

Acts 15:1-11
Ephesians 2:1-10
John 3:14-17

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St. Timothy's Lutheran Church
Pastor Judy Bangsund

“A Fatal Attraction”

At this point in time, it would be difficult to find anyone in the United States who has not heard of the shooting in Charleston that took nine innocent lives. It was an awful thing, a tragic act that robbed families of loved ones and tore into the fabric of a closely-knit church and community. But what was surprising about the crime was neither the means nor the motive but rather, the reaction by the congregation. They chose to forgive the killer. They chose, not vengeance, but forgiveness.

Forgiveness always takes us by surprise. It's not our natural choice. It was a choice that could only be born of grace – a divine gift. It was amazing grace, said our president in his eulogy; grace that is born of a power greater than ourselves; a gift that only God can give. Alexander Pope said, to err is human; to forgive, divine. Grace is always divine.

Amazing grace is what each of us needs, not just that killer. Everyone here who has sinned, who has put self or anything else in the place of God, deserves only death. That's what the Bible says. That's what we teach and believe. And there's *nothing* we can do about that death sentence; *nothing that we can do* to make it right. Like a glass vase, shattered into a million pieces, there is no way you and I can somehow piece it back together and make it perfect again. When you come to that realization, you will yearn desperately for grace, for there is no other way to be made right with God.

The irony is that, while God's gift of grace is our only hope, we are fatally attracted to the notion that we *can* make things right. We have this persistent idea that if we just do all the right things, or at least, do more good things than bad, we can tilt the scales in our favor. We cling to this false hope that somehow, God will see our good deeds and say, “Not bad. Better than most.” And swing Heaven's gates open wide. That's what we think.

The notion that we can get right with God by *what we do* is a good definition of legalism. It works in normal human affairs. But it doesn't work in matters of salvation. Legalism is a fatal attraction. And today we are going to take a hard look at that fatal attraction, because that's what Paul and the others were fighting against at the Council at Jerusalem. We will consider the *attraction, the absurdity and the antidotes* to legalism – and, I believe, come out with a renewed appreciation for grace. Let's begin with our text.

Chapter 15 lands in the middle of the book of Acts. It is here that we find the heart of the matter -- the pulse of the Gospel that constantly beats, giving life to all the “acts” of this book. As you know, having read the first 14 chapters, the apostles have been preaching the gospel of salvation by grace through faith. “Put your trust in Jesus and all he did for you on the Cross, and you will be saved” – that is the gist of their message. But now, some are coming along to say, “Well, faith in Jesus is fine. But it's not quite enough – especially for new Gentile believers. They can be Christians, but they need to enter through the gate of Judaism.” That means, shorthand:

circumcision. Notice the treachery: they are not denying Jesus. They just can't let go of the Law. They're saying, Jesus isn't enough. The cross isn't enough. You need to add something more.

Paul sees the danger and is immediately on the alert. But, rather than duking it out on the streets, the apostles convene a Council. Wise move. After much discussion, Peter presents the decision: Based on the evidence of God's direct approval when Gentiles came to faith – even without the Law – salvation must be by grace alone. Verses 10-11 make it clear:

Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.

My friends, this was a seminal moment, not only for them but for the rest of church history – and thus for you and me. Because of that decision, you and I are not bound by circumcision or Sabbath rules. Instead of a rulebook, we are given a relationship – and it is faith-based. That decision, guided by the Holy Spirit, set up a clear understanding of the Gospel – that we are forgiven only through Jesus and the cross.

But that fatal attraction is persistent. Although this Council set the record straight, its decision didn't close the books on the matter. Time and again the apostles have to reinforce this message. Several of Paul's letters make this the central issue. Galatians, Ephesians and Romans all offer strong arguments for justification by grace through faith -- apart from circumcision, food laws, the Sabbath, and so on – because the threat of legalism just will not go away. Legalism, it seems, holds a fatal attraction for people – for them and for the Church in all generations. It still rears its ugly head today, often in very subtle ways. We need to be on the alert.

Attraction, absurdity and antidotes of legalism. That's our outline today. So what is the attraction of legalism? Well, legalism puts you in the driver's seat. It's *attractive* because you get to keep your pride – none of this humility business. You stay in control of your life – no need to submit your will to God's. You feel like: "Hey, I can do this; I'm on top of this. All I need to do is improve my behavior – I can do that." Just do a, b and c – and you're good to go. You stay in control.

Legalism is also attractive because it seems fairly easy. I think there are a lot of Christians who believe that if they just go to church every week, they look pretty good in God's eyes. I mean, that's what he requires. (Right?) That's what a lot of people think. It's legalism. It's what I do.

It's an easy answer. And let's face it, the law only requires the minimum level of good behavior. In regards to your neighbor, all you need to do to be street-legal is to keep your sidewalk clear of debris and the noise down at night. That's pretty bare minimum in regards to your neighbor. Jesus, of course, challenged the "easy law" concept. He said, to be a good neighbor is to be like the Good Samaritan, who went the extra mile – not just taking the victim out of danger, but also cleaning him up, giving him food and water, paying for his expenses at the inn, promising to

come back and check, to finalize the bill. He went above and beyond the law. (That's the way of love, by the way; a much harder route.) But the law is minimal. It's easy. Human nature tends to take the easy route, and so legalism looks pretty attractive.

Legalism is also attractive because we're wired for it. Especially in our task-oriented society. If your day is like mine, it's full of to-do lists. Now, lists aren't bad (don't get me wrong); they help you organize and prioritize your day. We like to know just what is required of us and how to define a win. We also know that if we don't measure up there will be consequences. That's all law-talk. We understand it. It's the way our world works. It makes legalism (in regards to God) very attractive.

Legalism is attractive. But it's also *absurd*. Legalism may work in the course of human affairs, but as a path to salvation it's absurd. God never meant us to be saved through the Law in the first place. Paul says in Galatians that God gave us the law as a kind of custodian, a nanny (if you will), to keep our lives in order until the time was right to send his Son. God always meant to enter this world himself, through the person of Jesus. His plan, from the very beginning, was not to patch us up somehow, flawed and sinful as we are, but to make us new. Legalism can't do that! Only the Holy Spirit can make new -- re-birthing us, forgiving us, granting us a new identity. In Christ we die to sin and are raised again as new creations. *That's* God's plan.

God never intended for the Law to be the path to salvation. It shows us the way but it cannot empower us to get there. Herein lies our dilemma: the Law demands what it cannot provide: perfection. James says that even if we break one part of the Law, we have broken all of it. God knows our situation. He knows we are human, sinful. He knows we will fail the test. He never set us up to trip us up. ("Aha! Got another one!") God never intended the Law to be our Savior.

And to be honest, legalism has never worked for us. No one is perfect, apart from Christ. Everyone of us has sinned and fallen short, says Scripture. Even the best of us. Pope Francis visited a prison this week and this is what he told the inmates:

You may be asking yourselves, 'Who is this man standing before us?' The man standing before you is a man who has experienced forgiveness. A man who was, and is, saved from his many sins.

Benjamin Franklin is said to have attempted perfection at one point. He made a list of his faults -- and found 13. Then he began to go after those faults systematically. Week by week he began to cross them off his list as he mastered them. But then, as he got down to #5 or 6, he'd find that #1 and 2 were sneaking back into his life. It's a game of whack-a-mole, kind of like the geysers at Yellowstone. If you were to put a lid on all of them, 50 new ones would pop right up. That's the nature of sin. That's why legalism doesn't work. The notion is absurd.

Now, I want you to hear me. I'm not saying the Law is bad. Luther says that the Law is good and that it serves two purposes. The first is to order society. To establish that minimum standard by which at least we don't kill each other off. And the second purpose of the Law is to be a mirror, showing us how badly we fail -- driving us to the cross. Jesus said, "You fall so short of God's standards. You have heard it said, *Do not kill*; but I say to you, if you even get angry with

your brother, you are liable to judgement. You have heard it said, *Do not commit adultery*; but I say to you, if you even once look on a woman lustfully, you have already been unfaithful in your heart.” Jesus ups the ante to make it clear that, as fallen creatures, we can *never* “accomplish” the Law. You may think you are doing ok if you are doing better than most. But Jesus calls our bluff. The jig is up. Busted. The only way is through the cross.

Legalism is fatally attractive; we seem bound to default to it. But legalism is also absurd – it doesn’t work. So, what are the *antidotes* to legalism? I’m going to give them to you briefly, because I’ve already mentioned them along the way. I’m going to try to make it easy for you to remember. The first is *Gospel conviction*. The truth is, salvation comes only through faith in Christ. Be convinced of this: there is no other way. The second is *Gospel clarity*. There is nothing we can add to Jesus’ work on the cross. Nothing. Luther put it this way: “The only contribution that we make to our salvation is the sin that God so graciously forgives.” Sin? Not much of a contribution. So let’s be clear: Gospel conviction: Jesus is the only way. Gospel clarity: there’s nothing we can add to the cross. And the third antidote is this: *Gospel consequences*. Legalism threatens the mission. Legalism hides God’s glory. Legalism undermines our salvation. Legalism destroys our confidence. These are lethal consequences -- which Paul saw immediately. He exposed legalism for the treachery it is. *Let it go!* When you do, the true Gospel emerges into the light – the good news of salvation by grace through faith – which provides hope, encouragement and confidence before God. Good news, indeed!

My friends, legalism holds a fatal attraction for us. But grace holds a wondrous attraction, and grace is more powerful. Remember that that shattered vase I mentioned at the beginning? That’s your life. A thousand fragments, scattered on the floor. Legalism says, “All you have to do is pick them up and put them back together again.” And you stand there, looking down, and say ... “Yeah. Right.” But then God, in his amazing grace, reaches down and causes those shattered fragments to arise ... and gather ... and assemble ... and, before your eyes, fuse together into a perfect whole. My friends: that’s the power of forgiveness; the power of redemption; the power of grace.

And that’s the heart of the matter. That’s the pulse that beats throughout the book of Acts and in the Church ever since. It’s the Good News that we must never forget. It’s the message that we bear when, as disciples and as missionaries, we go out to do whatever God has called us to do. Wondrous grace. The amazing grace of forgiveness, of God’s love, and the life he now offers to us through Christ.