

You cannot be saved unless ...

Acts 15:1-21

March 26, 2006

You cannot be saved ...

- ... unless you keep the Ten Commandments
- ... unless you have been baptized by immersion
- ... unless you are a member of a Protestant church
- ... unless you are a member of an evangelical Protestant church
- ... unless you are a member of a bible-believing, full-gospel preaching, sanctified-living, evangelical Protestant church

You cannot be saved ...

- ... unless you can point to the date and time of your conversion
- ... unless you believe in heaven and hell
- ... unless you believe that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God
- ... unless you know John 3:16 and the words to *Amazing Grace* by heart

You cannot be saved ...

- ... unless you live an exemplary life
- ... unless you tithe
- ... unless you go to church every week

You cannot be saved ...

- ... unless you are pro-life
- ... unless you are pro-choice
- ... unless you have never been divorced
- ... unless you don't smoke or drink or gamble
- ... unless you work tirelessly to save souls
- ... unless you work tirelessly to promote peace and justice

You cannot be saved ...

- ... unless you vote Republican
- ... unless you don't vote Republican
- ... unless you are open and affirming
- ... unless you are not open and affirming

You cannot be saved ...

- ... unless you like to sing out of the black hymnal

You cannot be saved ...

- ... unless you are circumcised

You get the point! We like to make rules and set conditions for determining who is saved and who is not. We like to have a clear set of criteria that allows us to separate the sheep from the goats, the saved from the unsaved.

A group of men from Judea traveled the two weeks journey north to Antioch and told the believers there: *You cannot be saved unless you are circumcised as the Law of Moses requires.* They had a clear set of criteria, a clear set of rules, and they wanted to make sure everybody was abiding by them.

But Barnabas and Paul were scandalized. As far as they were concerned, the gospel itself was at stake, and they fiercely debated the Judean emissaries. They and other members of the Antioch church considered this issue so critical that they decided to send a delegation to Jerusalem to present their case before Peter and James and the rest of the apostles and elders of the church gathered there.

And so Paul and Barnabas and the Antioch delegation appeared before the apostles in Jerusalem, telling them the stories of all that God had been doing among the Gentiles. But some of the believers, who happened to be members of the party of the Pharisees, insisted: *The Gentiles must be circumcised and told to obey the Law of Moses.*

Now we must not judge these Christian Pharisees too harshly, because almost all of us have been in their shoes. They were not trying to exclude Gentiles from the church, they were in fact ready to welcome them. They were not blinded by prejudice or cultural bias -- OK, maybe some cultural bias -- they were simply trying to get it right, to get it right the only way they knew how.

It was about what they knew, what they had always known, that a person was identified as part of the covenant community, the family of God, by being circumcised and by keeping the Law of Moses. Their concern, their fear, was that without these conditions, the Gentiles would be lost. Or, if the Gentiles were not lost, that they themselves would have lost the ability to distinguish themselves from everybody else, and the assurance of their own salvation would be out of their hands.

The assurance of their own salvation would be out of their hands ...

You see, it's really about control. We want to be able to justify ourselves, to make certain of our own salvation. We like to have a clear set of rules, an unambiguous set of conditions, that allow us to separate the saved from the unsaved, that allow us to identify ourselves as among the saved. A clear set of rules, an unambiguous set of conditions. Our rules, our conditions.

But the assurance of our salvation is out of our hands! It is in God's hands ...

Peter understood that. After listening to the debate, he rose to say this:

God, who knows the thoughts of everyone, showed his approval of the Gentiles by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he had to us. He made no difference between us and them; he forgave their sins because they believed. So, then, why do you now want to put God to the test by laying a load on the backs of the believers which neither our ancestors nor we ourselves were able to carry? No! We believe and are saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they are.

Peter knew about the grace of the Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord, Jesus, who came to him, burdened as he was with the shame of broken promises and cowardly denials and a betrayed friendship, and asked him: *Simon, do you love me?* Three times Jesus asked him. Three times Jesus allowed Peter the opportunity to say, *Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.* Three gracious opportunities to undo, one at a time, the three times Peter had said, *I do not know that man!*

Peter knew about forgiveness. There were two men, two disciples, who had betrayed Jesus, who had turned their backs on their dear friend and teacher -- Peter and Judas. Judas was overcome with grief and shame, and killed himself. Peter was overcome with grief and shame, and was forgiven ... because he believed.

Because he believed God can and does forgive sins. Because he put himself in God's hands. Judas believed he was beyond forgiveness, beyond redemption, and he took matters into his own hands.

Being forgiven requires humility, the readiness to accept a gift we do not deserve and cannot earn. It means knowing we are saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus, and nothing else!

The council of apostles and elders in Jerusalem was convinced by Peter's testimony, and by the stories Paul and Barnabas told them about the grace of God in action among the Gentiles. And so they decided, in the words of their leader, James: *We should not trouble the Gentiles who are turning to God.*

We should not trouble the Gentiles who are turning to God ...

Can we make that same pledge, that we will not trouble our brothers and sisters who are turning to God? That we will not lay on the backs of fellow believers a load we have not been have to carry ourselves? That we will remember that we are saved only by the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they are? That we will not add an "unless" to the salvation God offers to us and to the world in Jesus Christ?

You cannot be saved unless ...?

Just be careful. Be careful, because what happens when you take away the "unless" from the phrase: *You cannot be saved unless ...?* You are left with: *You cannot be saved.*

You cannot be saved. That is the conclusion some of us reach. We see through all the rules and conditions and requirements people deem necessary for salvation, and we become convinced that it is all about control and self-justification and wishful thinking. We become convinced that since anybody can make out salvation to be whatever they want it to be, it must not be anything at all.

But this too is a form of pride. We decide for for ourselves what salvation is and what it is not. We listen to people and not to God. We take matters into our own hands. And we refuse to let God do what God wants to do -- save us!

We are saved by what God does. We are saved by grace alone. So give up your pride! Give up your need to make the rules! Hear the good news: you -- and everybody else -- are saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus!

Believe it! Don't let anyone tell you otherwise, and don't you tell anyone otherwise. Don't make anyone, yourself or anybody else, carry a burden God does not ask you to carry. Don't make anyone, yourself or anybody else, jump through a hoop God does not ask you to jump through. Don't rebuild walls that Jesus has torn down.