

To Seek and To Save The Lost

Acts 11:1-18

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When you submit to God you grow, the church is unified, and he is glorified.

Introduction

As we live out our lives amongst sinners, and of course being sinners ourselves, we inevitably develop critical thoughts about others. Sometimes those critical thoughts manifest themselves into outright criticism. While this is happening, from our perspective, others are doing the same thing regarding us.

I find our section of text this morning to be a powerful case study in the receiving of criticism and how to answer critics. Simply think about the week that just ended to see if this topic is relevant. Did anyone criticize a meal that you made? What about a policy you have at your business? Perhaps your children have openly criticized your decision to punish their demonstrated disobedience? Those are just a few brief examples, but the list could easily go on.

What if I turn the table on you? Have you been the one doing the criticizing? Either in thought or in word, maybe even in action. I'll share a ridiculous one from my past. Newly married, living in a campus town apartment with my wife, and I suddenly realized a different way existed to fold towels. I had grown up thinking towels were folded a certain way and now that way was being challenged. I think I muddled a weak criticism of this difference. But then childishly led a campaign of folding towels in a different manner whenever I folded the laundry. I was being critical with my actions.

Now I believe this type of criticism ranges in scope in our daily lives, but it doesn't remain in the small and trivial – no it grows and manifests itself in our understanding of Biblical truths as well.

We might hang onto our preconceived notions of who might be permitted into a life changing relationship with Jesus to the actual exclusion of those he has chosen. Putting us in the wrong and in need of repentance. This is an ongoing part of the sanctification processes that is being worked out in believers – individually and corporately.

It shouldn't be too difficult for us to recognize that when we are not conformed to God's will in our understanding, we are ultimately denying him glory and attempting to redirect that glory to ourselves. Holding our opinion to a higher level of authority than it deserves. This leads to oppressive views that hinder personal growth, stifle relationships, and hinder the gospel.

What we have been studying in Acts these past few weeks has been a careful dismantling of barriers. Barriers that arose from a misunderstanding that existed about who was to be saved. The Jewish believers had one idea, an idea that Peter was holding fast to until God powerfully intervened to show him that God shows no partiality. Excitingly Peter was able to witness first hand the conversion of Gentiles to the faith! This was much to his own shock.

What I see happening in the life of Peter and what I see happening in the lives of those identified in our text as those of the circumcision party is: **When you submit to God you grow, the church is unified, and he is glorified.**

This is a wonderful truth to behold. It elevates God, strengthens his body, and allows the church to fulfill its highest aim – to bring glory to God.

Criticism (Peter rocked the boat), received gracefully vv1-14

1.v1 "Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also..."

a. This was big news! A grand departure from what was believed to be orthodox. Even though over the past few weeks as we have been working through chapter 10 and most acutely Peter's struggle with his assignment to go to the Gentiles (represented by Cornelius).

i. This revelation wasn't ready to be accepted elsewhere in The Way. Not in the least! The critics were stewing. They were debating this news and you get the sense that they were just waiting for the inevitable confrontation.

ii. But we cannot forget Peter. Self-conscience, I have no doubt, about his role in breaking tradition. Tradition that had stood for well over a thousand years. But he doesn't avoid the confrontation that he had to be expecting.

b.vv2-3 *"So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying,..."*

i. I am sure most of us have our ideas about impetuous Peter. When we are honest with our evaluation we see much of ourselves in the Apostle Peter. I'm hoping we will see a side of him today we don't often give him enough credit for. A humility and tenderness towards those who were ready to criticize his actions in Caesarea.

1. When Luke here is referring to the circumcision party, this is not a minority group – rather it is the whole of the Christian faith up to this point minus a few exceptions (Samaritans, Ethiopian Eunuch, and a blossoming group of believers in Caesarea).

2. Initially all the converts to Christianity were from the Jewish people – up until Caesarea.

ii. Look with me at our now familiar account of how God orchestrated this highly criticized meeting between Peter and Cornelius to take place.

c.v4 *"But Peter began and explained it to them in order:"*

i. Notice church it doesn't say Peter rebuked them. Rather Peter received their criticism gracefully. Mind you it was a criticism that Peter had also shared in shortly before God intervened in his own life.

1. This realization absolutely humbles Peter.

ii. He knows he must carefully explain how this all came to be. He must present his case.

d.v5 *"I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet..."*

i. Peter is telling these critical people. It all started when I received a vision from heaven! In another word – it wasn't my idea.

1.v6 *"Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles..."*

a. Literally he is saying, "animals described in the Scriptures as unclean for us."

2.v7 *"And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat!'"*

a. Peter was taken back by such an outrageous suggestion, just as any of those listening to his account would have been, so he continues.

i.v8 *"But I said, 'By no means, Lord;..."*

ii. Peter is in essence saying I said what any of us would have said. No! It is not right! It has never been allowed.

3.vv9-10 *"But the voice answered a second time from heaven, 'What God has made..."*

a. Peter is empathizing with the circumcision party. He is finding that common ground that Seth referred to last week. The common ground of being adherents to the law. Recounting this massive dilemma he found himself in with this vision from heaven.

ii. But if the vision from heaven wasn't enough evidence, then while Peter was pondering the vision another act of God is unveiled.

1.v11 *"And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which..."*

a. Peter is recounting the story as he lived it. This is the most personal way he can convey the message.

b. This is how you too will be most effective in sharing how God is at work, when you share how he is at work around you. We can all think of amazing works recorded about how God worked in someone else's life, but our friends and family want to know why we believe in Jesus. They want to know why our lives are different because of Christ.

2.v12a *"And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction."*

a. Of course, the men from Caesarea were Gentiles, and I was being told by the Spirit to not use that as a reason to turn them down, but rather I was to go with them. Gentiles!

b.v12b *"These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered..."*

i. Peter told the account. But he also brought the witnesses. Just as to this day we value credible witnesses. Jewish law required true witnesses as well as a sufficient number.

ii. Deut. 19:15-21

iii. One of the things I cherish most about being in the church is the closeness of our relationships. We have grown together as a body and we can attest to the work that is being done in each other's lives. If for some reason this hasn't been your experience with the church let me urge you to attend the next four weeks as we take a break from Acts to work through the value of church membership. This is by no means a step we are taking lightly, but as elders we have been encouraged by the careful study of God's word to explore the value of membership to this local body.

iv. Peter is standing before those who are criticizing his interaction with the Gentiles with 6 faithful brothers by his side. This is a great comfort to us who are grounded in the church, to know we have Christ as the head and we have each other as his body (**Eph 5:23**).

iii.v13 *"And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, 'Send to..."*

1. For Peter this all started with a vision a trance. But it wasn't only him who was receiving revelation. He also finds out that the Gentile man, Cornelius, was visited by an angel from God who instructed him to send for Peter.

a. Peter is showing his critics just how much God was doing to make sure this unorthodox meeting took place. The very meeting that was the basis for their scrutiny of him.

b. The meeting was to take place for an eternally significant reason. For a kingdom expanding reason. That is what he shares in v14.

2.v14 *"he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved..."*

a. This is a level of detail we haven't received up to this point. But here as Peter is appealing to those criticizing him for going to the Gentiles he reveals he was being summoned to bring the message of the gospel.

b. Cornelius as we know was a devout man, he prayed continually, and he gave generously to the poor.

i. But no matter how righteous these deeds were; they were still far short of bringing him and his household salvation. Peter needed to come and share the truth about salvation through the Risen Savior.

Transition: Peter had rocked the boat and those who were used to things being only a certain way could not understand why Peter would do such a thing. They criticized him for his actions. But Peter received their criticism gracefully and carefully explained all that had happened leading up to his arrival in Caesarea. Peter had learned that by submitting to God – he had grown. He was walking by faith. In these first 14 verses he gave the account in order, but he doesn't stop. Peter continues in our next section with an appeal to what has become widely known if not directly experienced as common in The Way and to the word revealed by Christ.

Explanation from Scripture and Christian Experience (Peter soothes with Scripture) vv15-17

i. v15 *"As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning."*

e. This is how it happened on the day of Pentecost. After Christ had ascended to the right hand of the Father the disciples were waiting in Jerusalem as Jesus had instructed them. (Acts 2:1-4)

f. The experience on the day of Pentecost changed everything. The promised Holy Spirit was sent – filling the believers.

g. Peter was there. He tells those gathered around him that what happened in Caesarea was just like the day of Pentecost. The Spirit fell! He appeals to a common Christian experience to say what happened to us, also happened to the Gentiles! This is a work of God.

h. v16 *"And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you...'"*

i. Taking the group back again to the early days of Acts as well as the ministry of Christ, Peter wisely appeals to higher authority.

i. Acts 1:4-5 *"And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, 'you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.'"*

ii. Matt 3:11 *"'I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.'"*

g. After appealing to the words of Christ and the well-known testimony of John the Baptist concerning Jesus – Peter puts the question to his inquisitors.

h. v17 *"If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ,..?"*

i. Peter didn't start with the question. He carefully explained the extraordinary events as God led him. He even shares how he was able to come to the conclusion that he came to.

j. Isn't this what we all long for? When we are uncertain of why life is going the way it is going, when our natural reaction is to put up our fiercest opposition to change. Isn't it at these times that we want someone to carefully lead us through times of uncertainty – times of change?

i. We can be this type of friend. We can be faithful to God and careful with those who are questioning our reasons.

ii. We can and we should be this way, but we can only do so when we take God at his word and trust him.

iii. This is what Peter had to do. Despite what he believed was right, he trusted God's word above his own. He submitted to God and he grew. He reflected upon the teaching of his

Master Jesus. In this way Peter was able to lovingly share with his critics and watch the church marvelously become unified - even as it sat on the precipice of disaster.

1. Brothers and Sisters, our community and our country need us to take our cues from an Acts 11 Peter. The divisiveness is thick around us. It is turning daily more virulent. The cure is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Not a gospel that gets blasted from the hip like a fast drawn six shooter out of the old west, but a careful even a tender application of truth.

2. Meeting critics at a place of commonality and then sharing our personal testimony of how God is making a difference in our own life and how he has changed us overtime. Mind you, in doing so not forgetting where you started, because it is often where you started that you will most easily connect with the non-believer.

3. Give the credit to God. It wasn't a formula you developed, something you stumbled upon, but the careful guiding hand of the Holy Spirit leading you along the way.

4. And I mentioned tender earlier, because facing criticism as Peter was doing can cause our defenses to go up. Trust me, your face doesn't need to turn hard, your words don't need to become biting, your tone doesn't need to turn cold.

5. Peter stood there in front of his critics in an understanding manner, received their criticism gracefully, and appealed to the power of God to redirect the lives of the men opposing him to conform to God's will.

6. Turn with me to the other book credited to Luke as the author, **Luke 19:1-10**

k. *"He entered Jericho and was passing through. And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus..."*

i. To seek and to save the lost must be our aim. We of course want to live in close relationship with Christ. But in order to be close to Christ we also have to share in his passion. It is without a doubt that Jesus loved sinners and was willing to spend time with them to the point that they were willing to forsake their sin to follow him.

ii. Let me ask you does that resonate within you? Do the tears begin to well up at the thought of watching the sinner suffer one more day apart from the saving knowledge of Christ? If so then I would say the Spirit is working in you and you are rightly sensitive to the heart of God.

iii. **Ezekiel 34:11-16**

l. Throughout Scripture we read of God's great desire to bring his own close to him. When we are walking according to the Spirit this is to be our heart as well as we conform to the Father's will. This is a painful desire, no doubt. It cost our Savior a brutal death upon the cross, separation from the Father, and the crushing burden of the wrath of God.

i. He did it willingly for hostile sinners.

Transition: As Peter shared his experience with the likes of the circumcision party in Jerusalem their hard hearts were melted by the truth. The care with which Peter treated them was disarming and they were once again unified with their brother and were willing to see the church unified around Christ – not circumcision. This brings glory to God – the ultimate purpose of the church and what we see in the last point.

God is Glorified v18

i. v18 *"When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles..."*

m. The critics have been treated with such care, they have been treated so tenderly, the truth of Christ's words have been appealed to rightly – and what happens? Their criticism ceases.

n. No argument remains as to why Peter would do such a thing as, "eat with Gentiles."

i. *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."* **Galatians 3:28**

ii. For it is just as Christ proclaimed in **Matt. 8:11** *"I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven,"*

d. With what Christ proclaimed beginning to come true, the believers who met Peter to criticize him are instead given over to fulfilling the purpose of the church, to bring glory to God. They glorified God for saving the Gentiles.

i. But we cannot overlook the significance of the words used to describe the salvation of the Gentiles. These believers say the Gentiles have been granted repentance that leads to life.

ii. You see it is only by turning away from sin at the realization of God's holiness that we experience salvation. Jesus Christ is the Savior – he is the Savior for those who believe in him. We show our belief in him by turning away from sin and turning towards him – placing our faith in him.

1. Rom 4:16

Transition: Peter is being led by the Holy Spirit to speak words of truth. The critics are silenced – at least at voicing their criticism, but they find their new voice to bring glory to God and to speak powerfully true words concerning the value of repentance at conversion.

Conclusion

What we have seen in this passage is not unlike what we might experience in the work place or talking with someone at our kids' sporting event. Criticism may come at our next family gathering. Peter went up to Jerusalem and didn't shy away from the inevitable conflict that he must have been expecting. But his approach was unlike that which we have come to expect from Peter. He received the criticism gracefully and was able to soothe with Scripture. Even though he had rocked the boat, he was able to right it once again with carefully applied truth. Peter had learned that **When you submit to God you grow, the church is unified, and he is glorified.** I pray that we have learned that lesson more fully as well. That when we submit to God we grow in our sanctification. As we grow together in this manner the church is unified around Christ. This then of course allows us to live our very reason for existence – to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

Family

Table Talk



September 2, 2018

Family Discussion

1. Changes in life can be some of the most difficult parts of living. What are some changes you have gone through? Maybe a move, or the loss of a loved one, or maybe a new family member has been added in. How did you handle the change?
2. Many times it is the changes that we just talked about that bring out some of the ugliest reactions in us. We can become harsh and critical of those who are playing a role in the change that is coming about. How did Peter react to the criticism being levied at him in Acts 11? What can you learn from Peter's example?
3. Criticism can be a formidable barrier to progress. Have you become critical of others in your home or school or church? How can you apply the truth of the gospel to the situation you just identified? Now pray for God's strength to follow through!

GOD'S TRUTH

When you submit to God you grow, the church is unified, and he is glorified!

Key Verse

"That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all,"
Romans 4:16 (ESV)

TABLE READING

Lead your kids into
God's Word...

1. Acts 11:1-3, Matthew 11:29-30
2. Acts 11:4-17, Proverbs 16:1, Romans 9:20
3. Ephesians 4:1-7, 2 Corinthians 7:10, Acts 11:18

Scripture Memory: Ephesians 4:11-13

"AND THOSE WHO BELIEVE I COMMAND YOU TODAY (EPL) BE ON YOUR HEELS. YOU SHALL TEACH THEM DILIGENTLY TO YOUR CHILDREN, AND SHALL ENK OF THEM WHEN YOU SIT IN YOUR HOUSE, AND WHEN YOU WALK BY THE WAY, AND WHEN YOU LIE DOWN, AND WHEN YOU RISE, YOU SHALL BIND THEM AS A SIGN ON YOUR HAND, AND THEY SHALL BE AS FRONTS BETWEEN YOUR EYES, YOU SHALL WRITE THEM ON THE DOORPOST OF YOUR HOUSE AND ON YOUR GATES." - DEUTERONOMY 6:8-9 (ESV)

