

We now begin Acts 11, and if you notice, it sounds suspiciously like chapter 10. Luke repeats this same story three times, now through the eyes of Peter to a critical group of believers in his home church. When God repeats something twice, you listen, because He considers it important for you to know. **When He repeats it three times, you need to give the utmost attention and attend its telling with the most comprehensive obedience possible.**

Now, before we begin, it is to be noted that the unity which the Spirit creates does not make distinctions disappear, but makes them acceptable to one another *when they are not matters of the faith*. That is, there are distinctions which are to be rejected, but they are ideological distinctions, distinctions in the object of our faith. Such as which Jesus one claims to follow. Is He fully divine and fully human? Is Jesus the only way for salvation? Does righteousness matter to Him? Etc. What the Scriptures are not saying is that it doesn't matter what one believes or what one does, but rather that cultural distinctions, differences in diet or clothing, one's race or ethnic identity, one's gender whether male or female, one's economic status, slave or free, do not determine one's acceptability to approach God through Christ Jesus. Anyone within these distinctive differences can come to God through the Christ, Jesus of Nazareth, without hindrance. In fact, such a cultural and ethnic diversity of people bound together by one faith in one Lord proclaimed in one gospel only glorify the multi-faceted wisdom of God to all created beings, as Paul says in Ephesians 3.

But, this inclusion of the excluded through faith in Jesus as full partners in the gospel's promises required a significant shift in expectations in the local church. Consider what would have happened if they had not. What if Gentiles had to first become Jews in order to become Christians? The Church would have never become the great missionary force, the magnificent multi-cultural and global redemptive expression of God's grace. It would have remained a locally limited ethnic community, as Judaism remains in large part today.

But from this time on, people would not have to come through the doors of Judaism to become members of God's family and to receive the promise of restoration and redemption first proclaimed to Eve. The crushing of the Serpent's head, the renewal of life, come through Christ Jesus, not the laws of Moses. Thus, Jews who became Christians were to be fellows with Gentiles who did not become Jews, but became Christians. **The unity between Christians is ideological, faith in Christ Jesus, not ethnic, or cultural, or socio-economical.** There was one global Church, not two churches, one for an "earthly people of God" (Jews) and one for the spiritual people of God (Christians). There is only one people of God: Christians, who all come to God the same way: through faith in the Son of God, Jesus Christ our Lord. In this way, **every distinguishing characteristic for the Christian becomes a modifier, an adjective rather than the noun. The identifying noun is always Christian, though the modifier may be Jewish or Gentile or Black or White, or**

slave or free, or male or female. A black Christian is a Christian first. A white Christian is a Christian first. A rich Christian is a Christian first. A poor Christian is a Christian first. And so all are united into one Family of Christ Jesus with one Spirit, one Lord, through one baptism in His name.

Yet, this was such an unexpected work of God that it required a three-fold retelling to emphasize the significance of the shift required in the Church. And this major shift would require a major modification in the life of the early Church, which the Holy Spirit forcefully works in Peter's testimony here.

When Peter returned to Jerusalem, his Jewish brothers criticized him for the manner in which he lived among the Gentiles. This criticism of Peter is interesting and poignant for us because of two reasons. First, though Peter was a significant leader in the early church, his authority was clearly not so great that his word carried automatic approval of his activities or an infallible interpretation of the Lord's Word and work. This is no pope. Peter's actions, eating with uncircumcised people, challenged their interpretation of the Scriptures on what it meant to be the holy people of God. This leads to the second reason.

Which is that this criticism is very recognizable to us because we know both legalism and licentiousness in our own hearts and often see it in others. **What do you do when you are criticized by legalists?** What is legalism? Legalism is

the expectation that holy people of God do not go near to sinful opportunities. Notice that they do not criticize him for preaching to the Gentiles, nor do they believe that Gentiles cannot become Christians. Rather, they criticized him for breaking the expected kosher laws: “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.” That was what bothered them. They still felt that believing in Jesus meant becoming Jewish, and if Jews ate in Gentile homes as equal participants in the covenant promises of God, then the distinctive “evidence” of their holiness was removed and what would they have left to show their significance. The apostle Paul will later write of these Jewish groups who demanded observance of kosher law and circumcision as those who also don’t obey the whole law, but merely want to boast in your flesh. But, Paul noted that we ought to only boast in the cross of Christ (Galatians 6:13-14).

Legalism seeks to make the distinguishing marks of a Christian something other than the distinguishing marks of the Holy Spirit, what God has revealed in the analogy of fruit. The Holy Spirit is the sap of the tree of life which produces fruit through regenerating the heart of the tree to be filled with the life consistent with Christ’s love and submission to the Father, and thus the Christian’s love and submission to the Father through Him: Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Generosity, Faithfulness, Humility, and Self-Mastery. The fact that fruit is produced by the nature of the tree, rather than by external changes of habits, or circumstances only goes to show that legalism, that

external attempt to force righteousness through sheer will, cannot produce true holiness within us.

And **legalism is rooted in self-righteousness**. It claims that our righteousness with God, our moral purity, our significance is based upon making ourselves something good, beautiful, moral, or virtuous. **This self-righteousness creates counterfeit fruit which look like the fruit of the Spirit, but are rooted in self-exaltation**. Love is replaced by co-dependency, which works to save somebody so that it can be recognized and appreciated for being a savior. Joy is replaced by pleasure in the gifts but not the Giver, which is happy when the circumstances are good, but fail to be happy when the circumstances are bad. Peace is replaced by appeasement, the avoiding of conflict by any means necessary so that people aren't mad at me. It is truly apathetic, indifferent, and self-interested. Patience is replaced by fear or cynicism, which look like long-suffering, but are really another attempt not to upset others so that they will like me or a belief that nothing matters anyway, so I will simply avoid the person who is troubling me. Kindness is replaced by niceness, saying whatever another person wants to hear in order not to offend them, to make them uncomfortable, or feel guilt. It does this to avoid its own suffering or the shame which another may apply to it. Generosity is replaced by self-congratulations, doing good works in order to be appreciated and seen by others as a good and virtuous person.

Legalism shouts the glory of Me, and is always busy comparing itself to others and defending itself to others. I mean, think about it. When do we lack gentleness? Is it not when we have compared ourselves to another person and count ourselves superior to them? We look down on them and see them as unworthy of our service, our affections, and our resources? We treat them as lower than us, “less-deserving” than us, and even if we help them we puff ourselves up and thank God that we are not like them.

When do we lack patience? When do our outbursts of anger and irritation appear? Is it not when our ego has been hurt, someone has questioned or challenged or doubted what we believe to be the things that are right? We feel that we **MUST** defend that righteousness. We don't forgive each other, we blast away to defend our rightness. Really, we are presumptuous and assume that we are good, not merely good but that we are better, that we and our way is more important than the other. That we are right, and that we need to beat it into their heads that we are right, they have sinned against us, and they need to change now!

In both of these fruit-evaluating examples, we are still trying to present evidence to everyone, including ourselves, that we are adequate people. That we are good enough because...we have done these right things, this circumcision things, these kosher things. We have performed successfully. They have not.

Now, when other Christians are walking in grace, in the truth that we are only accepted by God because He has cleansed us through the death and resurrection of Jesus, and anyone who is accepted by Him is only made clean through faith in Him, they may get criticized by those who are still working to compare and defend their own righteousnesses. This is what happened to Peter.

So this criticism was the criticism one receives when you include those who do believe in Jesus, participate with them, worship with them side-by-side, even when those people have not become like you. This is particularly related to expression of culture. **Let's be honest, we're glad to have others join us as long as they become like us.** We like charismatics, as long as they aren't too emotional. If we are white Christians, we are glad to join with brown Christians, as long as they aren't too ethnic or too numerous. This probably goes the other way, too, where brown Christians accept white Christians as long as they aren't too country. The point is that God cleanses people where they are, and Christians do not have to become some other culture before they can come to Jesus. Our cultures are not our righteousness. Jesus is our righteousness.

Do the baggy pants keep you from including, fully including, the brother from a different part of town? Does the crew cut and the biker jacket make you lean back from the offer to dinner? Do the dreadlocks, the head scarf, the

beard, the beads, the beer, or the keep you from fully including a believer in Jesus Christ until they “rid themselves of those lesser things” and “take Jesus seriously?”

Or, maybe your law isn't the church things, but is the “freer things”, but it's a law just the same. Do you join with the prim and the proper, the classy and the classic, or does the tie, the long skirts, the cropped cut, the home-schooled kids, keep you from fully including a believer in Jesus Christ until they “find their freedom in Christ” and “take grace seriously?”

Or, maybe your law isn't so moral, but is simply aesthetic. Do you stay away from the unlovely, the difficult to understand, the awkward? Does body odor keep you from fully including a believer? From inviting him all the way in? Does the lack of knowing what to do, or how to communicate with the autistic one, or the one whose muscles are not within the control of their mind? We may, like the Jerusalem Church say, “Well, of course they can be Christians!” Yet, we make demands on their cultural expressions which go beyond the Word of God and avoid those who make us uncomfortable. Is not, then, this word of God through Peter and Cornelius for us, too? I think that it is.

And Peter knew it. He *knew* it, and so he acted upon it. He stayed with the uncircumcised who did not change their ways to become circumcised. He ate with them and lodged with them. He communed with them as equal partners

in the grace of God. And he was criticized for it. So, how, then, did he deal with the criticism of the circumcision?

First, I want to note that Peter was not perfect in this answer. In fact, he seems to see it clearly in this moment because of what God has demonstrably and powerfully revealed. Yet, later, it seems that he forgot it again and had withdrawn from eating with Gentiles until Paul called him out, having served in Antioch's multicultural church. So, even Peter failed to get it, and had to repent again. Another lesson for we who fail, too.

But here Peter handles such critique graciously, clearly, logically, and with deep submission to God. God is the ruler of His church. He makes the rules. He sets the themes. He builds it, maintains it, sanctifies it, and will glorify it. It belongs to Him.

But first notice how Peter doesn't respond. **He doesn't claim apostolic authority.** He doesn't base his actions upon some moral authority of His own. He doesn't claim that he was one of the inner three of Jesus' apostles. He doesn't simply say, "Look, God told me so and you just need to trust me. If you can't handle it, you can just leave." Some Christian leaders handle controversy this way. No, Peter reasons with them. The Greek is very clear. It says that he, "having begun, he was laying it out for them point by point." That is, he went over the evidence, recalled the data, so to speak, so that they could all conclude that God was certainly including the Gentiles, not through

kosher law, but through faith in Jesus. And he provided corroboration, “Look, these six guys were there. They can attest to what happened, too.”

Undoubtedly they did.

Secondly, in reporting the vision to them, **he clearly identifies with their doubts.** They would have seen the “creeping things” in the vision as unclean. They would have known the significance that Peter first expressed, and Peter tells them his initial response to the command to kill and eat, “Never! I have never eaten an unholy thing.” He gets their doubts. He understands their trepidation at such a significant shift in their expectations of what it meant to be the holy people of God. But **then he lays out the evidence for the transformation in his understanding.**

God gave him the vision three times, he points out, and then THREE men show up at my door. Do you think this coincidence? That I received the vision while I was praying? That they showed up while I was on the roof, where I could see the gate and ensure that they were received, rather than having the tanner send them away? What if they had arrived a week later? Do you think that Peter would have made the connection? It is less likely.

But it didn’t happen like that. They came at the exact time that he had the vision, enumerated the precise number that he had received the vision, in a time of prayer whereby He was seeking the Lord, and they were “unclean” just like the images in the vision.

Thirdly, in laying out the evidence it becomes clear that **Peter was relying heavily upon the words of Jesus**. He wasn't relying on some inner feeling of warm fuzziness, or esoteric moment of being in the presence of God. He clearly relates a vision that He had, but His evidence is clinched by what He knew of the historical sermons of Jesus. He knew the words of Jesus, and the promise that Christ had given them regarding His Holy Spirit, that He would "bring to your remembrance all that I have told you" was clearly being expressed in this.

In fact, Peter quotes Jesus' promise to the Jerusalem believers in v16, "And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'" The Word of the Lord was brought to His mind regarding what Jesus had taught and it now made sense. The vision was subsistent to the historical Word of God. The vision did not trump the Word of God, it reminded Peter of the Word of God.

Peter explains what happened in the visions, again noting that the thrice-repeated vision was not coincidentally joined with the three Gentiles showing up at the gate. He explained that he found the Gentiles humble and prepared to hear the gospel of Jesus.

Think about this. Finding the ground prepared, Cornelius and his household eager to receive the Word of the Lord, was not a coincidence for Peter. He was rightly impressed with how the Gentiles were ready, eagerly awaiting to

hear *whatever* God had told Peter to speak to them. *Whatever* is a key word in this sentence. These people were not trusting in their presumptions about God, about their knowledge or that they had everything that they needed. They knew that they needed to know, to hear, to listen, to believe, and to respond whole-heartedly. This is the deep humility of a person ready to receive Christ as Lord.

This doesn't mean that if the people were not immediately receptive to the Word that Peter had somehow not heard the Lord correctly. Many missionaries and church planters labor for years before the Spirit opens hearts to receive the word with joy. But to have such an eager expectation and willingness to receive the gospel immediately is a great confirmation to the Jerusalem church.

And when Peter began to preach the gospel, these uncircumcised Gentiles heard the message and believed it, and God showed his acceptance of them by pouring out His Holy Spirit in the same way as they had received the Holy Spirit, and in the face of such a demonstrative evidence of God's favor, none of the circumcised believers present in Cornelius' house had the audacity to say, "But they're not circumcised, yet! Let's make sure that they're kosher first, then they can be baptized." No! Peter immediately recognized that the sign of the Spirit was the distinguishing mark of covenant belonging, so he immediately called for them to be baptized.

And, interestingly, in 10:48, the language seems to indicate the Peter commanded *the circumcised believers* to be baptizing the Gentiles! Consider the power in that moment. Circumcised Jewish Christians being told to baptize uncircumcised Gentile Christians. Christians baptizing Christians, being told to do so regardless of the fact that they were not like them in ways which had been significantly distinctive and defining for their peoples for almost two thousand years.

In the end Peter is quite clear that God is the only authority, “If God did this, then who am I to be able to stand in his way?” It’s a good point, and a point that needs to be made over and over again throughout history in the Church. And the results in that moment were good, “When they heard these things, they fell silent, and they glorified God saying, “Then to the Gentiles, too, God has granted repentance that leads to life.””

Don’t miss that word “too”, to the Gentiles TOO. The Jewish Christians knew that God had granted them the gift of repentance, and they recognized that God had done the same thing for Gentiles, and they praised God. When the ESV translates “silent”, it simply refers to their criticism. Their criticism of Peter was silenced. They clearly glorified God verbally.

Secondly, notice that we recognize that **repentance, and its flipside, faith, are a gift from the Lord.** Regeneration and conversion are gifted by God to whom He chooses. Jews or Gentiles, as evidenced by His gift of the Holy Spirit.

Repentance is not merely a choice, though it certainly is a willed choice, but it is also gifted by God. It is granted. This is why the Jewish believers glorified God. They did not laud Cornelius. **They glorified God.**

Finally, there are two important things about this initial response of the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. First, **they were convinced by Scripture and reason of what God was doing.** Their criticism was silenced by it. They were willing to change their understanding when it was changed by these things. They were intellectually convinced. There was not a mystical feeling, or a threat from Peter. This shows us how to be corrected. When we criticize one another, fully believing that we are doing so rightly (there was no indication of harsh or abrasive attitudes in their criticism of Peter), when someone shows us through Scripture and reason, with proper testimony that is, then we ought to open to being changed by it.

Secondly, **their response to being convinced was to glorify God.** Because they were convinced, actually, they glorified God. What God had done was not something that they expected. Maybe not even what they preferred, but it was truly what God was doing and revealed more to them of how elaborately gracious He is. And if God is revealed, He is to be praised. If God is working, He is to be glorified. If outsiders are converted, God is to be glorified.

Now, we also know that the Church forgot this quickly. Not very long after this some of the Jerusalem group, labelled by Paul as the circumcision party,

rejected this working of God. They began demanding that the Gentiles who believed in Jesus needed to be circumcised and obey the kosher laws. So these questions had to be reasoned out again and again from the Word and the works of the Lord. This is what happens in Acts 15 and what Paul deals with particularly in his letter to the churches in Galatia.

Prejudice dies hard. Self-righteousness dies hard. But the gospel of grace demands that it die. And we ought to learn from these early divine works of God that the scope of God's grace in Christ Jesus is enormously wide. Often we find it difficult to believe that God can accept other people without them becoming like us. Yet, God does accept them when they repent and believe in Jesus.

And it's good that He does, because if He does not, then you and I wouldn't be accepted, either. We would have been excluded. We would still be the creeping things outside, repulsed and repulsive in our sins. The only reason that we are believers, fully accepted by God, is because He doesn't show favoritism and grants repentance which leads to life to whomever He chooses, regardless of their situation both past and present. That is why we are 'in'. Therefore, we must not show favoritism, either. We must reach out to all "kinds" of people, and we must not count it a threat when people different than us believe in Jesus and join His Church.

We must not seek to make them fit in the things which God has declared to be clean. Because what matters is not whether people fit in with us or not. What matters is that they have been accepted by God through Christ Jesus. And to that God gets all the glory from all of us.