

Grace Fellowship Church

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Series: Acts

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Grace: A Beautiful Mess

Acts 15

If you have a Bible, I want you to turn to Acts 15. If you don't have a Bible, there are some folks who are going to walk out with carts, and they will bring one to you because Buddy desperately wants you to have a Bible in your hand. You can borrow these from us, and you can lay them back at the carts later if you want. If you need one, you can just take that home with you.

As you turn to Acts 15, I want to say thank you for your great greeting here, my time so far at Grace. I've met a lot of you personally. Some of you I've met by email or by text, and some of you have become Facebook friends, and that's a phenomenal thing for me to get to know you a little bit. Here's what happened in my role as chief of staff: I get a lot of those "one off" conversations that go something like, "Hey, if you could just fix this one thing. There's just this one thing. Grace is great. It's awesome, but there's just this one thing."

Now multiply that times 4,000 people who attend, and I have some work to do. I have a great list, job security for sure. It might be a different thing for everybody, but one of the ways I've

been describing Grace to my friends who know I'm back in Atlanta now is that Grace is a beautiful mess. Don't you agree?

God is just doing incredible things all over, through, and around this body. As a matter of fact, about 20 minutes ago I got a text from Buddy, and what he said is, "As you pray this morning, please pray this way: I am sharing the kingdom right now with a young man named Arafat." So would it be okay with you guys if we just started out by praying for that conversation and others like it?"

Jesus, our pastor is alongside three of our brothers and sisters who we love. They're taking the gospel to the nations. Lord, I pray You would give favor to conversations he has, right now particularly with Arafat, but I pray You'd open doors for many more conversations, and I pray that Arafat or someone they meet would be a person of peace, who would open the doors for the gospel to an entire portion of people on that continent who need You. Let them sense Your power with them and the anointing of Your Spirit as they speak. In Jesus' name, amen.

So you agree Grace is a beautiful mess, right? Do you know why it is? It's because you're a mess kind of, aren't you? I mean, really if we're honest, I'm a mess, you're a mess, we're all a mess. Do you agree? Yeah. Do you want to feel a little better? Look at the person beside you and just tell them, "Hey, you're a mess."

Now if you want to put some emphasis on it, like tell them, "The Bible says you're a mess." Go ahead and do that. That's even better! But the good news in what we're going to read today is that

in Acts 15, what we see is the early church was a mess too. It was a mess too, but it was a beautiful mess. See, we're the messy part; Jesus is the beautiful part. When those two things line up, you can have the aspiration not to just be a mess but to be a beautiful mess.

So if you would, just look at Acts 15 with me, and we're going to sort of read this in three segments. First, we're going to read verses 1-21 because the church had a controversy, and the church had some outsiders come in and try to redirect the beauty, tried to co-op it just a little bit, and we begin reading about that in verse 1.

It says, "But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.' And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.

So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers.

When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, 'It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.'

The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, 'Brothers, you know that in the early days

God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as He did to us, and He made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.'

And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. After they finished speaking, James replied, 'Brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for His name. And with this, the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, "After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old."

Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.'" (Acts 15:1-21)

All right, now when we step into this, what we see in Acts 15 is the early church was struggling, and they were struggling with legalism. If you want to know what the definition of legalism is, we can turn to *Webster's* for some help. It says, "Strict adherence to law, but to the letter rather than the spirit." Now, the second one is even more pointed when it says, "The doctrine that salvation is gained through good works," is legalism. The third definition is, "Judging conduct in terms of adherence to precise laws."

Now why was legalism an issue? Legalism was an issue because the people Jesus came to, whom He lived a perfect life for, was born of a virgin, died for our sins on the cross, and rose from the dead to redeem, those people were messed up. Do you agree? Just like you. They were born into a religious culture where the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the scribes and the teachers of the law had 613 *mitzvahs* (commands) from the Old Testament.

If you really want to divide these up, if you wanted to be a good Jew, what you had to do in this day was obey 613 laws, 248 of them were positive, things we *should* do, things you should do, and then 365 of them were negative, things *not* to do. Then when you want to add to that... In this culture of legalists, that's the way their message was showing up. That may not be the way your mess up is showing up, but that's the way their mess was showing up.

So here's what happened: There were scribes who would write laws that interpreted those 613 laws, and they were in encyclopedia-sized books, and they were ridiculous. They were addicted to the law. Their mess was legalism, and so that culture was filled with legalism, so when the grace of Christ came, it was absolutely foreign to them.

It's foreign to a lot of us, but it doesn't have to be. See, one of the laws I think is the craziest...this is the craziest one...is that you couldn't cook on the Sabbath. Now could you imagine how life would change for us if cooking were not allowed on the Sabbath? See, but you need to know the interpretation to see how ridiculous this was.

Here's how crazy it was: If you cooked on the Sabbath that meant you had to have a fire. That meant you had to boil water. Now, if you couldn't cook on the Sabbath, you couldn't take a shower on the Sabbath. That's obviously just intuitive, right? No, it's not obviously intuitive, but one of the interpretations of the law was you couldn't take a shower on the Sabbath.

Here's why you couldn't take a shower on the Sabbath: Because there might be a fire in your house, and you might have a droplet of water on your skin, and you might scoot close enough to the fire for the fire to boil the droplet of water that's on your skin. That would be cooking. That would be work. You would be breaking the law. Isn't that crazy?

That's how crazy we get. We have books of interpreting laws, 613 laws, and that's why Jesus in Matthew 11:28 said, "Come to Me, all of you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you..." What? "...rest. I will give you rest." See, the grace of Christ enters a beautiful, beautiful group of people who were created in His image, but they were beautiful messes, and when grace comes we get to be a part of that beautiful mess.

So if you're one of those blanks people, and you need your blanks filled in, here you go.

1. *Religious leaders of Jesus' day struggled with legalism.* They struggled with legalism.

2. *The early church struggled with legalism.* If we were honest, we'd bring it up today.

3. *You and I actually struggle with legalism,* but in America it kind of takes on a different form. It's we have preferences for some things we like and some things we don't like, so it's my brand of legalism I want to put as a yoke on you, and Jesus says, "No, break the yoke." It's your brand of legalism you want to put on me. No, Jesus says, "Break the yoke."

Now I hate to admit this, but if we were honest, we would say we've come to understand this in a variety of different ways. One is individually, and then in our families, and then we come to understand this in communities we're a part of, and the church is a community we're a part of. So as a family man, you just need to know that my wife and I grew up in very different homes. I kind of grew up in the Cleaver household until later in my teenage years. She kind of grew up in...I don't have a comparison. Let's see, flower child, hippie home...not the Cleavers, okay?

When we got married, that was just going to blend together really easy, right? Absolutely, it's going to really blend together well. So here's what I thought to myself: *She's had a crazy growing up life.* Her parents split up at two. They divorced at five. Her mother died when she was 11. There was just a little bit of craziness everywhere. So I thought as the husband I could fix everything. Men in the room are just shaking their heads. I didn't even have to tell you. You just sat there and started shaking. *No, bro, that's not going to happen.*

I tried. I did try. I tried to do everything I could to make the growing up experience she had more complete, and I'll never forget those little markers of "Hey, we're a normal family" would come along. We would get our apartment and we would make it up with everybody else's cast off furniture. We would get the whole family's...whatever they didn't want. They'd go buy something new, and we'd get it, and we were just glad to have it.

So then we got our first home, our starter home, and about three weeks in we were going to have our first dinner party. That was our goal. Now it was on people's borrowed furniture, people's borrowed dishes. I mean everything was borrowed for us. I was in youth ministry, making a grand total of \$7,000 a year. We had it going on.

So here was the deal: We invited those people over, and I told her, "I want you to take off and have a great day leading up to tonight because I'm the fixer. I'm the Messiah. I have the Jesus' complex. I'm going to fix everything that was ever wrong in your world. I want you to go out. I've made this money. I want you to go get a nice outfit. I want you to go get your hair and nails, toes done, all that sort of stuff. You can even go eat with one of your girlfriends. Just go have fun. I'll get the house ready for the dinner party."

Now I did a great job. I cleaned the entire house. I swept floors. I vacuumed. I did laundry all day long. I put new sheets on *the* bed, not every bed. I did everything I could possibly do, and then I had to go take a shower to get ready before she was coming back, and I said, *Okay, it's all good. I have to get the dishes going.* I couldn't find the powder, so... What! You act like you

know the rest of this story. There's a reason that the soap liquid says, "Enriched." Let me just say that.

So I opened the door, and I thought, *Well you fill up the little tray with powder, so you must need to fill that up with liquid.* So I filled that whole thing up with liquid, and then I wanted the dishes to really, really clean, so I just kind of squirted some back up in there, not knowing that the powder gets everywhere. I just thought, *Hey, liquid isn't as potent.* I don't know what I was doing.

I went and took my shower. Dishes are rolling. I get out of the shower. I step out of my bedroom, and I look down my hallway. Suds are coming up toward me waist deep down our hallway. It had filled the kitchen that was over here waist deep, and they were now coming out into the living room where there's carpet and all sorts of other things.

I remember walking up and looking over and going, *How in the world? Something's wrong with our dishwasher.* That's what I thought! So I parted the suds, went over to the sink, and I couldn't think straight. I've done great all day long, and now she's coming home in 15 minutes, and I'm a dead man! Our dinner party is now toast.

So here's what I did: I went back to the bedroom, put on my bathing suit, and I went into the kitchen, and I opened the cabinet drawer. I couldn't think of anything else to do, so I got trash bags and opened them up like this, and I ran through the kitchen, tied it off, and took it out back.

Twenty-five bags of suds! (This gives you great confidence in me being your chief of staff, doesn't it?)

Twenty-five bags. I couldn't leave them in the garage because when she opened the garage door I didn't want that there, so I put them in the back. Then I had to take all of the towels and just soak up the corners and do all that sort of stuff. I had towels and I just went and threw them back in the clothes washer and started another load. I look, and she's coming up the driveway. I take off back to the back of the house, get changed, and greet her at the door. "Hey, honey! How are you? It's great to see you."

She said, "Man, the house smells lemony fresh! It's really great." I said, "Yeah, it does. It does. I worked hard today." She said, "I'm going to go get something to drink." We only had a certain number of dishes, so the only place she could get them was out of the dishwasher, which was the only place I didn't get the suds out of. I said, "Why don't you go get ready? I'll bring you something to drink."

She started walking down the hall, and you know that sort of mom/wife intuitive little alarm that goes off in their head? She's about halfway down the hall, and she stopped and turned around and said, "You didn't use the liquid soap in the dishwasher." I'm like, "How could you know that! How could you possibly know that!"

She said, "Honey, it's okay. You're so sweet. Thank you." I was like, "I totally messed this up, and you're telling me I'm sweet?" I couldn't believe how gracious she was with me, toward me, and for me. Listen, I know I can't fix the mess she grew up in because I'm a bigger mess.

You're a bigger mess. How many of you have tried to fix a mess and you realize, *I am just a bigger mess than the mess I'm trying to fix?* Absolutely, you are. I am. We all are. That's because we struggle. So, why then? Here's some time for confession. This is not for you to look at anybody else and say they're a mess, but we are fundamentally messed up, aren't we? We really are. Can you acknowledge that?

Those of you who have experienced the grace of Christ know you don't deserve your salvation, right? You know. You know if He hadn't come and in a very messy way cleaned up your mess by substituting Himself for your mess-ups, your sins, on the cross, you had no shot of getting to God on your own. Can you confess that? Can we confess that?

Here's the cure to legalism: The cure to legalism is you and I have to constantly remember how it is we came into this relationship with God anyway, don't we? We have to remember it. These people weren't remembering it. Now they were in a little different time because Judaism and Christianity were walking side by side. They were trying to figure some things out. They didn't have Acts 15 to read yet. It was being lived, and then it was going to be written. They didn't have the history we have. They just had the Spirit of God in them. So you're fundamentally messed up, and the good part is, just like everybody else.

So here you go one more time. Look at the person beside you and say, "You're just as messed up as I am." There you go. That'll work. I want to show you what the lands of the Bible and the penetration of the gospel look like when this was being lived out. In Acts 15, just before this began, this is what the Bible lands looked like. If you can see this map, where there's yellow, there were believers known to live. Do you see that? That's where they were.

So you can pray for me now that you've heard that story...you can pray for my family...I just want to show you so you can walk through all my years of being a family man, and you can pray intensely for my family with them being led by me. I want to show you the progression of my family as they grow up. So here's a picture of when Mary Beth was little. That's Kim, Seth, Nate, Drew, and Mary Beth. It took all day to get her to pose right there. The rest of us were smiling. That's our Christmas card that year.

Then a few years later, this is the picture, and this picture is special to me because we almost lost Kim. Some of you walked through that season of life with us. She had cardiopulmonary embolism break loose about two months before that picture was taken, so when I see that one it always reminds me that I could have been a single dad and have great grace for those who are.

A couple of years later, it was this picture, and then something happened with one of our kid's hormones in this next picture. I'm not sure exactly what was going on, but it's unfortunate. It's just unfortunate. They've shrunk back down to normal size, or maybe their body just grew a little bit. I don't know.

Then a couple of years ago, it was this picture. So that's my family. You can pray for us. They have to live with me in my mess, but one of the things I've learned...*I can't fix my family. I can't fix me. I'm just a mess.*

If you look at Acts 15:22-29, we see what the Lord's solution for people who were trying to say, "You need to be circumcised. You can't get to Jesus without going through the gate of circumcision." Pick up at verse 22.

"Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, with the following letter: 'The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul...' (Acts 15:22-25)

So in reality what happened was that church had leadership. They were being troubled by this teaching. They didn't know what to do. They didn't know how to process Gentiles coming to faith in Christ. They didn't know whether they needed to go through Judaism. They didn't know whether they needed to just be treated uniquely, and so they sent Paul and Barnabas and some of their leaders.

Verse 26: These were "...men who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell." (Acts 15:26-29)

So what happened? They sent leaders to the recognized church in Jerusalem, and they said, "Here's the issue: We're leading Gentiles to faith in Christ. We have Jews among us who feel like they need to go through the law of Moses to get to Jesus. So what do we do?" Paul and Barnabas had sharp disputes with the people who were teaching that way, and the church just didn't know how to respond. It was a young church. It was a new church. It was an aggressive church. The gospel was moving rapidly as a result of this church.

So what do we do? We send leadership to leadership. They're going to the church in Jerusalem. They met and had a council there and they discussed, "What should we do?" The decision of the council was this simple: "We just want to tell you you don't need to worry about that. Here are the things to do: Live a holy life." That was their answer. Live a holy life.

You don't have externals to go through to get to Christ. Just like all Jews who came into the kingdom through Jesus, there are no external hurdles you have to go through to get to Him. It's internal. It's by faith through grace resulting in repentance, a change of mind that leads to a change of heart that leads to a change of life. That's why they said abstain from food offered to

idols, don't eat certain types of animals that have been strangled, and avoid sexual immorality. Just live a holy life. Now that Christ is in you, by faith live out the life He would live through you.

So they provided leadership. God provides *leadership*, and that's a grace gift. So leadership is a definition on your sheet. "A person or persons who guides or directs a group." Number two, it's "influence exerted toward uniting a group to function together toward a common goal." Number three, it's "a position of authority matched with the power to lead."

So those of you who need blanks as you're working through this passage...

1. *God's response to legalism, which was our mess, is grace. It's grace.*

2. *God's response to legalism (our mess) is grace-filled leadership.* He provided men who sought God, who had the Holy Spirit alive in their lives through faith, and men who were wrestling through what this movement of Christianity was accomplishing to guide it.

So they kind of went to the Head. The Head sent grace-filled messages of leadership back. By the way, in this church God has blessed this church with grace-filled leadership. How many of you just love our staff as a whole? Aren't they amazing? Your staff is a reflection of your pastor, and he's an amazing leader. Your elders are here to lead you and to lead you effectively.

As a matter of fact, I just wanted you guys to know Acts 15 is happening in Grace. We're leading nations, neighborhoods, and next generation to the Lord, and some people don't like how we're doing it. Some people don't like how we're leading Muslims. So here's what we do on the back on your blue sheet: We've just established... This has always been here for Grace. This is what we believe. This is what our elders hold us responsible to uphold and to teach. If anybody ever wants to know when folks look at, *Man, Muslims coming into the kingdom? How do you do that?*

Well we *debate* how you do it. Here's what I love: I love the way Grace does that a whole lot more than the way a lot of folks don't even try. Don't you love that? It *is* messy. We learn as we've been doing it for 10 years. We've learned a whole lot, and we're going to keep learning, but if you ever want to know what we believe in relation to that, it's just right here. This is it. This is what we hold to. Everything we do reflects this right here.

So we have elders who hold us accountable to that. We have grace-filled leadership, and I want to say this. We talked about individuals, family, and home. In no way am I stepping into deep water when I say we need a revival of godly men leading godly homes with godly wives demonstrating biblical marriage. Do you agree with that? We need that. Lord, we need that.

Different roles in the home, equal value before God. The blood of Christ works through every member of the home who's a believer, but what we need is men standing up for God, leading their homes alongside wives who are supporting and leading with them, demonstrating biblical marriage to the next generation so that when the kids who are over there right now and down

there right now grow up, it would be foreign to them to do anything else but be biblical men married to biblical women, demonstrating biblical marriage in a culture that desperately needs to see healthy families in the church. Don't you agree? Amen, amen.

Well it's time for confession for us to say we are a mess. It's also time for concession. The leaders of Jerusalem sent a letter to the church that was being troubled. A little later on we're going to take Communion during our worship time, and when we do, you're going to see at Communion stations laid out a card that looks like this because maybe there's a letter you need to receive.

Maybe this morning God's putting a letter in your spiritual mailbox, and He asks you to respond in faith to it. So maybe if you come to Christ... Grace, wouldn't you just love it if we saw just tons of people come to Jesus this morning? Wouldn't that be great? Man, we'd love it. Maybe you need to receive that. Maybe you need to receive it's time for us to stand up and demonstrate what biblical families look like.

Maybe the Lord's speaking to us. Maybe He's saying, "Hey, you lean toward legalism. Listen, you're a mess. They're a mess. Lean toward grace." Maybe He has something, and He wants you to respond to that, but maybe it's not a grace-filled letter you need to receive; maybe it's a grace-filled letter you need to give.

You pick this card up at the Communion station in a little while, and you can write a note to somebody. You can put their address on it. Even if you want us to mail them, there are little

mailboxes like this that we'd love for you to just drop that in, and we'll put a stamp on it. We won't read them, and we'll mail them for you. Maybe during worship that's one of the responses you need to consider this morning as you respond to what God's teaching us by faith.

Let's move on. Godly leadership is a gift. As a youth pastor really basically for 25 years before I came here, leading youth pastors for nine of those, leading students and families and church in the rest of that time, I came to understand what grace-filled leadership was. I've worked under some great men, some great, godly men. I'm so thankful I've been able to lead alongside them. I'm leading alongside one now.

It wasn't always that easy. Those men are messes. The leaders we have, they're not grace-filled and perfect, are they? They're messes. My pastor took me to a conference of pastors when I was 24 years old as a youth pastor and I needed to grow up. It was in downtown Atlanta. It was with a large crew of pastors. They came in from everywhere. He told me I needed to wear a suit, and I said, "All right." So I wore a jogging suit, and everybody else wore a Sunday suit, and I wasn't being facetious when I did it. I actually didn't have many suits at the time.

So we went downtown to that deal, and he would introduce everybody, and everybody would look at me and say, "Youth pastor, right?" I go, "Yeah, I am." Then they started teasing me, pastor/youth pastor teasing. You know that stuff goes around. We do that all the time. They teased me ruthlessly for about four days.

Well this conference was at the Hyatt. It was the first place downtown that had the infrared little faucets. You know what I'm talking about? So this pastor who had been teasing me all week went in, and he was trying to wash his hands, and he couldn't figure out where to turn the faucets on. I saw that as a great opportunity for retaliation against all those men who had been teasing me all week long. So I walked up and I said, "Here's what you need to do, bro: If you just tap on the side of the sink right here, and put your hands under it..." When I put my hands under the infrared sensor it came on. He thought it was the tap. It was the infrared sensor.

I said, "If you do this, you can get water for your hands." He was like, "That's awesome. That's great." He went over to his sink and went *knock knock* and just looked at it, and nothing happened. I said, "Listen, I think it might be broken. Let me check." I hit it, put my hands underneath it, the water came on. I said, "You must be hitting it in the wrong place."

So here he is: *Knock knock, knock knock, knock, knock, knock knock, knock knock, knock knock, knock knock knock knock knock knock knock, KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK!* I said, "Let me check." *Knock knock*. Hands under there. The water comes on. It's driving him crazy. I said, "Maybe try another sink."

So he starts going up 15 rows of sinks right here, tapping them one at a time, and I'm just sitting over there so proud of myself like I really had this devious, twisted sense of humor. I was like, *Ha!* "Thank You, Jesus." I loved it.

About that time, my pastor had snuck in the bathroom behind me, and I felt the steely, cold clasp of his hand on my shoulder, and he said, "Tell him." He's going to make me admit. I was like, "Bro, you've been messing with me and my jogging suit all week, so listen, there's no place to hit it. Watch this. Just put your hand underneath it. Watch this one. Watch this one. It's magic! Look. Look." He just shook his head and said, "Stupid youth pastor."

So when we are a mess, the best we can do is just have fun with it. Just enjoy it. God will give you these moments pregnant with grace where you get an opportunity to just jump in. We're coming to a close. I want us to read these last five verses, 30-35. God gives liberty.

In verse 30, "So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them. But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also." (Acts 15:30-35)

What this encourages us is *liberty*. Liberty is the "freedom from arbitrary or despotic government or control." It's the "power or right of doing, thinking, speaking according to choice." For the believer, it's according to God's choice. You have the freedom actually to obey when you come to grace. You can't obey. When you come to Christ, and you receive His grace, and you step into faith, you have the freedom for the first time to do what God has called you to do.

He transforms you from the inside out. Number three, it's the "freedom from captivity, confinement, or physical restraint." Those of you who need blanks, here they are.

1. *In the midst of the mess, grace encourages the church.* In these five verses, what we saw, they received the letter, and in verse 31, "And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement." (Acts 15:31) They were encouraged.

2. *In the midst of the mess, grace strengthened believers.* Verse 32: "And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words." (Acts 15:32) So grace strengthens us. They were already saved, but grace continues its work encouraging the church and strengthening believers.

3. *In the midst of the mess, grace actually accelerated the advance of the gospel.* "And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them. But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also." (Acts 15:33-35)

I want to show you that map of the world at this time again. What we looked at first was a little tiny bit of Christian presence. You see it near Jerusalem and Antioch and Corinth and Rome. Buddy has been talking about the Antioch effect. That's in 45 AD. The time between that slide and this slide is when this book was written, reflecting on what was going on because of grace, and in 20 years because of grace lived out by people who were a mess amongst people of a mess,

but they were a beautiful mess, and people could see the beautiful mess they were in. That became the attraction to the gospel. There's the difference.

From those little bitty tiny yellow circles to almost little peninsulas and continents and some islands 200 years later, that's what had happened with Christianity. Here's the deal: This is what I want to say to you, and we're closing. We'll pray. Because of grace, God makes you, the church, the attraction in this world to Him. Christ in you is the hope of glory.

Now I know what you're thinking because in North America, this is the way we do church, this is what happens: You get a great speaker like Buddy, and he's the attraction. You get a great worship leader like Aaron; he's the attraction. You do everything you can to make a really comfortable environment. You put some coffee out there. You make sure people know how to get from the parking lot inside. They come in here and in this process of about 75 minutes that attracts them to the gospel.

Acts 15 says, "No, no, no. That is not the attraction to the gospel." Here's what it is: Christ in you out there for the next 166 hours until we gather back here to hear from you how He took the mess of your life and He added grace when you came to Christ by faith and made it a beautiful mess, and your life next to your neighbors, your ball team members, your school, your peers, anybody who encounters you is the attraction to the gospel.

Now *this* is when the church gets together and says, "Here's what God did in our lives this week, and we celebrate our faces off because we can't withhold how good He is and what He has done

for us. That Christ would take our mess and somehow come alive inside of us and make us the attraction causes us to remember and to avoid legalism.

In just a few moments...Aaron is coming now...we're going to give you the opportunity to respond to Christ in a variety of ways. You may have a letter you need to send. If you do, at these stations all over the room, there's a card here for you. If you want to write before you leave, stick it in. We'll mail it. We'll deliver the mail for you.

For some of you if you're a believer, it's to remember the body of Christ that was broken for you and to dip it into the blood of Christ that paid the penalty for your sins and to take in and cause yourself to remember to avoid the mess of legalism by remembering the grace that brought you into the family, or it might be that as an individual you need to trust Christ. We have a prayer team here that would love to pray with you if that's the response you need to make to Jesus. Let's pray together.

Lord, we're so thankful for who You are, and we ask by Your incredible grace that we would confess we're a mess and we would by faith ask You to come into the middle of our mess and let grace make it a beautiful mess. Lord, there are families here that are in turmoil. They need You to enter into that. Take a mess and make it beautiful with the obedience of Your people lived out through the power of Your Spirit inside of them.

Lord, we as believers together in community, we have so much to learn that You're by grace here to teach us. We want to receive it. Lord, for those of us sitting here who don't know You, and we know we don't know You, call us to Your Son. Turn our mess into beauty.

Father, we ask now as we respond in worship that You would lead us in our response, that we'd be obedient even as we sit here in these moments dwell together around Your throne, acknowledging our deep need for You and loving You for the way You want to absolutely, freely give Yourself to us. Help us be receivers, and then when we leave here reproducers, taking the incredible grace we've been given as we scatter in Jesus' name.