

Sunday, December 6, 2025 | Missio Dei

Week 4 | Acts 15:1-35 | "Sola Fide"

**READ:** Acts 15:1-35 (ESV)

<sup>1</sup> 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.**" <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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."

<sup>6</sup> The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. <sup>7</sup> 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.** <sup>8</sup> And **God,** who knows the heart, **bore witness** to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, <sup>9</sup> and **he made no distinction** between us and them, **having cleansed their hearts by faith.** <sup>10</sup> 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? <sup>11</sup> But we believe that we will be **saved through the grace** of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

<sup>12</sup> 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.** <sup>13</sup> After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brothers, listen to me. <sup>14</sup> Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. <sup>15</sup> And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written,

<sup>16</sup> "'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, <sup>17</sup> 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 <sup>18</sup> known from of old.'

<sup>19</sup> Therefore, my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.”

<sup>22</sup> 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, <sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> 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**, <sup>25</sup> 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, <sup>26</sup> men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>27</sup> We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. <sup>28</sup> For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: <sup>29</sup> 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.”

<sup>30</sup> So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. <sup>31</sup> And when they had read it, **they rejoiced because of its encouragement**. <sup>32</sup> And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. <sup>33</sup> And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them. <sup>35</sup> But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

The Protestant Reformation (1517-1648) sought to reform the church. At the time, it had become corrupted by false teaching—e.g., indulgences, prayers to saints, veneration of Mary, transubstantiation, papal supremacy, and so on. But among the many criticisms the reformers had of Catholicism, they especially took issue with how it taught that salvation involved, in some capacity, human merit. Using the Scriptures, Martin Luther thoroughly demonstrated that salvation is secured, not by works, but by faith. And he coined the term “Sola Fide” (lat. “faith alone”) to highlight this fundamental aspect of the gospel.

As such, Sola Fide is one of the key characteristics of Protestantism. In fact, it not only distinguishes us from Catholicism, but it also separates us from all other world religions. Apologist Wes Huff explained this principle best when he said,

“Within Christianity, you have something that’s inherently unique in that in all other systems of religiosity, it’s some form of survival of the fittest—it’s some form of do this, and you’re accepted, feel this, and you’re accepted, or think this, and you’re accepted. It’s one of those three things. However, Christianity says you can’t feel, do, or think enough; it’s not gonna work. You’re not going to live up to the standard of a holy God. And so, it’s not survival of the fittest—it’s not the most intelligent, or the most spiritual. Instead, the Fittest [Jesus Christ] steps down and sacrifices Himself for the survival of the weakest. That’s what we call the gospel. That’s the good news. It’s subverting the system. It reverses the works-based system of all the other religions, where it’s up to you—just do, just think, just feel enough, and you’ll be accepted. Whereas the Bible says, “No, you’re accepted, now do, now feel, now think.” It’s a very different paradigm.”<sup>1</sup>

In today’s passage, we’ll see the early church wrestle with this very issue. Some will claim that works, namely circumcision, are essential for salvation, while others will fervently and successfully defend the doctrine of Sola Fide. While good works are a *result* of salvation (cf. Eph. 2:10; Ja. 2:17-18), they’re not a *requirement* for salvation. The moment we move away from this essential understanding is the moment we forfeit the gospel for a cheap forgery.

This passage is divided into four parts:

#### 1.) Vs. 1-5 – A **Disagreement** Arose

**Vs. 1** – While still in Antioch of Syria, Luke tells us of "some men [who] came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” God called Abraham, promising that the land of Israel would be given to his descendants. Circumcision was given as a sign of this promise (cf. Ac. 7:8). As such, all Jews had to be circumcised to be included in that promise. In fact, if a Gentile converted to Judaism, they, too, would have to be circumcised.<sup>2</sup> At which point, they’d become a

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<sup>1</sup> Julian, Dorey, “Ancient Language Expert on BANNED Bible, Book of Enoch & Jesus Origins | Wes Huff • 257,” December 6, 2024, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUkZfgE-L\\_k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUkZfgE-L_k), [accessed December 5, 2025]. This quote is taken from this episode. However, searching the auto-generated transcripts doesn't show it in the main interview. It was likely said during the Patreon-only session following the episode.

<sup>2</sup> If a Gentile convert to Judaism didn't get circumcised, they would be called a "God-fearer" and wouldn't be considered as much of a Jew as those who went through circumcision.

“proselyte,” and though they wouldn't hold the same status as those who were born Jews, they would nevertheless be considered a part of the faith.

Here, we see that the importance of circumcision is being imported into Christianity. Those in favor of circumcision must've thought that if it was required before, they didn't see any reason to do away with it. They were so sure of their conclusion that they were emphatic that one “cannot be saved” unless they're circumcised. **And to be fair, they had strong Scriptural support for thinking this:**

God told Abraham in Gen. 17:11-4, “You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

**Vs. 2** – Nevertheless, despite the Scripture's precedence, such teaching greatly troubled “Paul and Barnabas,” who began debating these teachers. In fact, Luke says there was “no small dissension,” implying that the disagreements between the two parties were so significant that this issue could not be settled by one of the leading figures in the church and an apostle.

Apparently, the gulf widened to the point that the two sides could not reconcile. So, the issue had to be sent to a higher authority. Luke says, “Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.”

**Vs. 3-4** – This trip, however, served more than one purpose. As Paul and Barnabas traveled, they described “in detail the conversion of the Gentiles” to all the churches they came in contact with along the way. These reports “brought great joy to all the brothers.” Reports from the mission filed are a delight to those who are missionally minded. Even when they arrived in “Jerusalem,” though they came to settle a significant debate, they first used this opportunity to declare “all that God had done with them.”

**Vs. 5** – However, while the church celebrated there, those who would not be distracted from the task at hand. Luke says, “Some believers [not unbelievers] 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.’” If you'll recall, the Pharisees were obsessed with meticulously following the demands of the Mosaic law and abiding by the oral traditions. This is why it is not surprising

that we learn the issue isn't simply a matter of circumcision, but of keeping the "law of Moses." These well-meaning but misled believers wanted to make Gentiles into Jewish proselytes.

**Takeaway #1:** Good debate crystallizes truth.

Proverbs 18:17 says, "The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him." If you're only hearing one voice, you're only getting a part of the truth. Healthy argumentation helps us get a full grasp of a situation.

But when we debate, we ought to do so with respect, integrity, and charity. Peter says, "In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame" (1 Pe 3:15–16).

Debate may lead to division, and, sometimes, a parting of the ways is necessary (cf. Ac. 15:39). But disunity is not always a foregone conclusion. Marcus Tullius Cicero famously said, "Clarity of thought is a must for clarity in speech." In other words, that which we see more clearly, we speak more clearly. And it is often through the means of healthy discussion that clarity on a topic is achieved. Though Sola Fide can be traced back to the words of Christ himself (cf. Lu. 23:43; Jn. 5:24; 6:28-29), here, in Ac. 15, the doctrine was put through the furnace of debate, distilling our understanding of soteriology. Good debate crystallizes truth, and such a thing is a thing of beauty (cf. Pro. 25:11).

## 2.) Vs. 6-11 – A Defense Stated

**Vs. 6** – Luke says, the leaders of the church, "the apostles and the elders," convened a meeting to "consider this matter." The unity of the church is a serious matter.

**Vs. 7** – Sadly, we're not told the details of the debate. It would've been nice to hear the counterarguments against Sola Fide. However, one thing is clear: there was "much debate." So whatever the decision, it did not come easily or quickly.

Peter reappears as the primary spokesman once again. He briefly recounts his encounter with the centurion Cornelius in Acts 10. And, as with all good arguments, God is at the center of Peter's position. The Lord is the one who "made a choice...that...the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe," and it was 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." This is all old news to the Jerusalem church. If you'll recall, Peter was even

confronted about this very moment by the same group: “the circumcision party” (11:2). None could deny the Lord’s hand in grafting the Gentiles into the church.

But the thing that Peter points out is that God did not cleanse the Gentile’s hearts by circumcision or any other requirement of the law, for that matter; he “cleansed their hearts by faith.”

**Vs. 10-11** – Peter warns his audience, saying, “Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test.” Testing God was a serious transgression. In Ex. 17, Israel, though cared for by God, tested him by demanding water. They were so disrespectful that they even “quarreled” with Moses (Ex. 17:2), insisting that God prove himself.

In this instance, however, the Jewish believers weren't demanding something from God; they were demanding something from the Gentiles that God didn't demand. They were “placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?” The “yoke” isn’t circumcision, though that’s part of it. Peter is speaking more generally about the law. Not even the Jews could fulfill all the demands of the Law in order to be saved. And yet they wanted the Gentiles to uphold the law? It didn’t make sense. Jesus said, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt. 23:4). These believers wanted to make the gospel a heavy yoke upon the necks of the Gentiles.

Demanding the Gentiles be circumcised not only revealed that these Jews misunderstood the basics of the gospel, but it also demonstrated that they misunderstood the purpose of the law. You see, the Law was never intended to save. Paul says in Rom. 3:10, “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.” The purpose of the law was to reveal sin; it demonstrated that human beings were deeply flawed and could never earn their way to God. We needed someone to fulfill the law for us—i.e., Jesus Christ (cf. Matt. 5:17)—if we wanted a chance at salvation.

So, while the law was still good in that it educates us on how we ought to behave, salvation cannot be attained through that which is merely a teacher. This is why Peter says, “We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” The circumcision party was testing God by challenging his ways. By demanding Gentiles be circumcised, they were implying that the way God saved them was incorrect.

**Takeaway #2:** A faith and works salvation offends God and overburdens others.

Jesus condemned the religious leaders, saying, "You load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers" (Lu. 11:46). Serving God is meant to be a joy, and, sadly, some make it a drudgery by demanding things God never demanded.

### 3.) Vs. 12-21 – A **Decision** Reached

**Vs. 12** – Peter’s argument was so persuasive that “all the assembly **fell silent**.” To argue against such a rationale would mean aligning oneself with those who tested God with the water in the wilderness. Speaking of that moment, the Psalmist says, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work. For forty years, I loathed that generation and said, ‘They are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways.’ Therefore, I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest’ (Psa. 95:7c-11).” No one wanted to be associated with that generation.

Peter isn’t the only one to speak. Luke says the assembly “listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them **among the Gentiles**.” Not only had God worked through Peter to reach Cornelius, **but he was still working**. And he was doing so, **without** requiring circumcision.

**Vs. 13-18** – Then, Jesus’ half-brother, James, speaks. He affirms Peter's words, demonstrating that Gentiles' inclusion in the church by faith had **always** been God’s plan. He does this by quoting Amos 9:11-12, which says,

“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.”

They lived **in the age of fulfillment**, when the Lord was bringing the Gentiles into the fold. How God was doing this was sufficient, and any deviation from it would go against the prophets.

**Vs. 19-21** – James instructs the Gentiles to “**abstain**” from four things:

1. “**things polluted by idols**” – so those things which had any connection to idolatry.
2. “**sexual immorality**” – This is self-explanatory. Given that it comes in a list with other idolatrous practices, it's likely a reference to temple prostitutes.
3. Things that have “**been strangled**” – Strangling an animal was common in idol worship, and the process kept the blood in the animal.

4. “**blood**” – Blood was seen as the life force of creatures (cf. Gen. 9:4-6); it was also the substance used in sacrifices to make atonement (cf. Lev. 17:11). To eat it would be to treat common that which was sacred.

The prohibition against “**sexual immorality**” is always wrong in every scenario (cf. Rom. 13:13; 1 Cor. 5:11; 10:8; Rev. 21:8). However, in Rom. 14-15, Paul will confine things like food “**polluted by idols,**” “**strangled**” and “**blood**” to a matter of conscience. So, while on the one hand, he says, “**let us not pass judgment on one another any longer**” when it comes to matters like food, on the other hand, he says, “**decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother**” (Rom. 14:13).

James’s concern here is the same as Paul’s: **Jewish sensibilities**. After all, as James points out, “**For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.**” The OT, and its many prohibitions, are read weekly. The Jewish conscience about things associated with idols isn’t going away. As such, the Gentiles needed to be aware that many of their practices would be highly offensive to their Jewish friends. It is essential that the believer not cause another believer to stumble in inconsequential matters like food. We ought to care so much for our fellow Christian’s conscience that we not eat or drink anything that would needlessly offend them. **This, of course, does not apply to the privacy of one’s home, but it does apply to table fellowship.** Paul said, “**If food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble**” (1 Cor. 8:13). He’d rather eat a salad than eat something that would cause a fellow Christian to fall.

**Takeaway #3:** Love **limits** its **liberty** for the sake of its loved ones.

Paul says, “**Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble**” (Rom. 14:20-21). “**We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself...May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (15:1-3a, 5-6).**

#### 4.) Vs. 22-35 – **Diplomats** Sent

**Vs. 22** – Now that the decision had been made, it was time to spread the news. The church in Jerusalem picked “**Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers**” to go back “**to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.**”

**Vs. 23-29** – Luke relays the contents of the letter. This is quite possibly the first epistle written in the history of the church. In addition to the four prohibitions above, it addresses the circumcision party, acknowledging that they had "gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds." But the letter also distances the Jerusalem church from the false teachers, saying, "We gave them no instructions." Part of the letter introduces Barnabas, Paul, Judas, and Silas, describing their credentials and purpose.

**Vs. 30-35** – Once the men "delivered the letter," Luke says the Gentiles "rejoiced because of its encouragement." And after "Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words," they returned to Jerusalem while "Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also."

**Takeaway #4:** God's word delights hearts hungry for truth.

Why is God's word such a joy? "If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction" (Psa. 119:92).

Psa. 19:8a – "The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart."

Psa. 119:45 – "I find my delight in your commandments, which I love."

Psa. 119:103 – "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth."

Psa. 119:162 – "I rejoice at your word like one who finds great spoil."

Jer. 15:16 – "Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name, O LORD, God of hosts."

*Soli Deo Gloria*

## **Video Description:**

### **Missio Dei | Week 4 | Acts 15:1-35 | “Sola Fide”**

The Protestant Reformation (1517-1648) sought to reform the church. At the time, it had become corrupted by false teaching—e.g., indulgences, prayers to saints, veneration of Mary, transubstantiation, papal supremacy, and so on. But among the many criticisms the reformers had of Catholicism, they especially took issue with how it taught that salvation involved, in some capacity, human merit. Using the Scriptures, Martin Luther thoroughly demonstrated that salvation is secured, not by works, but by faith. And he coined the term “Sola Fide” (lat. “faith alone”) to highlight this fundamental aspect of the gospel.

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## **Sermon Manuscript:**

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Season 42 | 4