



Even for Them – Acts 11:1-18

(Expanded Sermon Notes)

Peter knew that it was going to be a tough sale. He knew that they would doubt him, question him, and he would have some explaining to do. In all honesty, he's still not quite sure of what just happened. First, the vision, was it heat stroke or hunger? Surely there had to have been a more logical explanation for it. But then they came, the men from Cornelius' house, just as the voice had told him. When he got to Cornelius' house, he saw God do things that only God could do. He saw the Holy Spirit fill this group of Gentiles just like he had filled all those on the day of Pentecost. As Peter makes his way back to Jerusalem, he knows that there will be some explaining to do, and he's right. As soon as he gets there, the brothers have already heard of what happened, and they have questions. We all know the scene; it is a tense church business meeting. Good intentions led to questionable practices, and now the integrity of the whole movement and their identity seems to hang in the balance. Peter will take a deep breath and begin sharing about what God had done; as the brothers listen, they will come to believe Peter, and they will respond in praise to God. Why? Because God has done things that only God could do, and he deserves praise for that!

In this passage, we will come to hear an important truth for the early church, and for us today, **there are no second-class citizens in the Kingdom**. But, we will also get a glimpse at how to walk through a theological conflict in a way that honors fellow believers and leaves space for God to do the unexpected.

1. Naysayers and doubters have always been in the church. (vv.1-3)

- a. Setting: This passage occurs about ten years into the life of the early church.
 - i. Most scholars date Peter's visit to Cornelius (Acts 10) around 43 AD.
 - ii. Sometimes the book of Acts can read as if these scenes are happening one right after the other.
 - 1. I.e., It can feel like we are weeks or months after the resurrection instead of ten years!
- b. This passage is a wonderful example of how the church should handle conflict and give us encouragement that there have always been contentious membership meetings!
 - i. **Caution** – This isn't the last time that this issue will come up. (Cf. Acts 15)
 - 1. Paul will eventually tell the Galatian church of how he had to reprimand Peter for being hypocritical on this very issue. (Gal. 2)

- a. Peter was supporting works of the Law with Jews. And then supporting grace with Gentiles. I.e., Peter was sending mixed messages.¹
- 2. **¹¹ But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹² For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. ¹³ And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. ¹⁴ But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?”** (Gal. 2:11-14)
 - a. Bock helpfully notes that, “Some old ways die hard in the new era.”²
 - i. When we step back and examine this for what it is, we should be encouraged that the modern church with its squabbles and issues isn’t all that different than the early church.
- c. **The first conflict at hand – Exactly who can be saved, and how?**
 - i. The central question at hand is that of salvation – who can be saved & how?
 - 1. **But clearly the major concern**, which if allowed to stand would blow a hole right through the worldview of the ‘circumcision group’, was that these **Gentiles** had been admitted as full members of the new and rapidly developing Jesus-family *without having had to become Jews in the process*.³
 - 2. **The common experience for Gentile converts up to this point:**
 - a. **First step:** Convert to Judaism.
 - i. This involved the sacrificial system and worship at the Temple.
 - b. **Second step:** Conversion to Christianity.
 - i. Includes baptism and receiving the Holy Spirit.
 - 1. You could not take this second step without the first.
 - c. **Third step:** Maintain the Jewish purity laws and rhythms of worship. I.e., Observe the feasts and celebrations.
 - ii. What we saw in Acts 10 and reaffirmed here, is that salvation is truly for all, and there is no requirement to convert to Judaism first or to keep the purity laws.
 - 1. This is a helpful answer to Christians today who ask, “Why do we not need to keep the dietary laws of the OT?”
- d. **The second conflict at hand – Table fellowship and personhood?**
 - i. This is an undercurrent of the theological conflict or disagreement that is on the surface.
 - ii. What bothers those who object the most is that Peter and company have gone in and eaten with uncircumcised men (v. 3). **That such a level of table fellowship has taken place is quite likely, given that Peter and his group stayed with Cornelius for days and would have received the food of their host.** The question that is less than clear is

¹ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 207.

² Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 406.

³ Tom Wright, *Acts for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-12* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2008), 173.

whether Cornelius would have been sensitive enough not to insult his Jewish guests with unclean food (Barrett 1994: 533).⁴

1. **Perhaps their view matches Jubilee 22.16: “Separate thyself from the nations, and eat not with them: and do not according to their works, and become not their associate; for their works are unclean, and all their ways are a pollution and an abomination and uncleanness”**. In their view, if Gentiles are to join the believing community, they must become like Jews.⁵
 - a. Note: Jubilee is an extra-biblical wisdom book in the Jewish canon.
- e. **How serious are the accusations being leveled against Peter?**
 - i. The tone of the accusations – A direct statement... not a question.
 1. There is an assumption of guilt, and not an inquiring of what has transpired.
 - a. **Remember, they are living in a shame-honor context.**
 - i. Peter’s violation of the law would have implications on all of them.
 1. I.e., You’ve made life hard on us. / I now have to clean up your mess.
 2. The complaint is expressed more likely as a statement rather than as a question (Barrett 1994: 537–38). It almost has the force of **“You went in and ate with Gentiles, so what about it! Explain yourself.”** Thus verse 2 says that they criticized (διεκρίνοντο, *diekrinonto*) him.⁶
 - a. I.e., These are not light accusations or the arguing over the semantics of a word.
 - ii. **Theologically speaking:** Borderline heresy. I.e., “You’ve gone too far on this one!”
 1. They believe Peter has abandoned right belief (orthodoxy).
 - iii. **Culturally speaking:** If the dietary and purity laws are no longer needed **a national identity was at stake.**
 1. People were not, in other words, sitting around in Jerusalem discussing, as an abstract issue, the question of the value of circumcision and the food laws. These were the equivalents of the national flag at a time when the whole nation felt under intense and increasing pressure.
 - a. **To welcome Gentiles as equal brothers and sisters must have looked like fraternizing with the enemy.**
 - f. **How does Peter address their concerns?**
 - i. He is sympathetic... I.e., Puts himself in their shoes. (v.8)
 - ii. He explains the situation clearly and puts God at the center. (vv.4-15)
 - iii. He quotes the words and teachings of Jesus directly. (v. 16)
 1. **This is a good model for theological conflict resolution.**
 2. **His accusers allow him the chance to explain himself, and are open to the possibility that God just might be moving.**

⁴ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 404.

⁵ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 406–407.

⁶ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 406–407.

2. Recap – God moved in Joppa. (vv.4-15)

- a. **Conflict resolution Step 1:** Talk about what God did.
 - i. Peter understands what is at stake, and he wants to make sure that he represents the Lord and his work well to the brothers in Jerusalem. → I.e., This isn't about Peter.
- b. **God's kindness is for all people. (10:19-20, 33)**
 - i. **In the most direct witness form possible, Peter makes the decisive case for what God has done.⁷**
 - 1. **Peter unequivocally explains that everything that happened was an action of God and not on his own liberty or authority.**
 - a. v. 8 - Consider how he repeats his refutation on the command to "kill and eat" by saying, "I have never eaten anything unclean."
 - b. Peter is convinced of the importance of the purity laws. → I.e., He would not break them willy-nilly.
 - ii. Acts 10 → There is a significant tone to this vision about the equality of all people in God's eyes.
 - 1. I.e., **Peter's vision wasn't about food, it was about people.**
 - 2. **v.12- There is no room for partiality in the Kingdom of God.**
 - a. The expression literally "without discriminating" (μηδὲν διακρίναντα, *mēden diakrinanta*) means that no partiality should be exercised against them because they are Gentiles (10:34; 15:9). So with six Jewish Christian brothers Peter went to Cornelius's home.⁸
- c. **The need for clarity – What version of the story are we getting?**
 - i. **Peter's reaction to the question was to tell the audience the whole story in order** (for this last phrase cf. Luke 1:3), in the belief that when they heard it properly (instead of the fragmentary and possibly garbled reports that they had already received) they would be bound to see that God had led him to this action.
 - ii. So the story is briefly retold with little significant difference from the earlier narrative, except that it is considerably abbreviated and told in the first person from Peter's point of view.⁹
- d. **Peter is sympathetic to those who are accusing him. (v.8)**
 - i. As we have noted, the charges against Peter are not light or insignificant. They are serious theologically and culturally speaking.
 - ii. **Peter's first move** is to recount the alleged incident with clarity.
 - 1. **In this move, Peter demonstrates a significant level of emotional intelligence.**
 - a. He could have become riled-up and leveled accusations against them.
 - b. He could have belittled them because he had received a unique revelation.

⁷ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 407.

⁸ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 407.

⁹ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 207–208.

- c. He could have dismissed them and avoided it altogether.
 - i. He doesn't. He knows they need to hear the actual account.
 - 2. **Undoubtedly, they have all heard some version of the account.**
 - a. There is a real-life factor of the game, telephone.
 - b. The more people that tell a story and re-tell a story, the more distorted it becomes.
 - 3. **On the positive note, Peter's accusers seem willing to listen to him.**
 - a. When we are in conflict over a situation with someone, are we willing to listen to them?
 - i. Note: There are 6 others that were there besides Cornelius and his family. There are more eye-witnesses that are available.
- iii. **Peter's second move** is to reaffirm his convictions and sympathize with them. → v.8
 - 1. How often do we put ourselves in the shoes of someone else that we are in conflict with?
 - a. Do we spend more time thinking from our perspective or their perspective?
 - b. This isn't to excuse or justify their behavior, but it is a gracious response to say, "I'm not the only perspective here."
 - 2. Peter understands them, their culture, and motives. → He knows that they are at some foundational level wanting to honor Jesus in the best way they know how.
 - a. **You can almost hear him say**, "Brothers my first reaction to the command to eat what is unclean, was the same as yours! I told, the voice, "I can't. I have never eaten anything unclean!"
 - 3. **Peter also appeals to a shared experience. → The arrival of the Holy Spirit.**
 - a. **Consistency of the Holy Spirit** - Peter's comment brings out the fact that the experience of the Gentile converts was the same as that of the original recipients of the Spirit *at the beginning*, i.e. on the day of Pentecost. It is significant that he compares the experience of the Gentiles with that of the group in the upper room, rather than with that of the first converts from Judaism: there is nothing that might suggest a status as 'second-class citizens' for the Gentiles.¹⁰
 - i. **I.e., They had the exact same experience that we had!**
- iv. **Peter's example of conflict resolution:**
 - 1. Is there clarity? → Do we all have different versions of the incident?
 - a. Are there details that I am missing?
 - i. I need to listen, so that I have all the facts.
 - b. Are there misrepresentations that are being fostered?
 - i. I need to listen so that I can have a chance to correct any misrepresentations.
 - c. Are there other eye-witnesses that can help give clarity if needed?
 - 2. Have I fully considered the other party, their experiences and motives?
 - a. Too often in arguments we find that we are both passionately talking about something, but rarely are those "somethings" the same thing.

¹⁰ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 209.

- b. If I haven't considered the other party, I am not able to learn or able to sympathize with them.
 - c. If I haven't considered the other party, I demonstrate that my priority is to be right and not reconciliation.
 - i. Peter experienced a groundbreaking theological reality, and he wants his accusers to get to live in the freedom of it as well!
- 3. Is there an agreed upon authority to appeal to?
 - a. Peter ultimately appeals to the words of Jesus for authority.
 - b. Christian brothers and sisters, there is no greater authority for our lives than the Word of God.

3. God's Word is what guides us. (vv. 16-17)

- a. **v. 17 - Jesus' own words come into play** - Further, Peter sees in the experience of the Gentiles a fulfillment of the saying of Jesus in 1:5 when he reminded his disciples of the fact that, while *John had baptized with water, they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit.*¹¹
 - i. Peter remembers this teaching of Jesus about the Spirit as the sign of promise and repeats it here in verse 16. The roots of the teaching are found in John the Baptist's remarks in Luke 3:16 in preparing the way for the new era.
 - ii. **The "identical [ἴσην, *isēn*] gift" of the Spirit given by God means that these people are cleansed and indwelt by the divine sacred presence. Thus no one can or should resist their inclusion.**
 - 1. God is the one who orchestrated this "halakic" (referring to the laws of the Torah) move.¹²
 - iii. Again, this new era and new perspective is not something of Peter's own invention. Nor, is it a product of his disregard for the law. It has come directly from God, and reveals the larger truth of God's heart for all people from the beginning.
- b. **As Christians, there is no greater source of authority than God's Word.**
 - i. **Note: The Word of God even trumps our experience.**
 - 1. Peter does not exclusively appeal to his lived experience as the highest authority.
 - a. Yes, his experience is important.
 - b. But, his experience is not ultimate truth
 - 2. Narratology – We must be careful to not make our experiences ultimate truth.
 - a. Narratology is the process of making one's lived experience the basis of ultimate and absolute truth.
 - ii. What do we believe in the EFCA?
 - 1. **We believe that God has spoken in the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, through the words of human authors. As the verbally inspired Word of God, the Bible is without error in the original writings, the complete revelation of His will for salvation, and the ultimate authority by which every realm of human knowledge and endeavor should be judged. Therefore, it is to**

¹¹ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 209.

¹² Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 409.

be believed in all that it teaches, obeyed in all that it requires, and trusted in all that it promises.¹³

- c. **God's Word holds a very high place in the book of Acts and the early church.**
 - i. **The Word of God is Inspired**
 - 1. Acts 1:16; 2:25a, 29-31; 3:18-19; 4:25, 31b; 7:6a; 38c; 10:36; 28:25b
 - 2. One of the first aspects of the Word of God that should stand out to us in our reading of Acts is, that it has been inspired by God through the Holy Spirit.
 - ii. **The Word of God is Active and Effective**
 - 1. Acts 2:37, 42; 3:21; 6:7, 10; 7:38c; 8:14, 35; 11:1; 13:26, 32, 48-49; 15:7c; 17:11-12; 28:25b
 - 2. Secondly, as we read through Acts, we see that God's Word is active and effective.
 - 3. **Particularly, we see that it is active and effective in the following ways, it convicts and convinces man of his need, it has authority for our lives, and when believed, it brings men to life.**
 - iii. **The Word of God is Revelatory**
 - 1. Acts 2:31; 8:35; 17:2-3; 26:22; 28:25
 - 2. Third, we see that the Word of God reveals the truth and mystery of Jesus.
 - iv. **The Word of God is The Gospel**
 - 1. Acts 5:20; 6:2; 8:4, 25, 35; 10:36
 - 2. Fourth, we see that the Word of God is the gospel. I.e., It is the good news of salvation for all men through belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus.
- d. Peter does not appeal to his own authority, he appeals to Jesus' authority.
 - i. Brothers and sisters, if you are in a theological or cultural discussion or disagreement with another brother or sister, there is one ultimate authority for both of you to submit to... The Word of God.
 - 1. Be clear about what it says, and what it doesn't say.
 - 2. Do not add to it, and be willing to humbly see when our cultural lenses are influencing our reading over that of the original intention of the author.
 - 3. Be gracious on things the church has not agreed on in 2000 years.
 - ii. **What is the central line and message of the Bible?**
 - 1. I.e., What is the main thing? → That God loves man and wants to redeem him.

4. We need to keep the main thing, the main thing. (vv. 17-18)

- a. **Again, Peter sticks to the main thing... The gospel and the reconciliation of broken humanity.**
 - i. He does not denounce the purity laws or Jewish religious practice.
 - 1. Want to keep following those things? → You are free to!
 - 2. Don't look down on your Gentile brothers and sisters who don't.
 - 3. Don't add works of the law as a gospel requirement... They aren't!
 - ii. **He also does not allow this group to exclude Gentile believers... the Gospel is for all people.**
 - 1. And, in view of Peter's explanation and the support of Jesus' words, this group of Jewish believers respond positively and accept Gentile believers into the community of believers.
 - a. **Again, there are no second-class citizens in the Kingdom of God.**

¹³ EFCA Statement of faith on the Bible: <https://www.efca.org/sof>

- b. Peter's argument proved convincing.
 - i. **Not only was incipient criticism reduced to silence, but rather the audience expressed their praise to God that he had granted *to the Gentiles* as well as the Jews the opportunity of repenting of their sins and thus of obtaining eternal life (5:20; 13:46, 48). This opportunity was provided in the preaching of the gospel.¹⁴**
 - ii. **God brings various ethnic groups into one in Christ. This message is important in Acts. Jesus brings reconciliation not only with God but also between people.**
 - 1. The new community will be diverse in makeup, equal in status, and called to reflect peace with one another (Eph. 2:11–22). Peter is the example of one who understands and actively pursues this fresh opportunity that is opened up to all people. Indeed, **he defends it vigorously as the will of God.**¹⁵
- c. **The question for us today: What is our main thing?**
 - i. Three options for us today:
 - 1. Is it the gospel?
 - a. Wholeness is only given through belief in Jesus' death and resurrection.
 - 2. Is it moralism?
 - a. Wholeness is earned through moral performance.
 - 3. Is it humanism?
 - a. Wholeness is realized by seeing man as the center of his own universe. I.e., Man is the beginning and end of himself.
 - ii. **As Christians, we understand that the only viable option is the gospel.**
 - 1. **Am I actively sharing the gospel, or do I present the options of moralism or humanism with my life?**

¹⁴ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 210.

¹⁵ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 410.