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The Jerusalem Council , Grace, Not Law

Scripture: Acts 15:1-35

Theme: We are saved by grace through faith, not by keeping rules

High School (Ages 15-18)

Free curriculum for small and rural churches

Lesson Overview

"Grace Over Law: A Challenge to Human Effort" (Acts 15:1, 35) This lesson invites students to grapple with the tension between religious tradition and divine grace, as the Jerusalem Council wrestled with whether Gentile believers needed circumcision or other Jewish laws to be saved. Theological depth lies in exploring how Paul's defense of faith alone (not works) resists cultural pressures to perform, today, from legalism in religious institutions to performative piety in society. Real-world application asks: Where do we see grace or legalism demanded today? Encourage discussion by posing: How does the gospel challenge us to trust God's mercy over our own self-righteousness? (Short, thought-provoking, and open-ended for deeper exploration.) Optional reflection: children can draw a picture of Jesus helping their friends, then share one way they can help someone else this week. This extra activity supports the lesson's theme and gives teachers a simple, lowprep option for extending the discussion.

Bible Story

The Jerusalem Council: Grace Over Legalism (Acts 15:1, 35)

The early Christian church was growing rapidly, but tensions emerged over how Gentiles, non-Jews, could join in without first converting to Judaism. Some Jewish believers, led by Paul and Barnabas, insisted on circumcision and other Mosaic laws as a prerequisite for salvation, arguing that failure to observe them left Gentiles spiritually unclean. Meanwhile, a group of Pharisees (some of whom had been persecuting Christians before their conversion) claimed that salvation depended on keeping the Torah, not just trusting Christ. The dispute threatened to fracture the community, exposing a deeper conflict: Can grace be universal if law remains essential? The church's leaders, including Peter, Paul, and James, convened in Jerusalem to resolve this conflict, not for legalistic debate but to preserve unity and faithfulness to Christ's mission.

Peter's response was direct and theological. In Acts 15:11, he declared, "We believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they are." His argument was simple yet radical: faith in Christ alone was sufficient for salvation, regardless of circumcision or ritual observance. The apostles understood that God's covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12:1, 3) extended to all nations, not just descendants of Israel. Yet, while they rejected the legalism of the Pharisees, they also sought wisdom from James, who represented the Jewish Christian leadership. James proposed a middle path: Gentiles should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, sexual immorality, and eating meat from animals killed in a way that defiled the conscience (Acts 15:20). These were practical, non-negotiable boundaries, symbolizing their respect for God's holiness without demanding full adherence to Jewish law.

Paul and Barnabas argued for a decision that honored both grace and responsibility. They proposed that Gentiles adopt a decree of peace, a way to live faithfully without legalism. The Jerusalem Council ultimately agreed, drafting a letter (now called The Jerusalem Apostolic Constitution) to the Gentile churches. It affirmed that salvation came through Christ, but it also set boundaries: Gentiles must not exploit the gospel for immoral purposes while still respecting Jewish customs. This decision was not about erasing distinctions but about clarifying that salvation was for all, not just a subset of people.

The theological weight of Acts 15 lies in its tension between universality and responsibility. God's grace is universal ("as many as the Lord calls"), yet freedom does not absolve accountability. The church's wisdom was that faith in Christ was enough, but it did not mean abandoning ethical boundaries. This principle still shapes Christian theology today: salvation is by grace alone (Eph. 2:8, 9), but faith must be lived out in ways that honor God and others. For high school students, this lesson is not just about history but about a challenge: How do we believe in universal grace while committing to ethical living in a world where legalism and exploitation often lurk? The Jerusalem Council reminds us that faith is not just about what we believe but how we live, balancing freedom with responsibility.

Why does this story matter? Because it exposes a timeless struggle: the tension between God's boundless love and human freedom. For Christians, this means embracing a gospel that is both radical and responsible, open to all but demanding faithfulness. In a culture where identity politics and religious legalism often dominate, Acts 15 challenges us to ask: How can we proclaim grace without compromising truth? The answer, as the early church found, is in a balance: Grace so great it includes everyone, but ethics so strong they exclude none.

Key Verse

Acts 15:11 , 'No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.'

This verse (Acts 15:11) is a powerful declaration of shared faith and theological unity. It asserts that salvation is not earned by works but granted entirely through God's grace, whether through Jewish or Gentile belief in Jesus, emphasizing that faith, not ritual or ancestry, defines salvation. Theologically, it bridges Old and New Covenant truths, showing that Jesus' work on the cross unites all people under grace, dismantling the legalistic divisions of the Law. Real-world application: In an era of identity politics, social divides, or exclusionary systems, this verse challenges us to reject human-made barriers to love and unity, trusting instead that grace bridges gaps, whether between cultures, races, or even political factions. It reminds us that true faith isn't about being something (like "pure" or "qualified"), but about believing in the transformative power of Christ, which reshapes hearts and societies.

Activities

Activity 1:

Students divide into two teams representing key figures in Acts 15 (e.g., Peter, Paul, James, the Gentile leaders) to debate the Council's resolution. Through structured role-play, they explore how Scripture balances covenant law and grace, then craft a modern-day application.

Activity 2:

Students receive a hypothetical moral dilemma (e.g., A Christian student refuses to eat a meal at a school event where alcohol is served; A pastor is asked to endorse a local business with problematic labor practices). Using Acts 15 as a guide, they write a short response (3, 5 sentences) defending their stance, then present to the group.

1. Divide & Analyze (5 min):
2. Assign each student a dilemma (pre-distributed or drawn randomly). Give them Acts 15:1, 11 (Paul's grace argument) and Galatians 2:15, 21 (faith vs. works) cut into strips. Ask them to:
3. Circle the verses that most resonate with their dilemma.
4. Write a 3, 5 sentence response that:
5. Applies the Scripture to their situation.
6. Explains their ethical reasoning (e.g., "Grace means I can't condemn others for their choices, but I can still call them to repentance.").
7. Acknowledges a counterargument (e.g., "Some might say I'm enabling injustice by not speaking out.").
8. Present & Debate (7 min):
9. Each student shares their response with the group. Encourage critical questioning:
10. "How does your answer align with the Council's resolution?"
11. "Where do you see tension between grace and justice?"
12. Facilitate a classwide discussion: How should grace inform decisions in modern dilemmas where "the law" is unclear (e.g., climate change, racial bias, technology ethics)?
13. Reflection (3 min):
14. Ask students to write one question they still have about applying Acts 15's teaching to real life. Collect responses to address later.
15. Theological Connections:
16. Grace as Freedom: Acts 15's resolution shows that grace doesn't free us to do anything, it frees us to act responsibly within God's boundaries. Paul's argument that "God forgives all" doesn't mean we're free to sin (Galatians 5:13, 14); it means we're free to live in love without legalism.
17. The "Gray Areas": Many moral dilemmas today lack clear-cut answers. The activity forces students to ask: What does it mean to trust God's grace when the "right" answer isn't always obvious? Discuss how the Council's decision to include practical commands (Acts 15:29) shows that grace and ethics are intertwined.
18. Real-World Application:
19. Justice vs. Grace: The activities tie into modern debates like Christian nationalism (where legalism replaces grace) or anti-racism movements (where grace requires active justice). Ask: Can we love others without being complicit in their suffering?
20. Discipleship: How does this lesson challenge students to practice grace in their own lives (e.g., forgiving others, speaking truth without condemning)?
21. Cultural Engagement: The Council's decision to include Gentiles in the Church models inclusivity. Discuss how this applies to LGBTQ+ Christians, interfaith dialogue, or immigrants.
22. Adaptations:
23. For quiet students, allow them to write their dilemma responses first and share aloud.
24. For advanced discussion, introduce Paul's later ministry (Colossians 2:16, 17: "Do not let anyone judge you...") to contrast with the Council's approach.
25. Extension: Have students create a one-page "Council's Modern Guidelines" for a chosen issue (e.g., climate change, gun laws).

Discussion Questions

- Here are four intellectually engaging, open-ended discussion questions that encourage deep reflection on The Jerusalem Council, Grace, Not Law, while connecting theology to real-world application and personal faith:
- 1. Faith, Freedom, and Responsibility
 - The Jerusalem Council grappled with how to balance God's grace (Acts 15:11) with Jewish law for Gentile believers. How might this tension shape your understanding of freedom in faith? Consider:
 - What does it mean to receive God's grace without the weight of legalistic demands?
 - How could this passage challenge or reinforce your view of how Christians should live, individually or as a community?
 - Where do you see human systems (schools, social media, religious traditions) demanding performance over grace? How might you resist or engage with this?
- 2. Theological Foundations of Grace vs. Law
 - The apostles argued that salvation is by grace alone (Ephesians 2:8, 9), not by obedience to the Torah. Yet, modern churches often blend these ideas, e.g., "faith + works" rhetoric. How does Acts 15 challenge or reinforce this mixed message?
 - What biblical figures (e.g., Paul's conversion, the prophets) do you see as embodying a pure grace before the law? How does their story contrast with legalism?
 - How might cultural or political contexts (e.g., oppression, consumerism, social media) distort what grace actually looks like? Give an example.
 - If you were to write a letter to a friend who struggles with guilt over "unworthy" behavior, how would you frame salvation as grace, not law?
- 3. Community and Disagreement
 - The Jerusalem Council was divided (Acts 15:2, 6), yet they reached consensus through dialogue. How does this model of conflict resolution (or failure to resolve it) speak to modern churches or diverse groups?
 - Think of a time you disagreed with a peer, teacher, or online community over faith-related values (e.g., ethics, worship style, social justice). How did you resolve, or fail to resolve, the tension? What would Acts 15's approach look like in that situation?
 - The apostles included Gentiles in their decision. How might this inclusivity challenge or inspire your view of who belongs in Christian community? Are there "outsiders" today who feel excluded from grace?
 - What role do traditions, history, or authority figures (e.g., pastors, leaders) play in shaping consensus in faith groups? Does this reflect well on grace, or does it risk becoming legalism?
- 4. Real-World Application: Grace in Justice and Justice in Grace
 - The Jerusalem Council's decision was about how to include Gentiles, but grace is often tied to justice today (e.g., racial equity, climate justice, economic inequality). How might Acts 15's themes intersect with these struggles?
 - Imagine a society where people's worth is defined by performance (e.g., wealth, success, social media metrics). How could this align with or contradict the idea of salvation by grace?
 - If a marginalized group in your community (e.g., undocumented immigrants, LGBTQ+ youth, poverty-stricken families) feels like they're excluded from grace, what might the church do differently? How could the Jerusalem Council's dialogue inspire a new kind of dialogue?
 - How might systemic sin (e.g., systemic racism, capitalism) challenge the idea that grace is universal? Is grace still "free" if it doesn't address injustice? How does this play out in your own life or the world around you?
- Follow-Up Suggestion:
 - Encourage students to share their responses in small groups, then discuss:

- Where do we see grace most clearly (or least)?
- How can we balance the freedom of grace with accountability for justice?
- These questions aim to spark theological depth, personal reflection, and critical thinking about how ancient theological debates still shape modern faith, and society. Would you like any of them refined further for a specific context?

Prayer Focus

"Lord, in the tension between the weight of tradition and the call of grace, where faith must walk through the halls of reason yet trust in your unconditional love, grant us the courage to encounter truth not as chains but as liberation. May our study of Acts 15 remind us that the Gospel's message is not a legal code but a living, breathing invitation: one that calls us to examine our own hearts for grace's transforming work, and to engage the world not with rigid demands but with the freedom of a love that seeks, not perfection, but presence. Teach us to debate with humility, to debate for the sake of truth, not to destroy, but to build bridges where the Spirit leads." (A prayer that honors intellectual rigor, theological depth, and the real-world stakes of grace over law.)

>> Missions Spotlight

In many parts of Africa, traditional religions mix with Christianity, creating confusion about salvation. Missionaries emphasize the Jerusalem Council's decision: salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

-> To the Cross

Some people said you had to follow Jewish laws to be saved. Paul and Barnabas said no , salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus alone. The cross is enough. We don't add our good works to what Jesus did. His work on the cross is complete.