

Fallout

Acts 11:1-18

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Do you know what the most common exercise activity in America is? It is not Crossfit or yoga or even running. If you decide which activity is most common based on how many people participate, the most common exercise in America is: jumping to conclusions!

As a society, we are great at doing this. We get a small piece of information and immediately fill in the rest of the details for ourselves. We live in a society that thrives on action, so we don't have time to worry about gathering facts or trying to make sure we've got the whole story.

Just watch the news today. I find it particularly fun to watch news stories from both sides of the political spectrum. News channels aren't concerned with nuance—they are concerned with activating their base. They gloss over facts that might detract from their narrative, and instead focus on helping people jump to conclusions and into action.

We might like to think this is a modern problem; and while it is probably magnified in our connected culture, it is not really a new problem. The same issue existed in Peter's day as well. Peter knew the revelation that the Gentiles had come to faith would be big news. He probably knew that it would cause some consternation among the Jewish believers. He may have even expected the accusations that were leveled against him when he arrived back in Jerusalem. Whatever the case, Peter gives us a master class in how to respond to such criticism. There is a great deal of wisdom to be gleaned from this brief encounter in Jerusalem in Acts 11.

The Charges

Our passage begins with the charges that were leveled against Peter,

Soon the news reached the apostles and other believers in Judea that the Gentiles had received the word of God. ² But when Peter arrived back in Jerusalem, the Jewish believers criticized him. ³ "You entered the home of Gentiles and even ate with them!" they said. (Acts 11:1-3, NLT)

At the end of last week's passage, we learned that Peter spent several days staying with Cornelius and instructing him and his family in the faith. This delay meant there was time for word to travel back to Jerusalem about what happened. The message was simple: the Gentiles had received the word of God. This surely created quite a stir and probably a mix of feelings amongst the believers in Jerusalem. On the one hand, there was excitement and encouragement at the fact that the gospel was spreading even to the Gentiles, but there was probably also resentment and concern that they were not following the Jewish religious rituals. There was a deep-seated animosity toward the Gentiles because they didn't adhere to all the rules the Jews held so dearly. The notion that they could simply be accepted into the body of Christ without following Jewish laws surely ruffled some feathers.

When Peter arrived back in Jerusalem, we are told that some of the Jewish believers criticized him. The Greek says that “the circumcision” criticized him. There is debate on whether that means all the Jewish believers criticized him or whether it was just a group that insisted on circumcision as for salvation. We know that such a group existed later (Paul condemns them repeatedly in the book of Galatians), but we don’t know whether it was that group in particular that criticized Peter here.

Regardless of who made up the group of Peter’s critics, they did not criticize him for sharing the gospel with the Gentiles. That was not their primary objection. Their objection was the Peter had not “kept kosher.” They had issue with the fact that Peter had entered the home of Gentiles and even ate with them! Their problem was that he had not followed the laws they held so dear.

Notice that they didn’t ask Peter any questions. They didn’t ask him, “We heard that you ate and even stayed with Gentiles in Caesarea. That seems out of character for you. Is it true? If so, what led to that happening?” That wasn’t the case at all. They weren’t concerned with gathering information. They had all the information they needed. They’d heard Peter was a terrible person who was eating with Gentiles, and immediately attacked him.

The Response

Peter did not respond the way most of us would. We see his response in verses 4-17

⁴ Then Peter told them exactly what had happened. ⁵ “I was in the town of Joppa,” he said, “and while I was praying, I went into a trance and saw a vision. Something like a large sheet was let down by its four corners from the sky. And it came right down to me. ⁶ When I looked inside the sheet, I saw all sorts of tame and wild animals, reptiles, and birds. ⁷ And I heard a voice say, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat them.’ ⁸ “ ‘No, Lord,’ I replied. ‘I have never eaten anything that our Jewish laws have declared impure or unclean.’ ⁹ “But the voice from heaven spoke again: ‘Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean.’ ¹⁰ This happened three times before the sheet and all it contained was pulled back up to heaven.

¹¹ “Just then three men who had been sent from Caesarea arrived at the house where we were staying. ¹² The Holy Spirit told me to go with them and not to worry that they were Gentiles. These six brothers here accompanied me, and we soon entered the home of the man who had sent for us. ¹³ He told us how an angel had appeared to him in his home and had told him, ‘Send messengers to Joppa, and summon a man named Simon Peter. ¹⁴ He will tell you how you and everyone in your household can be saved!’

¹⁵ “As I began to speak,” Peter continued, “the Holy Spirit fell on them, just as he fell on us at the beginning. ¹⁶ Then I thought of the Lord’s words when he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷ And

since God gave these Gentiles the same gift he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to stand in God's way?" (Acts 11:4-17, NLT)

Notice how Peter responded. He did not lash out but chose to carefully and clearly recount exactly what happened. He recognized that the remedy to gossip is a healthy dose of facts, so he shared the details of what had transpired.

Listen to James Montgomery Boice's observations about this, Peter could have said, "I am an apostle; God speaks to me and through me. God told me that going to the house of these Gentiles was all right. So if you don't like it, you can just leave my church." Some Christian leaders handle controversy in that way. Peter did not. Peter did not flaunt his apostolic authority. Instead he began with a humble recitation of what happened. The Greek makes this particularly clear. It indicates that Peter began at the beginning and explained everything precisely—a very strong word—as it happened.

If anybody questioned his particular presentation of the facts, well, there were the six brothers who had gone to Caesarea with him. They could say, as undoubtedly they did, "It is exactly as Peter has reported."¹

Another commentary had a similar, helpful observation, This detailed recounting required effort, energy, and time. He might have said, "Look, I know what happened to me. I know what God said. I don't have to explain myself to you."

But Peter worked hard to keep the peace and promote understanding. Often, good communication and peacemaking takes time. When peacemaking is needed, don't rush or skip essential conversations with others (even when it's hard or inconvenient).²

Peter's response shows great wisdom and restraint. When you are unjustly attacked, it is tempting to lash out, to respond in kind. When people treat you poorly, when they shout you down, it's easy to follow the same pattern, to shout back, to go on the offensive.

Rather than escalating the situation, however, Peter responded by carefully and calmly recounting the facts of what happened to the believers gathered there. We are familiar with the story, as we looked at it last week. The story he told in chapter 11 is nearly identical (though condensed) to what we read in chapter 10. He explained that he was praying, had a vision from God, and the Holy Spirit instructed him to go with the men who showed up at the house. He emphasized God's leading throughout the process.

¹ Boice, James Montgomery. *Acts: An Expositional Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997.

² Barton, Bruce B., and Grant R. Osborne. *Acts. Life Application Bible Commentary*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1999.

And then he told them about how Cornelius had also had a vision, how he shared the gospel with them, and how the Holy Spirit fell upon the Gentiles in exactly the same way He had fallen upon them. He recounted Jesus' words that they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit and realized that God was showing them that these Gentiles were acceptable in His sight, just as they were.

Peter didn't editorialize; he didn't get defensive; he simply responded with the facts of what happened. And he had 6 other witnesses who could attest that what he said was true. I suspect Peter may have anticipated that whatever was going to happen in Caesarea would be very significant, and possibly controversial. He was wise to bring several witnesses with him to corroborate what he said. Jewish law required that every matter be established by at least two eyewitnesses. Peter decided to triple that number!

When we are unjustly attacked, we do not need to fight or try to prove our innocence. Some people will never be convinced to move from the conclusions they've jumped to. So, we should simply share the facts and trust that in the end, the truth will prevail. If we have truly done nothing wrong, then there is no reason not to simply lay out all the facts. If we have done something wrong, then we should admit it and deal with it.

Often, in the church, we are quick to get our feelings hurt and simply run away or attack in return. This is the cause of many church splits or people choosing to leave the church. That's far easier than doing the work of making peace. Peacemaking is rarely quick or easy, but it's always better. The goal should not be to get what we want as quickly as possible, but to restore relationships as completely as possible. Often, that takes time and hard conversations. It requires working to understand one another and working together to find solutions to our problems. The world's way says cut bait and run away. God's way takes more time and care but also leads to much better outcomes.

The Outcome

After Peter took the time to explain what happened, we see his critics' response in verse 18.

¹⁸ When the others heard this, they stopped objecting and began praising God. They said, "We can see that God has also given the Gentiles the privilege of repenting of their sins and receiving eternal life." (Acts 11:18, NLT)

Luke gives us the impression that everybody agreed with Peter and rejoiced over the fact that the Gentiles had come to faith. And I suspect that's exactly what happened—they were happy that the gospel was spreading, as they wanted others to know the salvation that was available through Jesus.

But we also know this peace did not last. As more and more Gentiles came to faith, the church began to look different. Instead of being Jewish people who had come to recognize Christ as their Messiah, it started to become a completely different animal. It no longer looked like the Jewish religion they had come to know and love. So the issue did not stay resolved for long. It ended up rearing its head later (which we will see in

Acts 15), and Paul continued to deal with those who insisted that a person must undergo circumcision to be saved.

While it's easy to sit in judgment over these closed-minded people, this attitude is more common than we might imagine. We are eager to see people come to know Jesus. We claim we want everyone to know the gospel and be saved. But what about when that begins to change the makeup of your church? What about when the new believers have different preferences and ideas than you? What about when they bring in others like them and the church you spent years serving and loving begins to look so different that you hardly even recognize it anymore?

I attended a church in college that faced this exact problem. They were the closest church to my college campus which had 11,000 students. Their pastor had encouraged them to look at the university as a mission field they should be trying to reach. They began several programs that reached out to students and attracted a significant contingent of college students. The students brought new life to the church, and it was exciting for a while. But then they became a nuisance. The ladies who ran the kitchen complained that the students were using too many paper products during their bible studies. So they locked the paper products up. They were frustrated that they had to share the kitchen with the college students for activities and felt the need to defend their territory and run the students out. Soon, the concern was that these students might desecrate the church by behaving in ways they thought inappropriate. So they declared there was to be no dancing anywhere on the premises. Guess what happened? The students got the message that they weren't welcome and left. The church kept their traditions but missed what God was doing.

Friends, we must be careful that we don't become so enamored with the way we do things that we allow it to overshadow the gospel. Often, we are willing to accept people into fellowship in the church as long as they promise to be like us. As long as they:

- Affirm the same theological perspectives we do
- Hold the same political convictions we do
- Dress, talk, behave, sing, and spend their free time like we do
- Fit in with our "church culture"

The problem with this is that we make Christian fellowship contingent upon things other than the gospel. The deciding factor is not whether people have trusted Christ, it's whether they are maintaining the status quo. This is not how we should behave—but it's far more common than we realize.

Think about it on an even larger scale. Missionaries are constantly working to bring the gospel message to people who have never heard it before. When those people come to trust in Jesus, their churches often end up looking very different from ours. They come to reflect their cultural beliefs and customs. They are worshiping the same Christ, but it may look very different, at times almost unrecognizable to us. When I was first confronted with this fact, I had the realization that I believed we should export "American Christianity" to the rest of the world. I believed that the only people who were right were

the people who did it like me. And then I realized I was distorting the gospel with that belief. It's something I still wrestle with often.

We must stand guard against the tendency to worship our traditions rather than our Lord. The early church had to fight this battle over and over. Chances are, we will too. The remedy, however, is to keep coming back to the essentials of the gospel message. Those elements do not, and cannot, change, but we must recognize that the expressions of that faith may change depending on the person, the culture, and the situation. And we must learn to be ok with and even celebrate that fact!

Conclusion

Even though this passage rehashes a lot of content we covered last week, it addresses some fresh and unique issues. These issues were new to the early church, but they were not limited to it. We face similar challenges today, so we should learn from them. I've got a few lessons to draw from this passage.

First, we should listen and ask questions before jumping to conclusions. In our fast-paced world that demands action now, many people do not have the patience to listen to both sides of a situation or ask questions to determine the truth. Jumping to conclusions is far easier, but almost never better. Instead of immediately assuming the worst about people, learn to listen first. There's usually a reason for people's actions. That doesn't mean those reasons are always good, but you can't know until you ask.

Second, choose to respond with dignity and truth when attacked, rather than attacking back. Being unfairly slandered is hard. It is hard when people you thought were your friends seem to turn on you. It's hard when people believe lies about you without even bothering to ask for your side of things. But that doesn't mean we should respond in kind. Instead, we should choose to act with dignity, and simply speak the truth. Resist the temptation to take shots at your critics, refuse to point fingers back. Do your best to fairly and accurately communicate the facts and trust that ultimately the truth will prevail.

Finally, look around to see what "sacred cows" you might have. Pay careful attention to your thoughts about others. When you feel yourself looking down on someone, ask yourself what you're really responding to. Often, you will find they've broken some unwritten rule you think they should be following. The danger is that we can begin to place far more importance on our unwritten rules than on the gospel. Challenge yourself to look at what are the essential elements of the gospel message and then choose to stand only on those.

It seems that in first-century Jerusalem, jumping to conclusions was just as popular as it is in 21st century America. While I know exercise is good for you, I think there are probably far better pastimes we can strive for. This week, choose to be a peacemaker, a truth-teller, and a person who welcomes those who are different from you. That's not an easy task, but it is who God calls us to be.

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