

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

A Prescription for Getting Out of the Spiritual Ruts (Part 2)

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...

Last week we began looking at this passage as a prescription for getting out of spiritual ruts. As we work our way back into our text, picking up where we left off, let us first take a moment to define what is meant by a spiritual rut. Starting with the word "rut" – Webster's dictionary defines a "rut" as:

1. *A groove, track, etc., as made by wheels;*
2. *A fixed, routine course of action or thought.*

Using these ideas, we might define a spiritual "rut" in this way:

1. Going through the spiritual motions (i.e. bible study, prayer, church attendance, evangelism, etc.) without really seeing any spiritual progress;
2. Doing spiritual disciplines (i.e. bible study, prayer, church attendance, evangelism, etc.) in a monotonous, dutiful way without enjoying the pleasures of the doing and in a manner that at best maintains the status quo rather than pushing the individual or congregation to radically progress in Christlikeness (Colossians 1:28) or in fulfilling the Great Commission to make disciples (Matthew 28:19-20).

Was any of this true of the early church? The early church, as we noted, was perhaps five to ten years old at this point. The gospel was being preached, and people were being saved. It would at least appear that the church was making spiritual progress, right? Was the church making progress or were they only maintaining the status quo? You see, the problem was that some 99.99% of those being saved at this point were Jewish. Yes, the church was busy, the church was prospering, the church was spreading, and yet the church had grown comfortable in fulfilling only part of the Lord's mandate. The command of the Lord Jesus to see the gospel spread to the remotest part of the earth was falling off the radar of the church. In short, the church was in a spiritual rut. The wheels were indeed turning, but spiritual progress, according to the Lord's standards, was not taking place. The church was going through all the right motions

This was happening to the church, but it also happens to us as individuals. As individuals, we can fall into spiritual ruts when one or more of the following such attitudes or actions are present:

1. We find ourselves going through the motions of praying and studying the Word but without a heart that is willing to change in areas where we know or think it is going to be uncomfortable.

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2. We find ourselves seeking the Lord most often when it is convenient for us, not willing to make real sacrifices like waking earlier or fasting or giving up some other activity in order to have our attention and heart undivided to the Lord in both attitude and action.
3. We find ourselves withdrawing from accountability in order that we may not have to be confronted with the areas of our hearts and minds in which we may be compromising.
4. We find ourselves doing what is expected of us without depending upon and experiencing God's power.

So what are we to do if we find ourselves in such a circumstance? What is the prescription for getting out of spiritual ruts? We find the answer to that question here in our text; noting that there are five things we need to know and practice if we would have victory over spiritual ruts. We noted the first three last week.

First, we saw from verse 1, we need to **know that God brings change** (11:1). If God has given a mandate, a command to be fulfilled and His people are not fulfilling it, He will change things up. He will put his people into uncomfortable situations, as He did with Peter in sending him into the home of a Gentile to preach the gospel, in order to get His people out of their rut, out of their comfort zone, to accomplish His purposes.

Second, we noted from verses 2-3, we need to **know that with change comes criticism** (11:2-3). If, because of the change God brings into one believer's life to more faithfully pursue God's will, it will invariably cause others discomfort in their own status quo. And so, in order to defend their status quo as being spiritual, they attack, misrepresent and criticize the one who is bringing change.

Third, we saw from the description of Peter's defense of these things in verse 4, that we need to **know criticism is overcome by courageous faith** (11:4). If we would overcome spiritual ruts, then we must become people of increasing and courageous faith, risking our reputations (as did Peter), our comforts (as did Peter), and devoting ourselves intensely to the task believing that God will accomplish His greater purposes through us. This brings us to the final two prescriptions for getting out of spiritual ruts.

IV. Know that courageous faith considers the work of God (11:4-17)

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

Two taxidermists stopped before a window in which an owl was on display. Upon their consideration, they began to criticize the way the bird was mounted. Its eyes, they suggested, were not natural; its wings were not in proper proportion with its head; its feathers were not adequately arranged; and its claws could be improved. When they had finished with their criticism, the old owl turned his head...and winked at them.

Sometimes it helps to have a sense of humor in dealing with criticism. Some of us, myself most especially, need to pray for an increasing in our sense of humor. For when the darts of disparagement and denigration fly, we can quickly take ourselves too seriously, focusing on ourselves rather than on the greatness of our God and His doings. We see in Peter's recitation of the dealings of God, that his focus is not on himself and what he did or did not do, but rather it is upon God. Peter's heart was for these reluctant brothers and sisters come to consider with Him the work of God. There are three facets of Peter's response by which he strives to get his hearers to consider the greatness of God in this matter rather than the grumbling at the changes

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taking place. Consider with me here Peter’s humility, his homily (the message), and his heart (the point).

A. Peter’s Humility (11:4)

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

The way Luke describes Peter is as a man of humility and patience. Let me remind you that Peter was an apostle, perhaps the *leading* apostle at the time and one of the inner circle of Jesus’ disciples. He might well have simply responded, “I am an apostle of Jesus Christ. God commanded me to visit the Gentiles and if you have a problem with that, well, you know where the door is.” It is easy to write someone off when he or she criticizes you. It is easy to become defensive and then even to justify your own behavior in light of what is happening to you rather than upon the Word of God. Peter takes the time to humbly and patiently work his critics through the problem.

One of my preaching heroes is English evangelist George Whitefield (1714-1770). On more than one occasion, he had learned the lesson of pleasing God even if it meant not pleasing men. He had to remind himself that he was doing what was honoring to and keeping with the Word of God. This is what kept him from discouragement when he was falsely accused by his enemies. I read an account where Whitefield received a vicious letter accusing him of wrongdoing. Listen to his humble and brief reply: “I thank you heartily for your letter. As for what you and my other enemies are saying against me, I know worse things about myself than you will ever say about me. With love in Christ, George Whitefield.” His greatest concern was not to please men, but rather to please the Lord. We see this in Peter as well. If we would get out of spiritual ruts, we must keep this truth in mind; to be God-pleasers, not man-pleasers.

But Peter also sought to move his critics from where they were mentally, emotionally and theologically, to the place they should be. This can be a time consuming process. It had been hard enough for Peter to grasp God’s intentions for the Gentiles, for God had to show him the same vision three times! And now, without these folks having that vision, Peter had to explain what God was doing.

We read in verse 4 that Peter ***proceeded to explain to them in orderly sequence...*** The phrase “orderly sequence” means that Peter took the time to recite all the facts, point by point. Remember that Peter’s critics only shared some of the facts and then used misrepresentation to make their point. Peter is shown to have shared all the facts. And then I would have you notice that whereas Peter’s critics put the focus on Peter, saying in verse 3, ***“You went to uncircumcised men and [You] ate with them...”*** Peter puts the focus on God. The detractors made this a personal problem of Peter, but Peter turns the spotlight upon God. A lesson that we all need to remember, myself especially, is that God has not called us to be judges and juries of people, rather we are to be witnesses of Jesus Christ. We need to simply tell people who God is and what God has done for us in and through Jesus Christ. Our calling is to be witnesses. God will do the work of conviction and convincing. Let us be humble and faithful in the task of being witnesses, considering ourselves and helping other to consider the work of God. This brings us to Peter’s homily

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B. Peter's Homily (11:5-16)

A homily is a message, a sermon. And so, after seeing how Peter responded, we next see what Peter communicated about God in verses 5-16. And if you recall, this is simply a recounting of all that took place just the week before. How important is this consideration of Peter? Let me point out that Luke has seen fit to speak of this event once again. We have said this before, but let it be said again; when God says something in the Word just once, it is important. However, if He repeats it, we ought to be sure we grasp the significance of it. And if it is said a third time, we had better assume that it is absolutely critical for us to understand. This will be the third time we read of Peter's vision, two times in chapter ten and once here in chapter eleven.

Luke thought it important enough to devote a lot of space in his writing. Unlike our word processors and computers of today, an ancient writer did not have unlimited space. They used scrolls of material made of papyrus. The longest scroll that was still manageable to roll and carry was about thirty-five feet long, which would be the space required to hold the written content of the book of Acts. Luke had limited space in which to communicate what he thought was most important for the church to know and thus he had to select his material carefully. And in Luke's mind, the account of Peter and Cornelius was so important he repeated it three times. This was to be a keystone event. The church, having grown comfortable with its Jewishness, had to be made uncomfortable to be reminded of her full mission. Peter was made uncomfortable in order to get both him and the church out of the spiritual rut, that the Gentiles might hear the gospel, so that you and I might be here reading and studying this today! Hear this, if Peter had not taking the time to help his fellow Jewish Christians understand what God was doing, the church could have easily split into two groups, one exclusively for the Jews and one exclusively for the Gentiles. Let us note three things about Peter's homily.

First, Peter explained the vision the Lord gave him in verses 5-10. Let us read these verses again:

5 I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, a certain object coming down like a great sheet lowered by four corners from the sky; and it came right down to me, 6 and when I had fixed my gaze upon it and was observing it I saw the four-footed animals of the earth and the wild beasts and the crawling creatures and the birds of the air. 7 And I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Arise, Peter; kill and eat.' 8 But I said, 'By no means, Lord, for nothing unholy or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' 9 But a voice from heaven answered a second time, 'What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.' 10 And this happened three times, and everything was drawn back up into the sky.

With these words, Peter certainly captured the attention of the critics. When he said, "By no means, Lord...!" he connected with these men. Peter needed them to know that he had had the same problem that they were having now just the week before. He had not set out to change up the status quo, but God had by sending this vision.

The **second** point of Peter's homily is seen in verses 11-15 where Peter explained how the Lord has opened the way for all this to take place. We read there:

11 And behold, at that moment three men appeared before the house in which we were staying, having been sent to me from Caesarea. 12 And the Spirit told me to go with them without

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misgivings. And these six brethren also went with me, and we entered the man's house. 13 And he reported to us how he had seen the angel standing in his house, and saying, 'Send to Joppa, and have Simon, who is also called Peter, brought here; 14 and he shall speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' 15 And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, just as He did upon us at the beginning.

Notice there in verse twelve that Peter reveals that he had the same concerns that his critics did. When changes come, if our focus is on ourselves, how these things affect us rather than upon how these things are from and point to God, we will be critical and reluctant to change. We do not like leaving our comfort zones even when it is clear to us that God has called us to do so. Thus, God commanded Peter by the Holy Spirit to **“go with them without misgivings...”**

The point Peter is making is this; that God had opened the door of opportunity to preach the gospel to the Gentiles so wide that a Boeing 777 could have flown through it. God had sent His Spirit to instruct Peter what to do and God had sent an angel to Cornelius to him what to do. The Lord orchestrated everything for the gospel to be preached. And then, even before Peter finished his message, the Holy Spirit fell upon them all just as He had done upon Peter and the disciples back in Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost!

If you were to time Peter's message in Acts 10:34-43, if this is all he got through before the Holy Spirit came upon the hearers, he only preached about 60 seconds. What is the point? The point is that God did it all. Peter did not call or command the Holy Spirit to come! Peter did not give an altar call, pleading with these folks to receive Jesus as Lord and Savior. Peter just told them what Jesus had done and then whoosh...the Holy Spirit came upon them and saved them! This was a God thing, not a Peter thing! Do you want to get out of a spiritual rut, then start considering and communicating what Jesus has done for yourself and for others?

The third and final point of Peter's homily is a reminder of what Jesus had said. Notice verse sixteen where Peter recounts the words of Jesus saying,

And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, 'John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'

What a great reminder! When we find ourselves in the midst of criticisms and controversies, let us recall the Word of God. What does God say about the matter? This is as practical as it gets. If you are in an argument, in the midst of criticism and animosity, then turn attention to what God says in His Word. We need to be careful not to appeal to our own opinions, to our own preferences and even to our emphasize our favorite preachers, authors and speakers. Keep focused on and submitting to the Lord and you will see amazing things happen. And amazing things, amazing as God does them, is a great means of getting out of spiritual ruts.

Peter recalls the words of Jesus, the words given just before His ascension into heaven. Peter is remembering Acts 1:5. What makes this so special? Beloved, he who has the Spirit of God has been accepted by God. Peter and the disciples had received the Spirit on the day of Pentecost and they knew they were accepted by God. But now Cornelius and other Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit just like the Jewish disciples had. This brings us to the final of Peter's responses to his critics. We have seen Peter's humility in verse 4, his homily in verses 5-16 and now finally we see Peter's heart in verse 17.

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C. Peter’s Heart (11:17)

If God therefore gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?

Al Mohler, president of Southern Seminary and a very gifted theologian once noted that counseling is not his greatest strength. He has come up with a method of counseling that is fairly cut and dry; 1) what is your problem?; 2) what does God’s Word have to say about it?; 3) why are we having the conversation? Now counseling is not always that easy, although I would like it to be, but sometimes a simple question does clarify the issue. Peter says to his critics in effect, “How do you deal with what God has done for both the Jews and now the Gentiles? How can you get in the way of that? It was obvious that God had given to the Gentiles the very same gift that He had given to the Jesus. And it was obvious that God did not make the Jews before He gave them the gift. The only thing they “had” to do was what? They had to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. And the same is true for each one of us. If we would have the Spirit of God in our life, we must confess with our mouth Jesus is Lord!

Thus, we see the twofold heart of the matter for Peter. First, he wanted his hearers to know that the was God’s work and not his own and second was that to stand against this work was to stand against God. Do you see the courageous faith of Peter overcoming the critics by considering the work of God? By faith Peter left his comfort zone and go to the home of Cornelius, and by faith he responded to his critics who said he should not have done this by showing them the work of God. If you want to get out of a spiritual rut, you need to exercise faith and take risks for God. It has been rightly said that no one every stubs his toe by standing still.

The English preacher, John Henry Jowett, warned of this temptation of self-preservation over living by radical faith saying, “It is possible to evade a multitude of sorrows through the cultivation of an insignificant life. Indeed, if a man's ambition is to avoid the troubles of life, the recipe is simple: shed your ambitions in every direction, cut the wings of every soaring purpose, and seek a life with the fewest contacts and relations. If you want to get through the world with the smallest trouble, you must reduce yourself to the smallest compass. Tiny souls can dodge through life; bigger souls are blocked on every side. As soon as a man begins to enlarge his life, his resistances are multiplied. Let a man remove his petty selfish purposes and enthrone Christ, and his sufferings will be increased on every side.”

This was Peter’s consideration of God’s work before his critics. What was the result of this testimony? This then is the final of the five prescriptions for getting out of spiritual ruts. We must...

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)

V. Know that the work of God is a cause for celebration (11:18)

And when they heard this, they quieted down, and glorified God, saying, “Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life.”

It would seem that the criticism was silenced and the people turned their hearts toward God and worshipped the Lord. I would have you notice two aspects of this celebration.

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First, notice how Peter, by being humble and gracious in his consideration of God’s work brought about such a gracious response. The people quieted and calmed down and glorified God. What Peter did here is what we read of in Proverbs 15:1, **“A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”** Peter’s handling of this turned this potential problem into an opportunity for praise.

Second, notice the testimony here of the power of God to change hearts. Whose hearts were changed by God? First, Peter confesses his heart was changed by God, Next, we see the God changed the hearts of the Gentiles to receive the Lord. And finally, we see God changing the hearts of the critics to celebrate what God had done.

Beloved, if we are to get out of our spiritual ruts, we must know and make known what God can do. Let us not get stuck in those definitions of a spiritual rut – of...

1. Going through the spiritual motions (i.e. bible study, prayer, church attendance, evangelism, etc.) without really seeing any spiritual progress;
2. Doing spiritual disciplines (i.e. bible study, prayer, church attendance, evangelism, etc.) in a monotonous, dutiful way without enjoying the pleasures of the doing and in a manner that at best maintains the status quo rather than pushing the individual or congregation to radically progress in Christlikeness (Colossians 1:28) or in fulfilling the Great Commission to make disciples (Matthew 28:19-20).

By faith then, let us strive to...

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)

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