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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

Jr High (Ages 12-14)

Free curriculum for small and rural churches

Lesson Overview

Lesson Title: "Grace vs. Rules , Who Gets to God?" Acts 15:1-35 , A Story of Two Opposing Views Imagine a big group of believers in Jerusalem, some were saying, "You have to follow these strict rules to be saved!", while others argued, "Grace is free; rules are just extra!" Their debate isn't about arguing (even though it was tough!), but about how we connect with God. Jesus didn't come to break the law, he came to fulfill it, but the real question is: Who do we trust for our salvation, our own effort or God's amazing love? This lesson helps kids see that grace isn't "cheap" (it's freeing), and rules aren't "optional" (they're boundaries for life). Real life: Have you ever felt guilty for messing up, or like you're "owed" forgiveness because of a rule? Grace tells us: "You're already loved, now enjoy it!" And rules? They're like a roadmap: Follow them to live well, but don't let them steal your peace. Key Takeaway: God's love isn't a test, it's a gift. Use it boldly, not to earn it! 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

Sunday School Lesson: "Grace, Not Law" A Story from the Jerusalem Council

The early church was growing fast, but trouble erupted when some Jewish believers came to Jerusalem. They said, "You can't follow Jesus if you don't follow all the Old Testament laws, like circumcision. We're stuck in rules, not freedom!" (Acts 15:1-2). The apostles and elders, including Peter and Paul, had to meet to sort this out. They weren't arguing over what to believe, but how to live as Jesus' followers. The question was simple: How do we welcome people who've never heard the Gospel, while still honoring God's Word?

The group debated for days. Some insisted circumcision was essential; others argued it wasn't necessary for salvation. Finally, Peter stepped forward and reminded them: "God didn't just choose us, He chose us because of

what Jesus did on the cross. We're free from the law because of that!" (Acts 15:11, using Peter's words). He wasn't saying the law was wrong, it was still God's guidance, but it wasn't the only way to know Him. The leaders agreed: "No circumcision, no rules, just the one thing that matters: faith in Christ."

The Jerusalem Council didn't invent a new set of laws. Instead, they declared: "The Gospel isn't a test; it's a gift." They sent letters to Gentile churches, saying, "We're not putting you under more burdens, just let faith in Jesus lead your hearts." This wasn't about freedom for the sake of sin; it was about freedom from the heavy weight of laws that couldn't save anyone. They even added a reminder: "Remember, God loves everyone, even if you mess up." (Acts 15:35-36).

Why This Matters Today: This story teaches us that grace isn't a maybe, it's a command. Jesus died so we wouldn't have to follow rules to earn love. The church in Jerusalem didn't invent "easy" faith; they shared the real truth: God's love is stronger than rules. Life application? When you feel pressured to "earn" God's approval (through perfection, popularity, or performance), ask: Is this really about freedom, or just another rule? Jesus doesn't want your obedience, He wants your heart. And that's how we grow in grace, not law.

--- Discussion Questions for Junior High: 1. What's one rule you think every person should follow (like "no cheating")? Why? 2. If you had to follow the Old Testament law today, would you? Why or why not? 3. How can you "share grace" with someone who struggles with rules?

(Tip: Pair this with a short role-play, have students debate "Can you believe in Jesus without obeying certain rules?" then discuss the answer together!)

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.'

Here's a simple, heartfelt explanation of Acts 15:11 for junior high students, like a conversation with a trusted friend who knows your struggles: --- "Look, we don't get saved by doing things perfectly, like following rules just to earn God's love. Instead, we trust Jesus because His love is free, real, and enough for us. It's like when you mess up a game and your team still wins because of their teamwork. God's grace is that kind of teamwork, He already covered our mistakes through Jesus, so we don't have to pretend we're perfect anymore. That's why we can believe in Him too!" --- Why it matters in real life: - Real question: "What if I don't feel 'good enough'?" Answer: God's love isn't a prize; it's a gift you don't earn, but receive through Jesus. Your mistakes don't cancel it out, just like His love doesn't! - Life application: When you struggle with guilt or doubt, remember: Jesus already paid the price for your mistakes. Now, you just get to trust His love like a superhero who's already won the battle for you. - Challenge: This week, tell someone you believe God's love is enough, not because of what you did, but because of what Jesus did for you. --- Bonus: Think of it like a free pizza. You don't have to earn it, you just get to enjoy it! Grace is like that, God gives it to you anyway.

Activities

Activity 1:

1. Set the Stage (2 min):
2. Start with a short story: "Imagine you're a Christian in Jerusalem in Acts 15. A group of Jewish believers says, 'No one can follow Jesus without keeping the Law', like circumcision for Gentiles. How would YOU respond?"
3. Ask: "Would you trust rules, or trust Jesus' grace?" Write responses on the board.
4. Role-Play Debate (8 min):
5. Divide the group into 3, 4 teams (e.g., Team Legalist, Team Grace, Team Middle Ground).
6. Give each team one handout page of "evidence" to argue their side. Example:
7. Legalist: "The Bible says, 'He who keeps his word lives' (John 14:21), so rules matter!"

8. Grace: "Jesus said, 'It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles you' (Mark 7:15), rules can limit love!"
9. Let teams take turns presenting their side. Encourage honest questions: "What's a rule you struggle with? When does grace feel unfair?"
10. Reflect & Apply (5 min):
11. Ask: "What would you add to either side?" (e.g., "I think rules help, but grace helps more.")
12. Life question: "When do you feel like you have to follow rules? When do you trust God's grace?"
13. Wrap up with: "The apostles didn't give an answer in Acts 15, they trusted God's heart. How can you trust Him today?"
14. Why It Works:
15. Uses creative conflict to spark debate.
16. Connects to real teen struggles (e.g., rules vs. freedom, peer pressure).
17. Ends with actionable reflection about trusting grace.

Activity 2:

1. Introduce the Symbolism (3 min):
2. Show a picture of the Jerusalem Council meeting (from Acts 15).
3. Ask: "The Gentiles wanted to join the church, but some Jews said, 'No, you need rules to be accepted.' How did the apostles respond? They built a bridge of grace!"
4. Give each group a paper plate as their "bridge gap" between teams.
5. Build the Bridge (8 min):
6. Groups must use only wooden sticks, tape, and string to:
7. Place sticks horizontally across the plate to create a "bridge frame."
8. Secure sticks with tape to stay upright.
9. Use string to add "bridging connections" (e.g., loop string between sticks for stability).
10. Rules for the build: No glue, no extra materials. Teams must work together!
11. Compare & Discuss (4 min):
12. After time, have groups share their bridges. Ask:
13. "How did your bridge stay stable? Why?" (e.g., "Tape holds the sticks, but string added connections.")
14. "The Jerusalem Council said, 'We believe we must obey God, but we don't need extra rules to be accepted' (Acts 15:28, 29). How does your bridge show grace?"
15. Life question: "When you're trying to connect with others (or God), do you rely on rules, or trust God's plan?"
16. Challenge: "Walk Across Grace" (2 min):
17. Ask students to imagine their bridges as rules vs. grace:
18. A weak bridge = relying on rules alone.
19. A strong bridge = trusting God's grace to hold you up.
20. End with: "God's grace is like that string, it connects us even when rules can't!"
21. Why It Works:
22. Visual metaphor for grace as connection, not separation.
23. Teamwork focus mirrors the apostles' unity.
24. Low-cost, high-impact, uses simple supplies but leaves students with a tangible takeaway.
25. Bonus Tip: Pair either activity with a short video clip (e.g., a 2-minute animated Bible story of Acts 15) to set the scene before discussion.
26. Would you like adjustments for groups with more/less experience, or additional questions to guide the discussion?

Discussion Questions

- Here are four open-ended discussion questions designed to spark meaningful conversation around Acts 15, the Jerusalem Council and the theme of grace over legalism. These questions are crafted to engage young teens in critical thinking while connecting their personal lives to the Bible's teaching.
- 1. "If You Were There: The Pressure to Follow Rules"
 - Imagine you're one of the early Christians in Jerusalem, watching as tensions rise between Jewish believers (who follow the Law strictly) and Gentile believers (who don't). The disciples are split, some say, "Only Jews can be saved," others say, "All are welcome in Christ!"
 - How would you handle the pressure to pick a side? What might have made you think more about why we follow rules, and less about who gets to decide what's important? Think about the rules you follow in school, sports, or even online. Do they feel fair, or do you sometimes question them? How does this story show that God's love isn't about what we do but who we are in Him?
 - (Life Application: Many of us today live with rules, social, religious, or even family expectations. How can we remember that grace (God's unearned favor) is bigger than any rule we might want to keep?)
- 2. "The 'Why' Behind the Debate"
 - The Jerusalem Council's biggest disagreement was: "Why should Gentiles be included in God's family if they don't follow Jewish laws?" Some argued that salvation was only for Jews (Acts 15:1). Others, like Paul and Barnabas, said no, Gentiles could be saved through faith alone.
 - What questions do you have about this debate? Why would someone think salvation was only for Jews? What does it mean that Jesus died to save everyone, not just those who follow the Law? Imagine if you were one of the Gentiles in that crowd. How would you feel if you thought God's love was limited to one group?
 - (Life Application: Think of a time you believed something was "exclusive", like how certain groups might think certain religions, hobbies, or even family traditions are "only for them." How can we be kind and open to those who don't share our beliefs? Grace means we're all invited to the table, no matter what.)
- 3. "Paul's Biggest Win: Compromise for Love"
 - Paul and Barnabas didn't just debate, they compromised. They gave the Gentiles some freedom while keeping core truths about Christ. They didn't give up their faith, but they didn't demand others follow Jewish rules either. This was radical!
 - What does compromise look like in a way that's not weak? You might have to give up something you love, like a favorite snack, a hobby, or even a friend's belief, if you want to include someone else in a group. Paul's solution was: "Let's find the middle ground where both sides feel respected." How would you do that in a real-life situation? Think of a time you had to adjust your behavior to include someone else, was it hard? Why?
 - (Life Application: This lesson is about love in action. When we choose to love someone even if they disagree with us, we're modeling Jesus. How can you be someone who welcomes others, even when it's uncomfortable?)
- 4. "Grace vs. Performance: A Daily Battle"
 - The Jerusalem Council showed that God's salvation isn't about what we do but what He's done for us. But in our daily lives, it's easy to fall into the trap of "I have to earn my way", whether in school, sports, or relationships. The apostles realized: "If you're saved, it's not because you're perfect, but because Christ is perfect for you."
 - Where do you struggle with trusting grace instead of working hard? Maybe you pressure yourself to get good grades, play well in sports, or never make mistakes. How can you remind yourself that God doesn't need your perfection, He just needs you to trust Him? Think of a time you felt like you had to "deserve" something. How did you feel afterward?
 - (Life Application: Grace is like a gift, you don't have to "pay back" for it. When you realize that, does it change how you treat others? For example, are you more patient with friends who struggle, or do you hold them to

standards they can't keep?)

- Why These Questions Work for Junior Highers:
- Relatable: They use examples from school, sports, and social life to connect to real struggles.
- Encourages Reflection: Instead of yes/no answers, they invite students to think deeply about grace, compromise, and love.
- Life-Centers: Each question ties back to how these Bible truths apply to their daily choices.
- Honest & Open: They don't sugarcoat tough questions (like performance vs. grace) but invite honest discussion.
- Would you like any of these adjusted for a specific group or focus (e.g., more on family dynamics, social media, or faith struggles)?

Prayer Focus

Here's a heartfelt prayer you could use as a group to reflect on the Jerusalem Council and its message of grace over law: --- "Lord, we come before You as kids who still wrestle with 'what's right', like that one group who wanted everyone to follow strict rules, thinking they were keeping God happy. But You remind us in this story that grace isn't about rules, it's about love. Help us remember that You don't call us perfect, but You call us Yours, even when we mess up. Teach us to trust in Your kindness instead of our own rules, so we can share that same grace with others, just like the early believers did. Amen." --- Why it works: - Honors their struggles (e.g., feeling judged or trying to "earn" approval). - Connects the Bible story to real life: How do we apply grace to others? - Ends with an invitation to practice it. Optional follow-up: Ask: "Where have you seen grace shown lately, or where do you need it?" to spark discussion.

>> 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.