



"Acts of the Apostles: Acts 11: Lesson 18" by Faber McMullen, Union Grove Baptist Church ©2018

"Handling Criticism when You're Following God's Will"



11 The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. *2* So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, **the circumcised believers criticized him** *3* and said, “**You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.**”

4 Starting from the beginning, **Peter told them the whole story:** *5* “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. *6* I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles and birds. *7* Then I heard a voice telling me, ‘Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.’

8 “I replied, ‘Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’

9 “The voice spoke from heaven a second time, ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’ *10* **This happened three times**, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again.

11 “Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. *12* **The Spirit told me to have no hesitation** about going with them. **These six brothers also went with me**, and we entered the man’s house. *13* He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, ‘Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. *14* He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.’

15 “As I began to speak, **the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us** at the beginning. *16* **Then I remembered what the Lord had said:** ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ *17* So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, **who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?”**

18 When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.” (Acts 11:1-18, NIV).

Peter was in a place that Christians often find themselves. Sometimes God asks you to do a certain thing and you do it only to receive the criticism of your friends, family, and possibly church family.

I remember years ago being led to work as a volunteer for Living Water International. I was super enthusiastic about the work. I self-funded the work. I made numerous trips to Central America to encourage missionaries and move the work forward, and great strides were being made. My greatest resistance came from one of the leaders of the ministry. He called me and another missionary in one day and basically told me that I needed to slow down. He called me a Type A personality person who was destined for a big fall whether I liked it or not. He told me all sorts of things to discourage me, and frankly, it was shocking. Here I was, being criticized for the very things I knew God was leading me to do.

What was I to do?

Criticism

The same sort of thing was happening to Peter. Let's just call the circumcised Christians the "circumcision party." They came out and fully criticized him for what had just happened with Cornelius and the whole matter in Caesarea. Remember this was a group of Christians that continued to hold tight to the sign of the covenant, circumcision. They weren't really upset that Gentiles had come to know Jesus, but they were angry that Peter had gone into the house of a Gentile, and that he had eaten food with them.

Legalism

This was their biggest concern. They were very legalistic. Let me explain what legalism is and what it looks like. Legalism has excessive focus on irrelevant details. Legalism loves rules and regulations at the sake of all else. Legalism is alive and well today. There is a fine line between legalism and righteous living. Legalism always carries an undercurrent of pride within itself that says, "We're doing the Christian faith the right way and those that don't do it like us are not." Legalism can be seen in fixation on types of songs that are sung, dress that must be adopted to be accepted, and versions of the Bible that became the cornerstone of the religious community. The circumcision party was exactly this kind of group, and they were criticizing Peter. They are having a very difficult time accepting grace.

They were having a hard time realizing that we are declared righteous in God's sight not by our behavior, but by God's grace. Ask a Christian, "Are you righteous in God's sight?" Our righteousness is NOT according to how we live, but according to our faith. These Jewish Christians were still coming to terms with all of this. They had been raised as Jews, focused on the law. This was VERY difficult for them to accept.

Paul later writes these principles out in his letter to the little church in Rome.

²⁰ Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.

Righteousness Through Faith

²¹ But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² **This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.** There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, (Romans 3:20-22 NIV).

Our righteous standing comes through faith by belief. So if someone asks you, "Are you righteous before God?" You tell them YES. Even if you feel dirty for something you've done. You are in right standing with God through the finished work of Jesus on the cross. That is the reality regardless of how you feel. That is the reality regardless of the sin to which you've fallen captive. You may have a problem with holiness, but you don't have a problem with righteousness before God. We need to remind ourselves that when this event was occurring in Acts 11 this concept of "faith alone" had not been fully expressed by Paul in his writings.

These Jews had been raised all of their lives by believing that righteousness was kept by the keeping of the law.

They were upset (verse 2) because he had gone into the house of the unclean Gentiles, and he had eaten with them. This is classic legalism. Remember when I told you last week that they had adopted this as a custom? Even though it was not ordered by God, their customs took on the authority of scripture. That in itself is sin.

BE CAREFUL OF HUMAN CUSTOMS AND HUMAN TRADITIONS THAT TAKE ON THE AUTHORITY OF GOD'S WORD. If it is not God's Word, then it is not God's Word. Be careful about that. You will end up in the spiritual weeds very quickly.

I now want to talk about how Peter responded to these well-meaning brothers. Imagine the ways that Peter could have responded by citing how he had been with Jesus from the beginning, how he had been with Him when the disciples were called, and how he had jumped out of the boat and walked on water. Notice that Peter didn't talk about how much greater he was than them nor did he answer them in anger. He did not lose control of the situation. He won them over. I want us to look at this and learn how we should respond in similar ways. Here are 5 observations that I have in this text:

1 BE CERTAIN THAT WHAT YOU'RE DOING IS GOD'S WILL - Peter knew that what he had seen and done was totally orchestrated by God in heaven. He knew his calling. It is important for the pastor and for you to know what God has called you to do.

2 ANSWER CRITICISM IN HUMILITY - Learn to respond and not to react. Verse 4 says, but "Peter began and explained it to them in order." It shows that he didn't

raise his voice. He didn't pull rank on them. He could have explained how much he had done with Jesus.

When you're criticized for what you've done out of obedience with God, the first reaction you might have when you're attacked is to attack. Don't do it. Respond calmly, gently, and with an attitude of humility even if though the person you're dealing with doesn't deserve a soft answer.

A gentle answer turns away wrath. Proverbs 15 tells us,

15 A soft answer turns away wrath,

But a harsh word stirs up anger.

² The tongue of the wise uses knowledge rightly,

But the mouth of fools pours forth foolishness. (Proverbs 15:1-2, NKJV).

Then in verse 5 of Acts 11, Peter talks about the trance and the vision. He says he looked at it closely, and saw all sorts of reptiles and birds of the air. He's explaining what took place.

3 DON'T RESPOND WITH FEELINGS - We should respond to criticism according to evidence. Share what happened. Tell the circumstances that brought you to the decision that you've made. It's important that we don't respond with feelings, but with respond with truth.

Most people criticize you because they FEEL like what you're doing is wrong. If you respond with mere feelings then it becomes a big battle of feelings. Peter started giving them the information to let them know how he had come to the decision that he had reached. It is not about emotion. It is not about opinion.

Don't fight with people in a battle of opinions. Opinions are a waste of time. Respond to people with evidence that leads to a conclusion. God Himself says in His Word, *"¹⁸ Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD" (Isaiah 1:18a, KJV).*

DON'T MAKE EMOTIONAL DECISIONS. MAKE RATIONAL DECISIONS.

4 APPLY WISDOM TO THE ARGUMENT - Peter relates that "These six brothers also went with me." Why was this so important? Remember what God had ordered back in the Torah. *"You must not convict anyone of a crime on the testimony of only one witness. The facts of the case must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." (Deuteronomy 19:15, NLT).* Peter knew he was talking to Jews who valued a number of witnesses. Look how Peter now talks about corroborating witnesses. Let every matter be settled by two or three witnesses.

5 RESPOND WITH THE AUTHORITY OF GOD'S WORD - Look at the words of Peter in verse 13, *"He told us how he had seen an angel appear **IN HIS HOUSE.**"* Then in verse 15 he said, *"the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on*

us.” His conclusion is in verse 17, “if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way? (Acts 11:13-15 NIV).

Peter had seen an outpouring of that Holy Spirit on the Gentiles that was evidenced in them speaking foreign languages they had not studied. He's taken the argument from being an argument with him to being an argument with God. God did this! He told them it wasn't his idea, but it was God who had directed him to go to the house of Cornelius.

Peter cites God's Word because that is where our authority lies. We need to be able to back up what we're doing and why we're doing it with God's Word. I think it's important to rest for a moment here on understanding just how important God's Word is.

As Baptists, we believe that the Bible is the authoritative, inspired written Word of God. What does that mean? It means that the Bible is my authoritative instruction on how to live. The Bible tells me how to pastor this church. The Bible tells me how to love my wife. The Bible tells me how to spend my money. The Bible tells me how to treat my neighbor. The Bible tells me how to interact with each one of you. It is ALL in there. I had a pastor one time that said B-I-B-L-E is an acronym for "Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth." I believe that to be true and I live my life on that.

My response to the Bible is to say, "God said it. I believe it. And that settles it." I may not always want to do what it tells me to do, but I have chosen to stand on the Bible as God's authority for my life. As Pastor of this church I have chosen to teach you all the Bible in an effort to make it not only the cornerstone for this church but for each of your lives.

If we cannot confirm what we're doing by the authority of God's Word, then we'd better go back to humility and reexamine what we're doing. You have to know God's Word to know what authority it presents. I hear so many weird things and opinions that people think are in the Bible, and they are not. And please let me caution you, that just because you think you're doing something God is telling you to do doesn't mean He's telling you to do it. Look in His Word. Look for confirmation from the Holy Spirit, and look for confirmation of fellow believers.

So, what happened in our story then?

"When they heard these things they became silent." (Acts 11:18, NKJV). Peter responded to their criticism with evidence and truth, giving them the witnesses and the authority of God's Word why they should accept what had happened.

Church, don't look to vindicate what you yourself are doing, but look to God's Word to vindicate what you are doing. Make it God's fight and not your own. But, I caution you to not lie to yourself. Let God show you truth. Let us pray.

Union Grove is one of the oldest Baptist communities of faith in the State of Texas dating back to 1844. Pastor Faber McMullen may be reached by email at uniongrove362@gmail.com or by snail mail at: 15301 FM 362, Navasota, Texas 77868. Tel: 936-825-1227 (Edited and proofed by Amanda Fryday - Webster, Texas.) All financial gifts to this ministry are tax-deductible as a 501 (c) (3) Corporation.