon of this priest was the greatest assault and the most formidable attack which had moved him yet. So this utterly undeserved forgiveness and generosity touched Valjean to the very core of his being. The bishop's grace towards Valjean unlocked his heart. It unleashed the potential in his life and transformed him forever. And so from that point in the book, for the rest of the book, Valjean lives in the light of this grace that's been shown to him by the bishop, this undeserved favor. And then there's this amazing story of how this transformed man then goes on and is able to transfer many, many, many other lives. It's a beautiful illustration of what the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ can do in any life, in yours and in mine. Because it not only sets us free from our sin and our slavery to our sin, it releases us. Not to continue to carry on like a slave trying to live and justify ourselves before God by doing lots of good stuff so that God will somehow accept us. No, it frees us to go and live out the salvation we have been freely given as a gift in Jesus. Because like Valjean, before the bishop, we are guilty before God because of our sin. And there's nothing that we can do about it ourselves. We've got no hope of being acceptable to God by what we do. And so it's only when we become aware of our total depravity, our utter helplessness before God, that we just discover how amazing

God's grace is in Jesus. Because it's through the grace of our Lord Jesus, through his suffering, through his death on the cross for our sin, through him being punished in our place so we can be forgiven, that we are saved. So that when our faith is in Jesus, then, well, we belong to the family of God.

We don't fight our way in. We couldn't earn our way in. We didn't perform our way in. But he welcomes us in on the basis of what he has done for us. And that's why the message of Christianity is such good news. It's the best news in the world because every other religion says to you, perform well, do all these things, keep going, maybe, just maybe, at the end of the day, you will be saved. You will achieve your salvation through all the things that you've done.

The gospel of Jesus Christ says, no, see what God has done in Jesus. See that Jesus came to do what you can never do for yourself. See that he lived the perfect life that you can never live.

[29 : 37] He died the death that you deserve to die for your sin. And he did it on the cross. And that's why we can only be saved. Not by putting our faith in ourselves and what we can do, but by putting our faith in Jesus and what he has done. Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone.

And when we have tasted that grace, when it is not just computed in our brains, but it is sunk down deep into our hearts, it will transform us from the inside out. And we will be different people.

We will be new people. People who now live to please God out of gratitude to all that God has done for us.