



THE NEW MATH

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This last week in Hallowell, Maine, Bob Greene was having his morning cup of coffee, watching the sun rise over the Kennebec River before heading out for a day of fishing. He heard a noise and thought it was one of the loud birds that have a tendency to interfere with his fishing. But as he looked again, he could see there was a man bobbing in the river. He was obviously unable to swim and about to drown. Bob's first instinct was to jump in and try to save him, but he wasn't sure he could, given the current, so instead he called 911. The dispatcher told him to throw something to the man instead. But Bob got an even better idea. He grabbed his fishing rod, cast his line. The 4 inch Chug Bug lure hooked the man's shirt. Then he just reeled the man in to safety. Quick action and an unconventional approach saved the man's life.

Quick action and an unconventional approach. Sounds like a segue to me... We've been looking at stories from the book of Acts, and this morning we come to an emergency in the church. About 300 plus miles north of Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas had made the city of Antioch a home base for their travels. They were doing a lot of teaching in the city and all kinds of people were putting their faith in Christ. This was the first major center of the church that wasn't Jewish. In fact, Antioch was the first place the word "Christian" was used to describe this new phenomenon of people believing in Jesus. Energy was high and the gospel was spreading rapidly.

But something happened there to interrupt Paul and Barnabas in their work. It looked like the church could get caught up in a dangerous current. So they cried out for help from the apostles in Jerusalem, who swiftly and decisively acted. Their response was just as unexpected as Bob Greene's. But it was a life saver – not just for the church in Antioch, but for the church through all of history.

I think it's significant enough that I want to read most of this chapter to you in one large chunk so we can get a feel for what was happening.

Acts 15:1-35

Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved."

This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see

the apostles and elders about this question. The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses."

The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. 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."

The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. When they finished, James spoke up: "Brothers, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

*"After this I will return
and rebuild David's fallen tent.
Its ruins I will rebuild,
and I will restore it,
that the remnant of men may seek the Lord,
and all the Gentiles who bear my name,
says the Lord, who does these things'
that have been known for ages.*

"It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."

Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers. With them they sent the following letter:

The apostles and elders, your brothers,

To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia:

Greetings.

We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul -- men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.

Farewell.

The men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers. After spending some time there, they were sent off by the brothers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them. But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord.

There's an old joke about three dry cleaners. I guess it must be dry humor. :) Anyway, these three dry cleaners happened to be right next to each other on the same city street. Naturally competition was fierce between them. So one day, the first drycleaner put a big, bright sign in his window that said, "BEST DRY CLEANER IN AMERICA."

The second dry cleaner wasn't going to stand for that, so he got an even bigger sign with flashing lights. It said, "BEST DRY CLEANER IN THE WORLD."

The third dry cleaner saw those two signs, then just put a small modest sign in the window that said, "BEST DRY CLEANER ON THE BLOCK."

Not to compare the book of Acts to dry cleaners, but we've been looking at story after story that are side by side, miracle after miracle, each one seeming bigger and better than the last. They sit right next to each other in the book. Healings, escapes, visions and demonstrations of the Spirit's power in people's lives. Very dramatic. Each one has a claim on being the most fantastic one of the bunch. Until the next one comes along.

Then we get to chapter 15, which isn't flashy at all. No spectacle to see. But I would hang a sign over this chapter that says "Best miracle on the block," because I believe this is the most amazing chapter of the entire book. It trumps just about everything else we've seen.

To me, what the apostles did here is more remarkable than any signs and wonders. God is at work in each conversation, bringing into sharper focus what it really means to be a

Christian. I don't think it is any exaggeration to say that this is the most critical point in the entire book.

Let's look more closely at what exactly happened:

Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved."

To our ears, it sounds like these guys are getting a little too personal. I'm never a big fan of hearing somebody's medical history, let alone something that private.

But circumcision in the Bible meant more than the modern medical procedure does. Let's think of an analogy from our world. It would be like that time I joined the Mexican Mafia and got a tattoo to show it. The tattoo says what gang I belong to and what code I live by. The mark is a way of identifying myself with a group and telling you what I stand for. The same thing was true for the Jews with circumcision. It was the physical way Jewish men identified themselves as part of God's people who lived by his law. It was the sign of who they were and what they believed.

So when these Jewish guys from Jerusalem come to Antioch, they're telling these new non-Jewish Christians, "It's great that you believe in Jesus. We're happy for you about that. But you're not full-fledged members of the club yet. There's something more you've got to do."

Actually, they aren't just saying there's something more to do to be part of the club. They're saying there's something more to do to be SAVED. Those are pretty strong words. What does being saved mean, anyway? Dave Wittenberg thinks he saved his mother-in-law last week by telling her not to eat peach pits. She had heard some doctor say they could be good for you, when really they produce cyanide and can kill you. Way to go Dave. The rest of you: quit munching on those peach pits.

Saving somebody like Dave did means rescuing them from something harmful or dangerous. To be saved in a Christian sense means being freed up from our sin. To be saved is to be rescued and protected from our own guilt that we carry around and the punishment that goes with it. Being saved means being pulled out of the horrible black hole of an eternity separated from the God who loves us. It's no small thing to be saved.

So how does that salvation happen? That's the issue at hand. According to what these teachers were saying, faith was only one part of it. You had to obey God's law, too. If the Christians in Antioch didn't agree to live by Jewish standards, they could not expect God to rescue them. Jesus alone wasn't enough.

If we put it in a simple math formula, it would look like this:

Jesus < Salvation

Jesus + X = Salvation

Now if that X factor is just circumcision, then this story doesn't have all that much to say to us. We're not in the same cultural setting. But that's not really the X. The X is anything we feel we have to do beyond what Jesus did to improve our standing with God. When I get into a spiritual discussion with someone I'm getting to know, I often ask why they think God would save them, why they would get to go heaven. Most of the time I get the same answer. People say, "I've been a pretty good person." We seem to have a built in idea that there are certain things we have to do (or not do) to achieve savable status. It's like the coworker who came up to me when she was going through a crisis and said, "What am I doing wrong? God must be punishing me for something." We see God's rescue and blessing as being directly linked to our behavior instead of to Christ's work.

Luke tells us that the people who came teaching these ideas in Antioch were themselves believers. They didn't doubt that Jesus died and rose again on their behalf. But they STILL thought there was more required of them to earn God's grace. These ideas were coming from WITHIN the church. That's why this story is vital for us. Even as people who know the truth of Jesus, we can still have distorted views of how our own actions influence God's opinion of us.

I remember sitting in an adult Sunday School class one time, listening as a friend of mine talked about salvation. He said, "I see it as a partnership between me and God, with both of us doing our part." Say it like that and it sounds pretty rational. But what he was really saying was exactly what those teachers in Antioch were saying: Jesus did his part, now you do YOUR part. Then you'll be saved. It's Jesus PLUS a little bit more.

So here's a question for you: What effect does that plus sign have? Does it really matter, or is this making a mountain out of a mole hill? After all, if people still believe in Jesus and are living better lives, what difference does it make?

I think it makes an enormous difference in at least four ways when we add an X factor to the equation. First, **it devalues Jesus**. My father-in-law and I have this ongoing battle when we go out to eat, because he always wants to pick up the tab and I don't want him to. Except for the expensive meals. Well the last time we went out, he told the waitress when we ordered, "This will all be on one check." I might have let him go ahead and pay, but then his lunch was bad and he didn't end up eating anything himself, and it didn't feel right to let him pay for the rest of us. So I managed to snag the check and pay it without him knowing what was going on. I completely undermined his offer to pay. It was beautiful.

Jesus has offered to pay for us. In fact, he hasn't just offered – he's paid the bill for our sin, even when he didn't have any himself. When we come along and try to do our part to pay, it's essentially ignoring what he's already done. There is no room for us to add anything to his work – it's more of an either/or proposition. Either Jesus' death was enough, or it wasn't worth anything. Jesus claimed it was complete, not partial. It

doesn't make sense to add something to it. If my works are that great, who needs Jesus? We can choose to not believe his death had any effect, but we can't really say it covers part of the problem and we make up the other part. Paul wrote to the Galatians and said,

Galatians 2:21

Is it not clear to you that to go back to that old rule-keeping, peer-pleasing religion would be an abandonment of everything personal and free in my relationship with God? I refuse to do that, to repudiate God's grace. If a living relationship with God could come by rule-keeping, then Christ died unnecessarily.

We've got to be clear: There really is no room for a plus sign in the equation. When we're saying we need to do something to be saved, to add something to what happened on Calvary, we're really saying we don't need Jesus. We're devaluing him and making him irrelevant.

As Jesus is devalued, he's replaced by the X factor – my own contribution. It **misplaces my confidence**, because now instead of trusting Jesus, I'm trusting in whatever good thing I'm doing.

We like to feel we have a measure of control over most things in life, that as we do good things, we can count on good results. That changes salvation from being a rescue effort by God into a self help effort by ourselves. And we kind of like that, because it helps us feel good about ourselves. There's no glory in accepting a life preserver that's thrown to me when I'm drowning – I'd rather say I swam a mile back to shore.

Maybe deep down we know we can't do it entirely on our own, but we figure if we combine it with Jesus' work, we can still take some of the credit. As we said earlier, though, Jesus doesn't need us to combine anything with him, so we're creating a false sense of security.

Not only that, when we add an X factor to salvation, it **turns me into a judge**. If behavior is now part of the equation, then I have a new standard for measuring other people. It's one more way I can compare myself to someone else and come out feeling better about myself. People who don't do the one thing I think is important are easier to write off.

Someone said it before me, but the ground is level at the foot of the cross. We're all dependent on that mercy, so there's no room for being judgmental. Peter nailed it when he said,

We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.

Peter saw that this question wasn't just about new Gentile converts in Antioch – it was about everyone. We all come to be saved the same way – by grace and not through our own actions. When we forget that, arrogance naturally creeps in and makes me want to exclude those whose actions don't meet my qualifications.

Ultimately, the X factor **creates a pressure cooker**. We set a bar that must be reached, and it must be reached perfectly for us to be saved. Now we've turned God's grace into something stressful that depends on our performance. So we try harder and harder.

That may go well for a while, but eventually, we all stumble. That was Peter's point to the council:

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?

That's some honesty for you. This is a burden nobody is able to carry. What happens when you have a burden you feel you have to carry but you can't? Two things. First, you learn to fake it really well. You can't let anybody else know you're not doing the job, so you cultivate this pretense of being on your A Game. You end up living in this environment where you can't be real

Secondly, when you get tired of trying, you count more and more on some kind of escape. I'm worn out from all this effort so I need to just get away from it. Our culture is filled with addictions of all kinds because people want to check out. Escape into a fantasy world is the way of coping with not being able to produce the results we want in the real world. That's why people quit church – they get tired of the effort to pretend they're measuring up.

The X factor creates a pressure cooker. When Jesus isn't enough, it's a scramble for us to try and make up the difference.

Twenty years ago this October, an Inuit man from the tiny town of Barrow in northwestern Alaska, went out to do some ice fishing. But when he got out on the ice, he saw something he would never forget: some gray whales were coming to a crack in the ice to get air. They were nearly suffocating. Apparently, the early winter had caught them by surprise. They were now surrounded by ice and trapped in the bay.

The man knew that whales need to come up for air about every 4 minutes and they were already exhausted. So he ran back to town and got everyone he could to bring their pick axes and chain saws to come and try to make a line of breathing holes for the whales to make it back out to the open sea. But the whales were too dazed or afraid to follow the holes out of the bay.

The story caught international news. Soon an ice barge came and tried to break its way in, but it got stuck. Then a sky crane helicopter flew in and dropped concrete on the ice to try to break up the ice from above. Finally a Russian icebreaker roared in. It charged the ice, smashing it into pieces. It worked all night, and by morning there was a narrow channel. The whales swam to freedom as the world watched and cheered.

I look at the response of the apostles to what was going on in Antioch and I see them like that whole town in Alaska, rushing in with pick axes and chain saws and barges and icebreakers to smash down this false teaching that was going to smother the gospel. They took this threat seriously and acted swiftly to ensure that Christians could breathe and be free. Jude talks about contending for the faith, and that's what they were doing, because faith will suffocate when we load it down with expectations that are beyond what God asks. Christ says his burden is light and we have to fight to keep it that way.

What incredible insight and courage the apostles had to stand up against this teaching and say, "No. We are saved by grace and grace alone. Period. We are not going to load up these new Christians with a bunch of prerequisites." Isn't that beautiful? People like things to be the same. We like to look the same and believe the same and talk the same. It would have been so tempting to ask all the new believers to look and act just like them, like a nice Christian club. Like going to church at the Gap, as Donald Miller puts it.

Have you struggled with church because it feels like a club? Like there's some membership fee to belong, but you don't know what it is? If that's been your experience in church, I'm so sorry. That was never God's intention. Are you seeking Christ? Then welcome. You belong. Not because of any good things you do, but just because of Jesus.

And it was James who stood up and made the final call, which is even better. James is the one writer in the New Testament who is most often misunderstood as being legalistic, so it's perfect that he comes right out and says we don't need anything but the cross. This was his chance to lay down the rules and he didn't do it! It was a watershed moment where the entire history of Christianity could have gone a very different direction. Praise God it didn't.

I love the way they worded their letter:

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you...

They weren't just relying on their own wisdom. They weren't digging back into historical precedents in Israel. They were listening to the Holy Spirit and trying to decide in sync with him.

What's more, it was the Holy Spirit that they recognized in the Gentile church.

God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.

When I attended Fuller Seminary, it was like any other grad school. To get in, you had to have completed your bachelor's degree. That was the requirement. But there was one guy who was allowed to register for classes even though he hadn't gone the college route. He told me his story and how the school had made an exception for him. They heard his

desire for ministry and looked at his life experience and waived the normal requirement. Somebody meeting him on the street might say, “There’s no way you can get in until you complete your degree. You’ve got to go through the proper channels.” But I sat in class with him. We had the same teachers. He was definitely getting a seminary education, and you couldn’t deny it.

The Jewish Christians may have been saying, “This shouldn’t be happening,” but there was no denying that the Gentile Christians had the same teacher. God had already given them his same Spirit. And the presence of the eternal Spirit meant those people already had eternal life. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians,

2 Corinthians 1:21-22

He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

Here’s why recognizing the Holy Spirit was so important: Before going back to heaven, Jesus had told his disciples that he would send them his Holy Spirit and that it would be the Holy Spirit’s job to guide them into the truth. They would have his voice speaking in their hearts to help them know right from wrong.

Now, as new people were responding to the gospel and receiving the Holy Spirit in the same way, the apostles had to conclude that he would be guiding them into all truth, too. So rather than attempt to impose a set of regulations for Gentile Christians, the apostles took the radical step of letting the Holy Spirit shape the church.

What does all this mean for us?

I hope it frees us up in our Spirit. Some of you have heard this story before, but it bears repeating. A friend of a friend was raised in a very strict Christian home. The dad was a strict disciplinarian who made sure his family was at church every week, he was seeking to raise his family in a godly way.

One Sunday though, he loaded everyone in the car, and instead of heading to church, he drove the family up to the mountains. They had a great time together, hiking around, having a picnic. Toward the end of the day, the dad asked the kids, “Do you know why we came up here today?” They all shook their heads. He said, “I did this because I want you to know that God doesn’t love you because you go to church. He just loves you.”

Listen, some of you are here today and you are working so hard to do what you feel God is asking you, and I want you to know that God doesn’t love you because you do or don’t do those things. He just loves you.

So where does that leave us? We still have to make choices about what we do. There’s still good and evil, stupid and smart. How do we try to make right choices without letting those choices become like a law for us and keep us from feeling free?

I think it comes back to the Holy Spirit. Instead of trying to work toward something outside of us, we start from the premise that we've already got the Holy Spirit working inside us. He makes all the difference.

Romans 8:3-5

The law always ended up being used as a Band-Aid on sin instead of a deep healing of it. And now what the law code asked for but we couldn't deliver is accomplished as we, instead of redoubling our own efforts, simply embrace what the Spirit is doing in us.

Those who think they can do it on their own end up obsessed with measuring their own moral muscle but never get around to exercising it in real life. Those who trust God's action in them find that God's Spirit is in them — living and breathing God!

That's the new math. If we put it into an equation, it would look like this:

$$\text{Jesus} = \text{Salvation} +$$

The plus here is the Holy Spirit. We not only are rescued through Jesus' death and resurrection – he also gave us his own Spirit. That is no small thing. He's not just some vague, nameless, universal force. He's a living, personal presence of God in our hearts, speaking guidance to us. If we've already got Christ's presence with us in that way, we no longer have to try to get through some checklist to reach his presence. Instead, our focus can shift to listening for him and recognizing him better.

Have you seen the new show Wipeout? It's an obstacle course with a 100% failure rate. It is designed to make you fall. Even the most athletic, coordinated contestants land in the mud, because it's an impossible course. Here a man is trying to cross a wall where big boxing gloves come out and punch you to make you fall off a tiny ledge with no footholds.

Think of life trying to reach God as being like that course. No matter how many times you start out, you're going to end up in the mud. There's no way to master it.

But that's not the new math. The Holy Spirit is already with us, not waiting at the end. We're not going through life on our own. He's there to give us a hand to support us, to show us the best places to set our feet. And he picks us up out of the mud when we fall.

We've also got Christ's spirit to give us the strength and courage to make the hard choices and live the right way. Christ is the only man in human history to actually live a sin-free existence, so it only makes sense that we would need his very presence in our lives if we hope to overcome sin ourselves. He is changing our character from within.

And, we've got the Holy Spirit to remind us that our salvation is secure. He whispers in our ear with the voice of God himself, telling us we are loved.

How's your math this morning? It's never been my best subject, either in school or in life. Learning to live with the new equation is hard. I keep wanting to add that X factor over and over again.

What's my X factor? What is the expectation I put on myself, that creeps into my mind as what I must do to earn God's acceptance? Go ahead and write it down. Now look at it and say to yourself, "God doesn't love you because of _____. He just loves me."

Maybe this is all new to you this morning, and you're going, "I wish I had some of that Holy Spirit, but I don't think I do." There's no magic to it. All it takes is a simple prayer of faith, saying, "Jesus, I know I can't do this obstacle course. I see now it's impossible. I need your Holy Spirit in my life. I believe that what you did when you died and rose again was all that God needs. I don't need to add anything. Please come into my life and forgive all the bad choices I've made and the wrong things I've put my confidence in."

Maybe you made that decision a long time ago, but you feel like one of those whales who's suffocating. You can't find your way out of the ice. You don't have to. Jesus can find his way in. He will bring his giant icebreaker and smash it to pieces. Call on him today and say, "Lord, I give up my X factors. I want to be confident in you. I want to listen for your voice and know your peace and strength. Fill me up and lead me."

Lord – thank you for all these people here this morning. Help us know how to live with the new math – to trust that Jesus is all and to grasp the awesome truth that you don't love us because of what we do or don't do. You just love us.