

Acts 11:1-18

(New International Version 1984, ©1984)

Peter Explains His Actions

¹ The apostles and the brothers 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 Peter began and explained everything to them precisely as it had happened: 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 of the air. 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 ^[a] water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁷ So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?"

¹⁸ When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."

Footnotes:

- a. [Acts 11:16](#) Or in

Introduction.

Some of you know that Lorie calls me "Barney" on occasion, and you may wonder where I got this pet name of hers. The way I got the name is that many years ago during our 2nd year of marriage, I woke up one morning and related to Lorie a dream I had the night before. In my dream I dreamed I was a race car driver, and I drove a yellow race car around the track with the number 5 painted on the hood. Over the loud speaker the announcer said, "Barney Barnes number 5, Barney Barnes number 5!" From then on the name stuck!

People have a fascination with dreams, and we often wonder what they mean. Freud was the first modern psychiatrist to reflect in depth on the subject of the meaning of dreams in, and he wrote a book on the subject. There he quotes Aristotle who said that that the best interpreter of dreams is the one who can best grasp similarities. For dream-pictures, like pictures in water, are disfigured by motion, so that one hits the target best who is able to recognize the true picture in the distorted one.



The apostle Peter would have agreed, and he would have gone on to add that the best interpreter of the meaning of a dream, or a vision, is the Holy Spirit of God. This morning we read of the account Peter gave to the leaders of the church in Jerusalem of the events that followed his amazing dream and how the Lord opened a way for the Gentiles to be included in God's family of grace. As we consider these things this morning, I want you to notice the criticism of Peter, the explanation of Peter, and the diversity of the church.

I. The Criticism of Peter.

Peter had a vision in which he learned that all things made by God are good, and that nothing in creation, including people, should be considered unclean or unacceptable. It was a whole new way of thinking for Peter who was a devout Jew. Up to this point in his life, the apostle was of the opinion that God looked with special favor upon the Jewish people, that all other people and other races of the world were inferior to chosen people of God. However, in this dream Peter's entire perspective began to change. It was a complete and utter reversal. Or, to use today's terminology, a total paradigm shift.

We all have a tendency to think that God is in favor of us, that He is on our side. And if God is on our side, then those who aren't like us are not looked upon by God with the same favor as we are. It makes our negative feelings toward those people more justified, and it allows us to excuse our bias and prejudice. So to learn that there is to be no distinction between people, especially when it comes to salvation, was a hard lesson for Peter to learn.

From his earliest days, the apostle had been taught that his people, the Jewish people, were chosen especially by God. They had special privileges. That's the way God intended it, and that's the way it would be, forever and ever. Then, all of a sudden, things changed. Drastically. Completely. Forever. In the home of Cornelius.

News about what happened in Caesarea Philippi with the conversion of the Roman centurion and his household began to spread throughout the early church in Judea. When Peter returned to Jerusalem, a number of believers who thought a person had to conform to Jewish law in order to be a Christian criticized him. Their chief concern was not that Gentiles had come to faith in Christ but that the apostle had broken kosher. They said, "You went into the house of Gentiles and ate with them!" That was the thing that bothered them most, because if it was okay for Peter to have gone into the home of Gentiles, then obviously Gentiles had the right to come into their homes and into their church as Gentiles and as equals with the Jews. That's where their prejudice lay.

We may think we don't have that same problem in the church today, but we do have something like it. We're glad to have other people join our church as long as they become like us. We don't mind diversity as long as that diversity accommodates our approach and style. We may be glad to have Pentecostals worship with us as long as they don't raise their hands too high or speak in tongues too loudly! We may welcome people of other races and backgrounds to our fellowship as long as they don't act too differently and they try to fit in with the way we do things. We don't mind if people who are a rough around the edges, with piercings and tattoos, seek Christ among us as long as they clean up just a little bit. But did you ever notice that when Jesus was a fisher of men He didn't clean His fish before He caught them?

Criticism in the church wasn't just a problem in the 1st century in Jerusalem. It's a problem in every church. Each of us needs to make a close examination of our own hearts to study the ways we are affected by prejudice and judgmentalism. We should repent of our bias and correct our prejudice to develop as inclusive a fellowship as we possibly can, and that means we need to make room at the table for folks who different from us.



There was once a Sunday School teacher who taught her class about the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. She explained the Pharisee was proud and thought he was better than the other man, and he thanked God he wasn't like him. But the tax collector was humble, and he couldn't even raise his head in worship he was so ashamed, and he asked God to forgive him. When she finished teaching the lesson, she invited the students to bow their heads and pray, and she said, "Dear Lord, we thank you that we're not like that Pharisee...." She missed the point of the lesson she was teaching!

In what ways do we look down on other people, even people who look down on people? How are we threatened by folks of different backgrounds? In what ways does God want us to grow in this area, too?

II. The Explanation of Peter.

Peter could have responded to the criticism, "Hey, I'm an apostle. God speaks to me and through me, and He told me to go to the house of these Gentiles. So, if you don't like it, you can leave my church!" That's how some Christian leaders react to criticism and controversy, but Peter did not. He didn't flaunt his authority. Instead, he offered a humble and detailed account of exactly what happened, and the text says he explained everything precisely as it occurred.

There are several aspects of Peter's explanation I think are worth noting. **First, the apostle made it clear he hadn't acted alone, and there were others with him in making this decision.** Six companions joined Peter on the visit to Cornelius' house, and those same six men were also with him in Jerusalem. The Bible says there is wisdom in the counsel of many, and the best decisions are made in community not by ourselves in isolation.

Second, Peter also made it clear **this wasn't something he set out to do on his own. Rather, it was something he felt led by God to do.** The vision came to Peter when he was praying, and it was a vision that was repeated three times for emphasis. At first he reacted negatively to God's invitation to take up and eat, but gradually he came to see that kosher restrictions were a thing of the past in the kingdom of God, and the Lord was more interested in purifying people's hearts rather than their diet. He learned God has no favorites, and we shouldn't make distinctions between people.

The **third** thing Peter did in his explanation was **he appealed to circumstances** which he interpreted as a divine appointment. The apostle said that while he was praying and immediately after he received the vision, men from Cornelius came to where he was staying. Timing like that could not have been accidental, and Peter saw the hand of God in the circumstances.

Next the apostle said **he witnessed a divine action** when the Spirit of God came upon the people gathered in Cornelius' home. The Holy Spirit came on them just as he had on the early believers on the day of Pentecost. The extraordinary similarity of the two events struck him, and he concluded this must be of God.

Finally, the apostle ended with the words of Jesus, and he said when this happened he remembered what the Lord said about the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Peter appealed to the authority of God's Word in justifying his actions of the previous days.

From time to time people ask me, "How does a person know the will of God? How does He lead people? How can I know whether or not I should do this or that? What is God's will for my life?" This passage gives us great insight into these questions. It reminds us decisions are best made in community. Prayer is a foundational activity if we desire to know what God wants us to do. Circumstances play a part in understanding the plan of God for our lives, and sometimes He closes a door but opens a window. And Scripture should inform whatever decision we need to make. We should ask ourselves what does the Bible have to say about this matter?



What decision are you facing, and how can this passage help you in discerning the will of God? Are you praying about it? Are you seeking the counsel of others? Are you reading your Bible and searching God's Word for answers? And how is God using your circumstances to direct your path?

III. The Diversity of the Church.

The result of Peter's speech was their criticism ceased and their worship began. The people praised God for this amazing miracle, and they rejoiced that salvation had come even to the Gentiles. However, even though these Jewish believers were convinced by Peter's presentation, it was only for a time. They praised God, but not for long.

A short time after this, a faction in the church began to grow in Jerusalem that eventually rejected this initial enthusiasm, and later these legalists would argue that to be a Christian you could not ignore the law of Moses in the Old Testament. These questions had to be battled out again later on, and the apostle Paul, not just Peter, would be at the center of the debate. Many of his letters addressed the problem of what came to be called the "judaizers," and the apostles had to fight for the gospel of grace and rescue it from those who would seek to co-opt it to their own narrow way of thinking.

This reminds us that prejudice dies hard, and we need to learn these lessons over and over again. Even when we make progress and come to a new way of thinking and living, old ways tend to creep in and we find ourselves slipping back into old patterns. Just a few chapters later in the book of Acts, we will see this same Peter doing this very thing when he was in Antioch. When some Jewish believers arrived from Jerusalem, Peter himself withdrew from fellowship with Gentile Christians, and he had to be publicly opposed by Paul. Old patterns die hard, and all of us need to work at rooting out the prejudice in our hearts.

The sin of discrimination continues to raise its ugly head in the church of Jesus Christ. Whether it's racism (color prejudice), nationalism (my country, right or wrong), tribalism in Africa, casteism in India, classism in America, or sexism in discriminating against women, all such discrimination is wrong because God has no favorites, and neither should we.

Author Philip Yancey writes¹ that every church he has attended has included a measure of diversity. He thinks back fondly on two people in the church of his childhood in Atlanta – people he took turns sitting with when his mother was off teaching Sunday school. He loved sitting with Mrs. Payton because she had a stole that consisted of two minks biting each other's tails. All during the service he would play with the hard, shiny eyes, the sharp, pointed teeth, and the soft skin and floppy tails of those animals. Mrs. Payton's minks helped him endure many a wearisome sermon.

Mr. Ponce wore no animals around his neck, but Philip knew no kinder person anywhere. He had six children of his own, and he seemed happy only when a child was in his lap. He was a huge man, and Philip could sit there contentedly for an entire service without his leg falling asleep. He praised the pictures Philip drew on the church bulletin, and he drew funny faces in Philip's hands that would smile and wink when he moved his fingers a certain way.

Philip remembers Mr. Ponce for his kindness, and also for an enormous sprout of nasal hair, easily visible when Philip looked up from Mr. Ponce's lap. If you had asked Philip then who he liked best, probably Mr. Ponce would get the edge. Philip's own father died when he was only a year old, and Mr. Ponce provided a comforting male presence.

Later, when Philip grew older and more sophisticated, he learned the facts: Mrs. Payton was rich, which accounted for the animals around her neck. Her family owned a Cadillac dealership. Mr. Ponce, on the other hand, drove a garbage truck and barely brought in enough money to support his large



family. When Philip learned these facts, he realized to his shame that as an adult he probably would not have befriended Mr. Ponce. They probably would have shared few interests.

But, Philip concludes, he's glad that the church of Jesus Christ in my childhood included both these friends. He now sees that the church should be an environment where both Mrs. Peyton of the hairy stole and Mr. Ponce of the hairy nose feel equally welcome.

Conclusion.

The title of this sermon on Peter's speech is "I Had a Dream!" It reminds me another speech made back in 1963 by Martin Luther King, Jr. His speech then was "I *Have* a Dream!" Dr. King dreamed of a colorblind society in which a person was judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. He dreamed of a day when black children and white children, the ancestors of slaves and slave owners, would play together in the red clay hills of Georgia. It is a dream that has been realized to some degree, but we've still got a lot of room to grow and progress we need to make.

Several years ago, a friend of mine in Dallas was watching a documentary on TV with his father, who was now in his 70s. The film detailed the civil rights movement in the 1960s, and it included King's speech. However, it also showed footage of the police dogs which attacked peaceful demonstrators and the water cannons officers used to break up marches. There were photographs of lynchings and other forms of violence against blacks. It was a very sobering film. When the program was over, the father of my friend turned off the television, and he asked rhetorically to his son in a mournful voice, "Where was I?" All this was going on, and he had buried his head in the sand and didn't want to know. "Where was I?"

I don't want to get to the end of my life and ask the same question. I want to make sure that at the end of my days I will have been faithful to do what I can to stand against prejudice and hate.

If you were to ask the average person on the street in Austin what their impression of the church is, many if not most would say words like "narrow", "angry", "bigoted", and "legalistic." But if you were to ask that same average person what they thought of Mother Teresa, they would reply with words like "love", "sacrifice", "mercy", "hero." What do you and I need to do so when people are asked about WHPC they say those same things about us?

What would it take for our church to be known for breaking down barriers of prejudice? What would it take for us to be in the forefront of healing the things that divide? May God give us insight and courage to live into this hope of Christ. It's a dream still worth having. Amen.

ⁱ Philip Yancey, *Church: Why Bother?* Pp. 53-54.

