

Which Yoke ? Acts 15:6-11

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Read Acts 15:1-5

B. Set Scene

1. As ch. 15 opens, Paul & Barnabas have returned from their first missionary foray.
 - a. They're back in Antioch, ministering in that great church as part of a dynamic leadership team.
 - b. The last verse of ch. 14 says they were there for a *long time*.
2. After a few years, some guys show up from Jerusalem.
 - a. They fancy themselves *teachers with a special message* for *Gentile* believers.
 - b. They must become *Jews*.
 - c. They must be *circumcised* and begin a lifestyle dictated by *kosher* dietary laws, observing the *Sabbath*, & all the *other commandments*.
3. When Barnabas & Paul heard this, they were steamed!
 - a. They'd traveled *hundreds* of miles preaching the Gospel to *thousands* of Gentiles & had seen hundreds saved.
 - b. After spending years in Antioch among Gentile believers, they *knew* that spiritual maturity & being used by God in a powerful way had *absolutely nothing* to do with circumcision & keeping kosher.
 - c. It was all about a daily, intimate relationship with Jesus through faith in the grace of God.
 - d. So they got right in the face of these guys from Jerusalem.
4. It was quite a brueha that saw no resolution; neither side would give an inch.
5. So the leaders of the Antioch church sent a delegation led by Paul & Barnabas south to Jerusalem to consult with the Apostles.
6. When they arrived, they were welcomed & gave a report about all that had taken place on their missionary journey in Cyprus & Asia.
7. It was then that the reason for their trip to Jerusalem became clear.
 - a. As they told about the hundreds of Gentiles brought to faith,
 - b. Some Pharisees who were part of the Church stood up & began to rant about how Gentiles had to convert to Judaism.

C. True Jews

1. Take note of the reaction of these Pharisees to the news of Gentiles coming to faith in Jesus.
2. That they argued so strongly for their conversion to Judaism *proves* that these early believers did not see following Jesus as a new religion – it was Judaism.
3. They thought believing in Jesus was *the purest & truest form* of Judaism because as the Messiah, Jesus was the epitome of *all Abraham & Moses had pointed to!*
4. *Paul agreed* with that as what he wrote in Romans 2:28-29 makes clear.

28 For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is [real] circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; 29 but he is a Jew who is one

inwardly; and [the] circumcision [God is looking for] is of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter . . .

- a. The Pharisees said that it was the cutting of flesh that made someone a Jew.
- b. Paul said *Faith in Jesus* is what makes someone truly Jewish.
5. Here's the problem with the Pharisees in the Church at Jerusalem: *They only believed* in Jesus as *Messiah*, not as *Redeemer*.
 - a. Their faith was incomplete because they considered Him *Lord*, but *not Savior*.
 - b. One of the major problems of we face *today* is the legions of Christians who believe in Jesus as *Savior* but *not Lord*. They want the goodies of grace without the commitment of obedience.
 - c. For the Pharisees, it was the *opposite* – here's why . . .
6. Their whole perspective was that one *earns acceptance* by God by being good & doing the Law.
 - a. They thought they *gained eternal life* by works of personal righteousness, forged through obedience to the commandments.
 - b. They were so devoted to this philosophy it had become the bread & butter of their lifestyle.
 - c. They kept a close, exact, detailed record of all they DID for God –
 - d. And they pointed to it *constantly* to prove how good & right they were.
 - e. *Even more*, they used it as justification for their *superiority* over others.
 - f. The Pharisees genuinely believed they were *better* than others, & most especially the worthless Gentiles.
7. Paul & Barnabas' message of how God had accepted hundreds of Gentiles through faith in Christ alone outraged them; because if true, it meant their whole philosophy was a house of cards.
 - a. Let me see if I can illustrate just what a big deal this was to the Pharisees.
 - b. During the Civil War, the Confederate States issued their own currency; Confederate dollars.
 - c. Some people invested heavily in the Confederate economy & amassed piles of Confederate money, hoping the South would eventually win the war.
 - d. When the war ended, the notes were *worthless*; nothing more than pieces of paper.
8. The Pharisees had invested their lives & made their stake in an ultra-careful observance of the Law.
 - a. Where they erred was in thinking they'd *actually kept it*.
 - b. They were so invested in their personal spiritual fortune of good deeds they refused to accept that they were in fact—bankrupt.
 - c. They were *angry* at Paul & Barnabas because if they were right, it meant the Pharisees were poor, while the Gentiles they considered utterly lost, were *rolling* in spiritual wealth through faith in Christ.
9. It's this controversy & crisis over the salvation of Gentiles eventually helped the Pharisees realize the *righteousness God requires* isn't self-made;
10. On the contrary, it's the righteousness of Christ bestowed by grace through faith, not works.

II. TEXT

A. Vs. 6-9

6 Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter.

1. The leaders of the church in Jerusalem realized this was a major issue that would require their united counsel.
2. So they gathered and the debate began

7 And when there had been much dispute,

3. Each side was given an opportunity to fully explain itself.
4. This wasn't a hurried council. They realized they were being called on to render a decision that would set policy that would affect the lives of tens, even hundreds of thousands of people.
5. But once each side had spoken it's piece . . .

Peter rose up and said to them:

6. Peter was recognized as the leader among the Apostles because he was the eldest.
7. When he rose, everyone else hushed, & he was given the floor.

“Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.

8. Peter's referring to what we read in Acts 10.
 - a. He was in the city of Joppa when one day he had a thrice repeated vision telling him not to call unclean what God made clean.
 - b. As soon as the third vision was ended, some messengers from Caesarea along the coast to the north, knocked at the door, and asked Peter to accompany them back to Caesarea.
 - c. Their master was a Roman Centurion named Cornelius who'd also had a vision—of an angel who told him to send for Peter to come & share an important message.
 - d. Though Cornelius was a Gentile, because of the vision, Peter entered his home against Jewish custom, & preached the Gospel to he & his household.
9. Peter retells the story *because* of what happened **WHILE** he was preaching . . .

8 So God, who knows the heart,

10. God knew faith in Jesus was birthed in Cornelius' heart as Peter shared the Good News, along with all those in attendance. And because God saw that faith, He . . .

acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, ⁹ and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.

11. God knew Peter didn't know how to end his message & whether or not it would be right to invite Gentiles into a relationship with Jesus,
12. So He indicated *He already accepted them* because of their faith, by baptizing them in the Holy Spirit, as evidenced by tongues, just as had happened on Pentecost for the Jews.
13. When Peter saw Cornelius & his household filled with the Spirit, he realized it was God's way of proving they *were born again*.
14. And based on that Peter said there was no way they could be denied water

- baptism – which was understood by all as the rite by which people were initiated into the visible community of Jesus’ followers – the local church.
15. Don’t miss Peter’s main point – God had already made clear HOW people are saved – through faith in Jesus!
 16. Even the fullness of the Spirit comes through faith in Him, not through careful observance of rules!

B. V. 10

10 Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?

1. Peter sees the Pharisees as *provoking God* with their demand Gentiles becomes Jews & jump through the hoops of the Mosaic Law.
 - a. God *made it clear* He accepts people through faith in Christ *alone*.
 - b. To demand *something more* was to put words in God’s mouth.

2. Peter says the Pharisees were putting a *needless yoke* on believers.
3. In light of God’s acceptance of people based solely on faith in Jesus, why demand they earn it through keeping the law?
 - a. The Law had been *consummated* by Jesus.
 - b. It had been given to *point* people *to* Jesus, but Jesus had now come.
 - c. So why tell those who’d received Him to *go back* to all of that which was meant to *prepare* for Him?
4. Here are some eggs, flour, milk, unsweetened chocolate, sugar, salt, baking soda.
 - a. They’re *ingredients* for making a cake.
 - b. Anyone want to eat these individual ingredients? Or want to eat this?
 - c. If you have this & these – all reason tells you to enjoy this; which is the *consummation* of all this.

5. Jesus is the Cake the Law of Moses provided the ingredients & recipe for.
6. Peter refers to the Law as a yoke – a burden.
 - a. The yoke was a farm instrument, placed round the neck of an ox & attached to a cart or plow.
 - b. There were 2 kinds; the single yoke & the dual yoke.
 - c. The rabbis said the Commandments were a *spiritual* yoke placed by God on the people of Israel.
 - d. Each rabbi had his own unique approach for how to live in that yoke.
 - e. So when a disciple asked a rabbi if he could follow him, he’d say, “May I bear your yoke?”
 - f. If the rabbi consented, he would invite the disciple by saying, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me.”
 - g. It was an *invitation* into one of those *dual yokes*, in which a new, untrained ox would be paired with an older, mature ox who would train the new by sharing the yoke.
7. But Peter says the Law of Moses was a yoke neither their ancestors nor they’d been able to bear.
 - a. Picture a small ox in a single yoke. The rigging on the yoke is tied to a massive block of stone lying on the ground. It needs to be moved a mile away.

- b. The animal *strains* against the yoke but the block doesn't budge.
 - c. That ox is loosed from the yoke & a medium-sized ox replaces it. It pulls & manages to move the block an *inch*.
 - d. It's unyoked & a huge beast takes its turn in the yoke. When it puts its weight into the frame, the block slides a *foot*, but no more.
8. That's man & the Law. Some do better than others, but no one comes anywhere near what the law requires.
9. In writing to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul said God didn't give the law to *make* us righteous; He gave it to point out how unrighteous we are, & realizing that, it would drive us to seek forgiveness in Christ.
- a. We're not really conscious of sin until we see what's right, then realize how far short we fall.
 - b. Paul speaks of his own struggle with this.
 - c. He says he thought he was doing pretty well until he read the command to not covet.
 - d. As soon as he realized coveting was wrong, he saw how much of a coveter he was.
10. When I was in 5th grade, I produced an incredible work of art.
- a. It was a class project. We dampened some watercolor paper with plain water, then dipped splotches of color on them to make whatever patterns we wanted.
 - b. After putting some orange drops on the canvas, it looked like little flowers, so I drew in the centers, the stems, leaves, & vase.
 - c. It was a masterpiece—my teacher thought so too, so she submitted it to the principle who selected it to be one of 2 entries for our school in the prestigious Laguna Beach Art Festival.
 - d. My parents were so proud, as was I!
 - e. So we went to the festival for the first time; we'd only recently moved to CA from Illinois.
 - f. I'd heard the Laguna Art Festival was a major affair so I had this vision of my artwork being set in an expensive frame in a prominent place, on sale of hundreds of dollars.
 - g. Not exactly – it was stapled to a piece of whitewashed plywood way in the back along with a few hundred other elementary school submissions. Maybe like 6 people ever saw it, of which my parents & I were half that number.
 - h. As we waded around the displays & art exhibits, all pretense at the surpassing beauty of my little work was stripped away.
 - i. I was dully humbled after seeing the true masterpieces of real artists.
11. God gave the Law to show us what *true holiness* looks like.
- a. He intended us to see its beauty & realize that in comparison, our attempts are paltry & weak.
 - b. Realizing we could never attain to the holiness the law requires, it was God's intent we would then look for *another way* to be made righteous;
 - c. That our failure at keeping the law would move us to seek forgiveness.
 - d. And that we would find that righteousness & forgiveness in Jesus.

12. The Gentiles **knew** they didn't measure up to God's standard. They admitted it **readily** & found faith in Jesus as their Savior easy because they **confessed their need**.
13. The Pharisees reacted very differently.
 - a. They thought they **were keeping** the law & by doing so, heaping up spiritual reward.
 - b. They thought God considered them His special buddies because they were so good.
 - c. It's difficult to let go of something you're proud of,
 - d. And the Pharisees were inordinately proud of themselves & their devotion to the law. They thought **GOD** was proud of them too.
14. Then along came Paul & Barnabas with their message of God's ready acceptance of godless Gentiles on nothing more than faith in Jesus, & they flipped!
15. Religiosity is a difficult thing to shake, & the Pharisees had it in spades!
16. They stumbled because **they wouldn't admit they were wrong**.
 - a. Anyone who's been in recovery will tell you the first step in moving toward freedom is admission of need.
 - b. Though we don't refer to people anymore as Pharisees & Gentiles . . .
 - c. The very same responses we see here are in this room this morning.
 - d. You may not call yourself a Pharisee, but you've adopted the very same response to God.
 - e. You **reject Jesus** because you think you're **good enough** on your own.
 - f. You refuse to admit your need.
 - g. Compared to others, you're a pretty good person. You may even be more moral than some you've known who call themselves Christians.
 - h. You're not perfect, but then **who is?**
 - i. Compared with others, you're an upright, fine person, if you don't say so yourself.
 - j. After all, you haven't killed anyone.
17. Here's the problem with that way of thinking – **you're comparing yourself to others**,
 - a. And because that's your method for determining your moral & spiritual worth,
 - b. You conveniently pick people **that make you look good**.
 - c. You're your own spin-doctor & image consultant.
18. But all you **really are** is the ox that moved the block an inch comparing yourself to the ox that didn't budge it.
 - a. There's someone more righteous than you who moved it a foot.
 - b. But all of you together have gotten no where near the goal which is a mile down the road,
 - c. And you **never will** because you'll never reach the destination in your own strength.
19. The alcoholic or addict remains bound by addiction as long as she maintains her innocence.
20. Freedom begins with an honest admission of the problem.
21. Pride blinds us to our sin. A humble admission of guilt is the first step in

deliverance.

22. Stop comparing yourself to others.
 - a. God does not grade on the curve or average the class.
 - b. Life is a Pass-Fail course.
 - c. God doesn't give grades where an A-D gets you into heaven but an F means a trip to the bad place.
 - d. It's Pass or Fail & there's only one way to pass = Believe in Jesus as Lord & Savior.
23. **Salvation is a gift**, not a reward or payment for services rendered.
24. Look at v. 11 –

C. V. 11

11 But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they."

1. Salvation is by *grace*; received by faith in Jesus.

III. CONCLUSION

A. Christian – Listen!

1. Think about this.
2. The Gentiles in Antioch were saved & enjoying a rich relationship with God when along came some guys who said, "Okay – now you gotta' do this" & started slapping on a bunch of rules, regulations, rituals, & religion on them.
3. Paul & Barnabas immediately reacted with a vehement, "NO!"
4. Peter called it a heavy yoke history had proven didn't work.
5. Jesus' coming *proved* it didn't.
6. If righteousness & acceptance by God on the basis of works was possible – Jesus NEVER WOULD HAVE COME!
7. Why would the Father send His Son to die a horrible death if there was another way?
8. He could have rightly said, "Work it out yourselves."
9. That Jesus came is all the proof we need there's no other way to salvation & eternal life.

B. Yokes

1. We'll see how the Jerusalem Council resolved this debate in a couple weeks,
2. But as we close this morning—Look again at Peter's question in v. 10.
"Why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?"
3. I'm sure his use of the word "yoke" evoked a memory Jesus words in Matthew 11:29-30.

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."

4. He spoke that to a people who'd been loaded down with a heavy yoke of onerous traditions & the crushing burden of over 600 rules the rabbis had parsed from the law of Moses.
5. He spoke to a crowd of exhausted souls and invited them to share His yoke -

6. One of those dual yokes where 2 go side by side.
7. In this yoke, Jesus is the elder who does all the work; we're just along for the ride.
8. He's is the one who satisfies God's righteous requirements.
9. Our single duty is to hang out with Him, to go *with Him*.
10. Once again we see the incredible truth that Faith in Jesus is not so much *religion as relationship*.
11. He *really is* your best friend, who stays closer even than a brother.
12. You can't pick you family, but you do you choose your friends.
13. Listen to what Jesus says about us, "No longer do I call you servants, you are My friends." [John 15]
14. We often speak of the importance of *our devotion to Christ*. We even refer to need for daily devotions.
15. What's *far more important* to remember is how dedicated & devoted Jesus is *to us*.