

“...about all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1).

Overcoming Spiritual Ruts (Part 1)

Acts 11:1-18

1 Now the apostles and the brethren who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. 2 And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him, 3 saying, “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.” 4 But Peter began speaking and proceeded to explain to them in orderly sequence...

Jase and I meet for breakfast every Thursday. We have been doing this for many years now and you might say we are in a rut. We eat at the same time every week; 6:30 am. We meet at the same place every week; Chick-fil-a. And, although we do mix it up a bit at times, ordering different items; some things are the same; Jase always gets a plain, unsweet, no sugar Iced Tea; and generally, to my dismay because I liked their bold coffee that they have discontinued, I get my coffee; usually brought to my table as I walk in the door. You might say that Jase and I are in a rut. On those rare occasions that we really change things up, we cause confusion and chaos among the workers that know us. So we manage our ruts.

Along the same lines, I came across a cartoon this week where the caption reads, “Week #2 of a new church.” In the picture, two people are setting up the room for church, talking with each other and obviously upset about something. It was this. One fellow says to the other, “That’s not the way we did it last week!” How quickly we can get into ruts! Even in the church! After being in existence less than ten years, the early church was in a rut of sorts. They knew what Jesus had commanded, **“You shall be My witnesses...to the remotest part of the earth (Acts 1:8).”** He told them exactly what He was going to do and exactly what He expected. He was going to use them to take the gospel to all the peoples of the world. They had just grown comfortable to this point and God was going to shake things up.

In Acts 11, the church has been going strong for some time now. But just recently, back in Acts 10, something changed the routine; something sparked the church again to keep it from getting into a rut. Peter, the apostle to the Jews, had just shared the gospel with a Gentile. If that were not change enough, this “Jewish Christian” did this in the home of this Gentile and both this Gentile and many with him received the Lord; they were saved. This one event was about to rock the world of the early church. It was going to cause some controversy as well as to serve a catalyst for the gospel to spread further than it had up to this point. And this is the very point of the book of Acts, the rapid and radical spread of the gospel throughout the world. As we will come to see in our text however, many were resistant to this “change” – thinking among themselves, “that’s not the way God would do it!” God was doing something different and the church was about to learn that when it comes to spreading the gospel, it is okay to think outside the box and God often does things challenging us to get out of that box; or what we might call the spiritual ruts.

And so, the grand lesson we need to take from this account is this; that God’s ways are not our ways and sometimes God does things that make us feel uncomfortable and perhaps even unprepared; however, if God is at work somewhere or in someone; that is where we need to be. We need to see where God is working in our church, which ministries are we seeing God’s hand upon and how do we join in that work. Or perhaps there is a different ministry that is upon the heart of a handful of people; something that has not been done, but needs to be done. We must be prepared to think outside the box to accomplish the purpose God has given us in making avid, fervent followers of Jesus Christ. This is what was taking place in our text; God was getting the

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church to think outside the box in order to get them out of any rut. And from the text then, we will find five principles by which we can overcome spiritual ruts, whether in the church or in our personal lives. We are going to have to take these five principles in two parts, looking at the first three today and finish up the last two next week. But let me start with stating the five principles in our text by which we can overcome spiritual ruts.

1. Know that God brings change (11:1)
2. Know that with change comes criticism (11:2-3)
3. Know that criticism is overcome by courageous faith (11:4)
4. Know that courageous faith considers the work of God (11:5-17)
5. Know that the work of God is cause to celebrate (11:18)

I. Know that God brings change (11:1)

Now the apostles and the brethren who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.

Good news – as well as bad news - travels fast; or so the saying goes. Our text begins with the report of what had happened to the Gentiles. This news was spreading throughout Judea. Word had spread that something incredible had happened. No doubt the Jewish Christians alike gasped when the report that Gentiles were actually being saved came to them. This was a defining moment in the church. How would the church, comprised of 99.99% Jews respond? Could this report be true? What was the church coming to? How could this be taking place? Why were things changing?

While we might be inclined to read verse one in a positive light, this news was like shock and awe and it would seem that it was largely seen as a negative thing by many. This is evident in verses 2-3 as a bold party in the church will come to question Peter. But let us note here in verse one how clear Luke is that the Gentiles had **“received the Word of God.”** In book of Acts, to “receive the Word” is synonymous with “receiving the Holy Spirit” (10:47), with “believing in the Lord Jesus Christ” (11:17), and thus with being “saved” (11:14). To receive the Word is to be saved; born again. This reminds us that the early church had a *Word-centered* ministry. The early church had no Awana’s programs; they had no Christian singers, bands, or power teams to attract the crowds; all they had was the preaching of the gospel; the communication of who God is, who man is, what sin is, who Jesus is and then calling for a response. While the early church certainly cared for people; it was not people-centered; it was Christ-focused and Word-centered. Preach the Word! Bring the book! Preach Christ and Him crucified!

All of this reminds us that being a Christian is receiving God’s Word as the supreme authority in life. This is what James was speaking about in James 1:21 where we read,

Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.

When the Word of God is received and implanted, it brings salvation and a change in allegiance. The one who loves Jesus, keeps His commandments. He is putting aside the filthiness of this world and all that remains of his wicked ways of thinking that were his before receiving the Word. Now the Word of God is the guide. And this is what Cornelius along with a number of his family and friends did. They had received the Word; they had been saved; they

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were changed; they were exalting God; speaking of His mighty deeds and proclaiming Jesus. They received the word implanted, which saved their souls. Truly, the church had cause for celebration!

But again, this was a defining moment in the church. It was clear that God was doing something new; something non-routine; something that would make the church at that time uncomfortable. God was changing things up. For some five to ten years the church had been Jewish. Oh sure, there was the Ethiopian Eunuch that Phillip evangelized some time back, but he returned to Ethiopia. He did not attend the churches of Judea. He did not bring his gentile ideas into the purity of the Jewish Christian church! To have gentiles in the church; well, that would be awkward. But now gentiles were being saved; but Peter had to do so much wrong to accomplish this. No good Jew would fellowship with a gentile! Of course, they had forgotten that Peter was not a Jew now, at least not in the religious sense. He was a Christian. How could Peter have done this and open the door for so many problems? Who would be the first to speak up? Would this news be a cause for joy (as it should have been); or would it tear the church apart?

Beloved, the church had gotten comfortable with its routines. The church was content with being 99.99% Jewish. But Peter had to go and preach the gospel to a prominent Gentile; Peter had to go and fellowship with “one of those kinds of people.” This was uncomfortable news. And it reminds us that we can be like the early church and grow comfortable and complacent. It is okay that we have empty pews, it gives us more room to spread out! It’s okay that I only serve occasional, here and there, at least I serve more than some of the other people. But when your current level of service is challenged; when your current level of passion to share the gospel is confronted and you start to feel uncomfortable; then you need to recognize that perhaps you have become too comfortable in your service to Christ. God will stir things up and when He does, how will you respond? When news of God’s working was reported to the church, what should be a cause for celebration and a call to greater participation, turned turn into an opportunity for criticism. And this is our second point...

II. Know that with change comes criticism (11:2-3)

2 And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him, 3 saying, “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.”

What should have been a celebration is faced first with open criticism. Peter is called to task. Notice that the resistance did not come from the world, but from right inside the church. We might wonder, “Why would those in the church be resistant to God’s work?” This makes no sense. Yet it happens so often that when one person leaves his or her comfort zone in order to be obedient to God (and that is what Peter did); to do something to advance the gospel and edify the church, that not everyone is happy. We will talk about why this is true in a moment, but first let us note the criticism of a bold and vocal portion of the church.

Before Peter even made it to Jerusalem the church was stirred up. The circumcised believers (that is the Jewish believers who thought you had to become Jewish in order to be saved) “took issue with him” – or as the ESV says, “...**the circumcision party criticized him..**” This was no light disagreement. The KJV says they “contended” with him. If you notice down in verse 18, we read there that these people “quieted down”. They had caused a tension and a ruckus in the church. And just what was their criticism? Their words in verse 3 are filled with misrepresented facts and a misunderstanding of the truth. There may be a law of physics that says, “For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction;” but there is a tendency in the church to say it this way, “For every action there is an equal and opposite criticism.” These folks

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were trying to belittle Peter. For the truth is that one of the best ways to resist change in the church is to say that whatever the change is, it is not a God thing!

Now we might sympathize with these critics for just a moment. These were good, devout Jews, who kept the law all their lives in their attempt to be right with God, having believed in Jesus, knowing in part that Jesus did for them what they could not do for themselves, but they were not yet fully comprehending what this meant. On the other hand, we might be harsh with them and say that they needed to read how Paul argued against those who said you need to become Jewish in order to be saved in his letters; that is until we remember that Paul had not yet written any of those letters. There had been no formal teaching on the relationship between the law and grace, nor the place God had in His redemptive plan for Gentiles. And so, they were being cautious, perhaps thinking they were simply maintaining the purity of the church. What they were seeing and hearing did not make sense to them. However, honest confusion is one thing, but a hardheaded, uncompromising resistance is quite another.

Luke carefully chose words that tell us a schism had already begun in the church, even before this news. The controversy of whether or not you had to keep the law in order to be saved was blooming and so the conversion of the Gentiles was simply fuel for the fire. This is why Luke calls them the “*circumcised*” - These were church members who were polarizing themselves based on pre-Christian actions. The *circumcised* believers, that is, the Jewish Christians did not agree with they were hearing and were not quiet about it. Peter was messing everything up. If it is true that Gentiles could be saved, then that would make them uncomfortable because it would mean they would have to share the gospel with other gentiles. And if Gentiles did not have to become Jewish in order to saved, well that was uncomfortable because it means that the maintaining the law of God was not a part of the gospel. And so they attacked Peter, but they did it by means of two unfair tactics. Not unlike the tactics we see in politics today, they misrepresented the fact and then they misunderstood the meaning of the facts.

Notice first how they misrepresented the facts in verse three. With what seems to be disdainful tone, they said, “**You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them!**” Oh the horror of a Jew associating with the uncircumcised! Was this true? Did Peter, eat with Gentiles? Yes, he had, but this is not the whole story. The way they said it was to make it appear as though all Peter did was run up to Caesarea to pig out on some pork and party with some Gentiles. Yes, he ate with Gentiles but that was not the his primary purpose in going. Why did he go to the home of this Gentile? To preach the gospel with him and all those in him house. He went to introduced lost people to the Savior; to the Lord Jesus Christ. Notice there is not one mention of that in their accusation! One way in which we wrongly criticize others who are pacesetters in the church is to not mention or simply overlook what was being accomplished to the glory of God..

This is nothing new. The critics of Jesus did the same thing. In Luke 15:2 the critics changed Jesus saying, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them...” What they were trying to do is suggest that Jesus was condoning and participating in their sin. But why did Jesus go to them? That He might engage in their sin? No, that He might tell them how they could be set them free from their sin. If you are content and comfortable with the status quo, you resist and criticize those who offer change by misrepresenting the facts.

But not only may facts be misrepresented, they may also be misunderstood. These critics of Peter failed to grasp the big picture of Peter’s actions which also happened to be the *biblical* picture. Yes, Peter ate with Gentiles. Yes, he ate food that was not kosher according to the old covenant. What they missed though is that in Jesus, they were no longer under the old covenant.

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Jesus established a *new covenant*, and these so-called kosher laws no longer applied. Jesus made this same point in Mark 7:18-19 saying,

Are you so lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him, 19 because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated? (Thus He declared all foods clean.)

Peter's critics were content and comfortable with the status quo. They were in a rut; wanting to keep the old ways, which only brought them guilt before God, failing to embrace the grace of God in the new way of trusting Christ.

And to not thing we are so different in the church today. There are many in the church that are more than willing to have other people join them—*as long as they jump through our hoops*. Beloved, we do not need another "Pastor Ed" – one is plenty, but we do need Pastor Ed to be all that he can be for God. We do not need another "Brett Myers" but we do need Brett to excel to the fullness of Christlikeness. We do not need another Cathy Samuelson, but we need her to strive toward even greater manifestations of faithfulness. We do not need anyone here to be like anyone else in here; everyone one of us in here needs to be like Christ. Thus we must not and cannot criticize others if they are being used by God as a catalyst for change; to shake up and inspire the church out of our comfort zones in order to proclaim Christ. Beloved, to the degree that you see a critical spirit within you, know that you are resisting the work of God. We must reject criticizing and then pray for our hearts to be changed.

Theodore Roosevelt gave a thought provoking insight saying, "It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena; whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again; who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotion, and spends himself in a worthy cause; who, at the best, knows in the end the triumph of high achievement; and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat."

If we would get out of any spiritual rut we might find ourselves in, we must reject inappropriate criticism of those who are in the trenches and rather come along side of them, joining them in their work; encouraging them; cleaning their wounds; doing anything and everything we can to keep the pacesetters moving and even perhaps become pacesetters ourselves.

So then, if we would overcome the spiritual ruts, we must recognize when and where we have become too comfortable with the status quo, then we must reject inappropriate criticism of change, and finally, this morning, we must rehearse courageous faith.

III. Know that criticism is overcome by courageous faith (11:4)

But Peter began speaking and proceeded to explain to them in orderly sequence...

In our text, we find Peter unashamedly and faithfully prepared to rehearse his faith before the critics. Again, what should have been a cause for rejoicing, the salvation of a number of lost people, was used to criticize and divide. How can this happen in a church? I come back to the issue of comfort! I believe this happens because those who are on the sidelines can feel put to shame by the efforts of those in the struggle. The remarkable faith and courage of those who get out of their comfort zones, who become uncomfortable themselves in order to do something for

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God can make others realize how little they have done for the Kingdom or how lazy they might have become. It is ironic that when one person leaves his or her comfort zone in order to please God; there are sure to follow a handful of others who also leave their comfort zones; being made uncomfortable by their little faith.

Peter was a man of faith and obedience, wanting to do great things for the glory of God. When we read back in verse 2 that "**Peter came up to Jerusalem**" we know this is on the heels of seeing God do something extraordinarily different than he had ever seen before. We know that Peter went to see Cornelius as an act of faith. Peter had been in his own personal rut and the vision God gave him sparked within him what I would call a rut-ruining faith. Do you really want to get out of your spiritual rut, whatever it looks like? Then you must exercise a rut-ruining faith. What is a rut-ruining faith? It is a faith that recognized when it had become too comfortable with the status quo; rejects being critical of change any longer and practices extraordinarily courageous faith. Charles Spurgeon describes well what I see as the rut-ruining faith of Peter saying,

Faith is the foot of the soul by which it can march along the road of the commandments. Love can make the feet move more swiftly; but faith is the foot which carries the soul. Faith is the oil enabling the wheels of holy devotion and of earnest piety to move well; and without faith the wheels are taken from the chariot, and we drag heavily. With faith I can do all things; without faith I shall neither have the inclination nor the power to do anything in the service of God. If you would find the men who serve God the best, you must look for the men of the most faith.

This was the faith of Peter, who saw the hand of God at work in what Peter would have considered the most unlikely of people; Gentiles. But by faith he moved; by faith he acted; by faith he spoke; and by faith he saw God do great things. But where there is the exercise of such faith, there is sure to be those of little faith. Beloved, let us beware of little faith; for little faith is prone to despise the great things that God is doing. Little faith tends to criticize those in God's work rather than celebrate and join in God's work. Charles Spurgeon articulated this so well saying,

Little faith will save a man, but little faith cannot do great things for God. Poor Little-faith could not have fought "Apollyon;" it needed "Christian" to do that. Poor Little-faith could not have slain "Giant Despair;" it required "Great-heart's" arm to knock that monster down. Little faith will go to heaven most certainly, but it often has to hide itself in a nut-shell, and it frequently loses all but its jewels. Little-faith says, "It is a rough road, beset with sharp thorns, and full of dangers; I am afraid to go;" but Great-faith remembers the promise, "Thy shoes shall be iron and brass; as thy days, so shall thy strength be:" and so she boldly ventures. Little-faith stands desponding, mingling her tears with the flood; but Great-faith sings, "When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee:" and she fords the stream at once.

Do you want to be out of your spiritual rut? Exercise great faith! What is great faith! Take up the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God and by faith read it more regularly; by faith memorize it more resolutely; by faith share it more readily. As Peter did not hesitate to go when called by God to speak the gospel to Cornelius; let us remember that we have been called to go and speak the gospel. In Mark 16:15 Jesus said, "**Go into all the world and preach the gospel**

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to all creation." Maybe this is too literally an interpretation and or application of this verse, but what I get out of it is this, if I be a person of faith; if I believe that Jesus is my Savior and my Lord; then I will obey and be found preaching the gospel; speaking of the good news of salvation found in Jesus Christ alone, to anything that moves; to all creation!

If I thought that a tree might be saved, I would preach the gospel to it! If I thought that a raccoon could receive the Word, then you would find me diligently proclaiming salvation to it. If I were a fisherman, you would find me speaking of the living waters of Christ to the fishes! Preach the gospel to all creation! Since trees, raccoons and fishes cannot be saved, while I might practice preaching on them, I must, you must, we must be compelled to speak of the glories of salvation in Christ to the only creature that can respond, regardless of race, regardless of current religion, regardless of looks, regardless of social status, regardless of location and most especially, regardless of personal convenience. Beloved, we are too often of little faith, particularly if we do not have the heart of and cannot say with Paul the words of 1 Corinthians 9:16

For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel.

Mothers – preach the gospel to your infants! Dads – preach the gospel to your toddlers. Spouses and siblings, proclaim the glories of Christ to one another! If it moves, preach the gospel! If we would be out of spiritual ruts, then let us be compelled to preach the gospel! Let us exchange the failing investment of little faith for a share in great faith; longing for the Word of God to so fill us even as it did Peter. I know it will make us uncomfortable; but would it not be better to be uncomfortable doing the will of God; than being uncomfortable because we are only watching someone else do the will of God and thus feel guilty about it? Because then, our only recourse is to criticize those who are doing the will of God and to find comfort in doing little to nothing for the kingdom of God. Beloved, let us pray for an long to be a church of great and courageous faith; rejecting a critical spirit toward godly change as well as any tendency toward being comfortable with the status quo. You and I can be used by God to be pacesetters, to practice a rut-ruining faith that inspires others to fervently make Jesus known.

Soli Deo Gloria

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