The Book of Acts Lesson 29

Acts 15:1-35

“Stop Yoking Around”

Introduction: The concept of a dysfunctional family has increasingly become more acceptable in our society. Shows like the Simpsons and virtually every mainstream sitcom of our generation portrays the leader of the home, the father, as incompetent, lazy, and above all things interested in his own comfort and happiness. Mothers are portrayed as tired, overworked, and overall dissatisfied with their lives. Children are overtly rebellious and disrespectful, underappreciated, and ill-equipped to survive life outside of their circumstances. This may even describe some of your homes to some degree. It is sad to say, but this is not a shock, I have come to expect this from our society. When I saw the fighting, disagreements, and divisions in Acts 15 it peaked my interest. God has up to this point in the book of Acts been doing an amazing work to save the souls of men. But they quickly found that these changes brought up questions that needed to be answered.

Transition: The Jewish Christians had seen God work in the lives of the gentile believers, but they had a difficulty facing the fact that the people God was obviously working in could be His without going through the same process they went through.

1. Jewish believers insisted that gentile believers should be circumcised and keep the law.
2. The Old Testament clearly taught that these were what God’s chosen people were supposed to do.
   1. There was nothing that said this would be over. Gentiles are saved by grace, but they do not become Jews upon salvation. Even in the book of Revelation there is a distinction between Jews and Gentiles. God is not done with Israel.
   2. These observances were not developed by Moses or any other man, God Himself told them that this is what He wanted them to do.
   3. Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt and gave them these commandments at least 1200 years before this account in Acts. Generation after generation had passed these things down. Although the nation as a whole did not always follow God the way He wanted, they still maintained a sense of being somewhat obedient to God and would have valued these highly.
3. These practices were good, but not in line with what God was doing.
   1. The book of Acts records the transition between living under the law and under grace.
      1. Galatians 3.24-25 *Wherefore the law was out schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster.*
      2. God has had a plan of redemption from the beginning of creation.
         1. From Adam through Abraham to John the Baptist, people have always been saved by faith in God’s promise of the messiah.
         2. Through the shed blood of Christ, God had made a way for gentiles like you and me to become His children. John 1:12
         3. In Acts 2 the Holy Spirit came upon the believers that had followed Jesus. These were Jewish people.
         4. After the persecution several disciples went to preach to other cultures. In Acts 10 God put His mark of approval on the preaching to gentiles by sending His Holy Spirit upon Cornelius and his household.

Transition: I don’t believe that the Jewish believers were maliciously trying to make their case because they didn’t like the gentiles; remember these were Jews, even Pharisees that had come to Christ. They were trying to do what was right, but were not really in tune with God.

1. God’s truth trumps all tradition and superstition.
   1. They say that old habits are hard to break, but when God is involved there is no fighting against change.
      1. Even the apostles were not immediately sure about what to do about this issue. So they got together and discussed it.
         1. The passage depicts heated discussion about this between both sides.
         2. They were dysfunctional until they looked at the concrete evidence of God’s work.
      2. When they looked at what God had made clear with His light, they were able to find their way through the uncertain night.
   2. James emerges as one having the final say, indicating that he was the pastor of the church in Jerusalem.
      1. His decision is to make it known to all the churches. That salvation is by Grace.
      2. The letters were distributed by leaders in the churches and were primarily addressed to gentile believers. Verse 29 does not indicate that these prohibitions were necessary to be observed in order to be saved. He encourages them to stay away from these practices, which would impede their fellowship with Jewish believers.

Transition: So what does this have to do with us? I realize that most of you who are Christians tonight probably don’t struggle with deciding whether or not to subject yourself to Jewish customs. But this passage was written for you and me so that we could understand the nature and character of God.

1. God’s folk don’t need a yoke. V. 10
   1. A yoke is literally what they would put on cattle to keep them together. It was a heavy piece of wood. Figuratively it referred to troublesome laws imposed on someone. I found it interesting that Revelation 6:5 uses the word to describe a pair of balances. These both depict something under which the bearers of the weight must succumb.
   2. You may not have a yoke of Judaism, but it is likely that you have brought other yokes.
      1. A family will be dysfunctional when individuals bring to the table their own expectations and disregard the abilities and desires of others.
      2. The Jewish believers had unknowingly acted in a way that disregarded what God wanted and urged the gentiles to meet their expectations for righteousness.
      3. What are you trusting in to be saved?
         1. Do you believe that you are going to heaven because you are a good person? Then you are bearing a yoke God didn’t give you.
         2. Do you believe God loves you because you come to church? That’s not God’s yoke.
         3. Do you believe that because you have kept yourself from major trouble like prison or infidelity that you are ok?
   3. This has everything to do with us, because it tells us how we can be accepted by God.
      1. Ephesians 2:8-9 *For by grace are ye saved through faith and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast.*
      2. Romans 10:9-10 *That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth, and the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.*
      3. Every other religion in the world compels men and women to WORK! To DO! Biblical Christianity stands alone and calls us to lay down our works and humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God.
      4. The same humble attitude with which we came to God for salvation is the one that He wants us to live by. We do not look to a checklist to try to find acceptance with Him. We will never be good enough for Him. We must continually hold to the promise of God’s Word and remember that our salvation is not based on keeping traditions or pleasing men, but on the truth of God’s Word.

Conclusion: I know that there is a danger in embracing this truth to go too far to the other extreme. There may be some who hear this message and ask, “So it doesn’t matter what I do? I can just do whatever and God will be ok with it because He loves me?” That is absolutely not what I am saying. That is another message in itself, but the passage we are looking at here is primarily dealing with what is necessary for salvation. Don’t be fooled, there are real consequences to your disobedience to God. There is pain, sorrow, and regret waiting for you if that is the attitude that you take towards God.

This passage is important because I know that the same tendency of the Jewish believers is something we deal with. For the most part those of you trying to live your lives pleasing God don’t come across people who expect you to keep the law to be saved. It may be that you do, I don’t know. But I do know that Satan is always trying to keep people down when they fall. We all live in an environment filled with temptations and distractions, unfortunately somewhere along the way you will find that you sin. And you may not always engage in the good that God wants you to do. Don’t allow yourself to avoid what God wants for you because you are unable to keep the law. Psalm 119:81 *Thou art my hiding place and my shield: I hope in thy word.*