

## **An Adjustment Period**

### **Acts 11**

#### **DT- The Church's identity is found in Christ alone.**

Last week we saw Peter make an incredible change in his view of Gentiles. His change leads to a major adjustment period for the church. Some Jews were accepting of the Gentiles and others weren't. We will see that struggle to adjust in our text today. The truth is these issues will not be settled until the Jerusalem council in Acts 15.

In today's passage we will look at 3 different situations where adjustment is taking place. The end result in all 3 instances provides us with a wonderful truth, but I'll wait until the end to share that truth with you. Let's pray.

RPAY

Adjusting to things is not always easy. My family and this church family is about to go through a time of adjustment. You will have to adjust to me not being your senior minister. In a few months someone else will step into this role and it has been my prayer that they will shepherd this church family well. You will have to adjust to his preaching, his leadership, his way of shepherding. I will have to adjust to a whole new church family, a new staff to lead, a new group of elders to work with, a whole new place to live.

Some of you have described this transition like sending your kids off to college or ripping a Band-Aid off slow as we approach my last Sunday here. Adjusting to things is not always easy, but with the right heart it can be done well, and it can glorify God.

For those of you who go to the chiropractor, you know how those adjustments work. Depending on how out of place you are, those adjustments can leave you a little sore, but within a day or two you feel better and are glad you went. The adjustments we will see in this text are needed, you might even say they are desperately needed for the future growth of the church. In the moment however, some of them are struggling to adjust, but God sees them through it.

In the first section of this text, we see an adjustment from criticism to acceptance.

#### **1. From criticism to acceptance.**

Remember that Peter had just done something that no Jew would ever do. He entered the house of a Gentile and ate with them. Even without social media, word about what he had done gets back to Jerusalem and Acts 11:1-3 says, "Soon the news reached the apostles and other believers in Judea that the Gentiles had received the word of God. But when Peter arrived back in Jerusalem, the Jewish believers criticized him. "You entered the home of Gentiles and even ate with them!" they said."

The Jewish believers back in Jerusalem are not too upset about Peter sharing the gospel with them. They don't even seem very upset about Peter baptizing Gentiles. What they can't get past is that Peter went in a Gentile's house and ate with him and his family and friends. Peter is rebuked for fellowshiping with the Gentiles. They also couldn't believe that he would let someone come to Christ before they came to Abraham. The big Jerusalem council meeting in Acts 15 is a discussion about that very thing. Do the Gentiles need to convert to Judaism first and then Christianity, or can they convert directly to Christianity.

Peter is criticized because he allows the Gentiles to circumvent the Mosaic law and go straight to the gospel of Jesus Christ. That was an issue, but the biggest problem was that Peter had table fellowship with the Gentiles. He ate with them, and who you eat with you humanize. Why do you think some restaurants years ago use to have signs that said, "White's Only."

Because who you eat with you humanize. If you are prejudice against someone, eat with them. The Jews were certainly prejudice against the Gentiles, and Peter took it a step too far when he broke bread at the same table as them. There is something about eating at someone's table in their house and having that fellowship that changes the dynamic of the relationship. The more you do it the more comfortable you become with those people.

Did you know that one of the factors that helps young people keep their faith, from the ages of 18-25 when they go off to college or start living on their own; is whether or not they had regular meals with their family around the table. According to a mountain research, children who have regular meals with their family do better in school, have fewer social issues, and are more likely to graduate. They are far less likely to take up smoking, use alcohol or drugs, or experiment sexually.

There is just something about eating with one another. The table is physical, emotional, social, and spiritual. The Jews understood that and they were not okay with Peter engaging in that kind of social interaction with those people. All Peter could do in this situation was share his story of how God, through a vision, made it clear to him that it was perfectly fine to be in a Gentile's house and share a meal with them. Peter shares the exact story that we read in Acts 10 so I won't read it again, but after Peter explains why he ate with them he says this in Acts 11:17-18, "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?"

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."

Peter says, "Who was I to stand in God's way." Thankfully these Jewish believers moved from criticism to acceptance and stopped hounding Peter about eating with Gentiles. Not only did they accept this major adjustment they even began to praise God. They could have accepted it but been sour about it, and reluctant to praise God for these new believers. Instead they praised God that the Gentiles were part of the kingdom too. Even they have the privilege of repenting and receiving eternal life.

Their reaction gives a whole new meaning to Philippians 2:14 which says, "Do everything without complaining and arguing." It didn't start that way but most of them moved towards acceptance. We can certainly learn from their quick change of heart. Often times pride stands in the way of what God wants to do in our life. The Jews had a good reason to be proud of their heritage, but God was opening the door for everyone to hear the good news.

We need to make sure that we do the same. This was a new concept for them to adjust to but thankfully they accepted it and began to work together. In fact that togetherness is what we see happening in the next 2 sections of this text. We went from criticism to acceptance, and next we will see how they went from scattered to established.

## **2. From scattered to established.**

Just after the stoning of Stephen in Acts 7 the church in Jerusalem was scattered. Acts 11:19-21 gives us an update on those who were scattered, where it says, "Meanwhile, the believers who had been scattered during the persecution after Stephen's death traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch of Syria. They preached the word of God, but only to Jews. However, some of the believers who went to Antioch from Cyprus and Cyrene began preaching to the Gentiles about the Lord Jesus. The power of the Lord was with them, and a large number of these Gentiles believed and turned to the Lord."

The scattering of believers has now reached past Judea, and Samaria, and with the establishment of a church in Antioch we could say that they have reached the ends of the earth at least as they knew it. Although the persecution was not an enjoyable thing, it did allow the church to spread and establish new churches in faraway cities like Antioch.

The establishment of new churches because of scattered and persecuted Christians is a good and wonderful thing, but how the leaders in Jerusalem responded to this establishment of churches is also something to celebrate and learn from. Once the believers in Jerusalem heard about these new churches in Gentile cities, instead of criticizing them like they did at first, they chose instead to encourage these brand new churches by sending the encourager himself, Barnabas. Acts 11:22-24 says, "When the church

at Jerusalem heard what had happened, they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw this evidence of God's blessing, he was filled with joy, and he encouraged the believers to stay true to the Lord. Barnabas was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and strong in faith. And many people were brought to the Lord."

The church leaders in Jerusalem had a responsibility to shepherd the scattered flock, which now included Gentile congregations 300 miles away. They sent one of their best in Barnabas. He was sent to find out exactly what was going on. He arrives and sees evidence of God's blessing and it fills him with joy and so he stays and encourages the believers there for quite a while.

His method of encouragement was to first worship with them. Worshiping with Gentiles was a new experience for him. He encouraged them to stay true to the Lord. A better way of saying that might be to say "cleave to the Lord." Hold on to him. Love the Lord, walk in his ways, obey his word, and serve him by serving others. His encouragement had an impact because verse 24 says that many people were brought to the Lord.

Because the church started to grow Barnabas knew he needed help so he went down to Tarsus and found Paul and brought him back to Antioch to help him minister. The church went from scattered to established but in a way so do Paul. When we're young in our faith we can sometimes be scattered, and what we need is an encouraging mentor like Barnabas to come alongside us and help us get established. D.L. Moody once said, "It is better to put ten men to work than to do the work of ten men."

If you're in a position to be a Barnabas, then go be one. If you need a Barnabas, pray for one and look for one. The Holy Spirit worked through Barnabas and then through Barnabas and Paul to help those who were scattered from Jerusalem establish themselves and find firm spiritual ground. As we move into the last section the tables are turned. Instead of the leaders in Jerusalem looking after the scattered, those who were scattered had to look after those still left in Jerusalem. Because of a famine they had no choice but to move from blessing to blessed.

### **3. From blessing to blessed.**

Up to this point they had been the ones providing the blessing. They were the hub of mission's work. They were the ones sending people out, but that would actually begin to shift towards Antioch in the near future. I was always taught that you need to be a blessing when you can, but you also need to be humble enough to receive a blessing when one is offered to you. When you turn down someone's blessing you steal their joy.

The church in Jerusalem was about to face something difficult, and it would cause them to move from being the ones who bless to being the ones who need a blessing. That's when the church in Antioch decided to help. Acts 11:27-30 says, "During this time some prophets traveled from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them named Agabus stood up in one of the meetings and predicted by the Spirit that a great famine was coming upon the entire Roman world. (This was fulfilled during the reign of Claudius.) So the believers in Antioch decided to send relief to the brothers and sisters in Judea, everyone giving as much as they could. This they did, entrusting their gifts to Barnabas and Saul to take to the elders of the church in Jerusalem."

Famines would occur from AD 41 to AD 54. Historians outside of scripture during this time period record at least 4 major famines. 2 in Rome, 1 in Greece, and 1 in Judea. The famine in Judea was especially severe, and the Jewish historian Josephus records that many people died because they had no currency to buy what little food there was.

The Antioch believers decided to do something. They couldn't stop the famine from coming but they could provide relief for those that needed it. Galatians 6:6 says, "Those who are taught the word of God should provide for their teachers, sharing all good things with them."

That is essentially what they were doing for the church in Jerusalem. The church in Jerusalem had been a blessing to them. The Jewish believers in Jerusalem had brought the gospel to Antioch. They had sent Barnabas to encourage them and now Antioch had an opportunity to provide for their teachers, by sharing all good things with them.

Receiving this blessing may have been a humble thing for the church in Jerusalem, but it was a beautiful demonstration of how the church is meant to operate. Winston Churchill once said, "We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give."

This early church spread out across the Mediterranean was dealing with quite a few adjustments. In each of the 3 sections of this chapter we see Gentiles or Jews having to deal with change or are the ones creating the change. From criticism to acceptance. From scattered to established. From blessing to blessed. The one truth that we see in all these situations is that the church's identity is beginning to solidify around Christ alone.

Your identity is not founded in what you do. Your identity is not based on the amount of money you make. Your identity has nothing to do with what you drive, the size of your house, or the size of your bank account. I know people who have incredible resources and do almost nothing for the kingdom. I also know people with incredible resources who are constantly using what they have to help and further the kingdom of God. I know people who just barely get by and yet they are some of the most outspoken witnesses for Christ. Your identity is not found in the possessions you have or don't have. Your identity is not even found in the abilities or gifts that God gave you. Your identity is found in Christ alone. You are a follower of Christ first.

This early church, as they went through all these uncomfortable adjustments, is learning and establishing their identity in Christ, not in the color of their skin or their ethnic background. They were followers of Christ first. You are a follower of Christ, who also happens to be a mother. You are a follower of Christ and you just happen to be a grandfather, or an engineer, or an electrician, or a banker, an IT professional, a retired veteran, a mechanic, a policemen, a fireman, a teacher, or a preacher.

We are followers of Christ first. Galatians 3:26-28 says, "For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes. There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Our identity is in Christ alone, and he has saved us and set us free from sin and adopted us as his children thereby allowing us to be part of his kingdom too. If you will remember that, you will find it much easier to deal with the adjustments of life. These scattered believers were just starting to understand that the church's identity is found in Christ alone. I hope we remember and live that truth out as individuals but perhaps more importantly, I hope we always remember that truth as the Church. Our identity is in Christ alone.