

THIS WEEK'S MESSAGE

MAY 9TH–10TH // THE BOOK OF ACTS

CRITICISM (ACTS 11:1–3)

THE REPORT

No doubt, Peter returned to Jerusalem on a spiritual high, rejoicing in all that God had done in Cornelius's house.

- The apostles and the Judean Christian community in Jerusalem heard the report that the Gentiles had received the word of God (v. 1).
- This was cause for rejoicing! The Church had started fulfilling the commission of Jesus.

THE REACTION

As Peter returned to Jerusalem, he was met with criticism from a group within the church that was dedicated to protecting the Jewish perspective on Christianity (v. 2).

- This "circumcision party" believed that any Gentiles who came to Christ would have to go through the rituals of Judaism first, and that would certainly include circumcision.

THE REGARD

Even though the gospel was finally received by the Gentiles, this group's focus and regard were not on that at all (v. 3).

- The issue they raised wasn't against the gospel being proclaimed, the Holy Spirit being poured out, or baptism in the name of Jesus.
- It was the fact that Peter "ate with a Gentile," which was altogether unacceptable to them.

In the Old Testament, God had commanded Israel to be set apart and separate from the other surrounding nations—they were not to go after their gods or copy their pagan practices.

- But by the First Century, generations of rabbinical Jewish tradition had taken God's command to be spiritually distinct and gradually turned it into a system of social distancing.
- This wasn't Scripture; it was tradition.

For some Christians, seeing others simply trust in Christ for salvation just isn't enough.

- The traditions and cultural practices of their faith become almost (if not more) important than faith itself.
- Standards of dress, styles of music, political affiliations, lifestyle standards, and other cultural/traditional convictions become almost as important as belief in the gospel itself.

JESUS + = NOT THE GOSPEL

Some "sacred cows" need to be tipped. They are not matters of salvation or gospel faithfulness but simply cultural or traditional distinctives.

- When we major on minor ("non-salvific") issues or stress cultural/traditional distinctives as primary, we create unnecessary barriers to faith in Christ and distort the message of the gospel.

CLARITY (ACTS 11:4–18)

"PETER BEGAN TO EXPLAIN TO THEM STEP BY STEP..." (V. 4)

The old Peter would have been tempted to cut off an ear or two because of this kind of petty criticism, but this Spirit-filled Christian leader responded quite differently.

- Peter began to explain everything precisely as it had happened. This should be a model for how mature Christians are to handle criticism.

There was wonderful openness, vulnerability, humility, calmness, and security in the fact that his actions were simply in obedience to God's commands.

- Peter's defense simply rested in the clarity of God's will and the purity of his motives—he had acted only out of obedience to God's command.

HANDLING CRITICISM

Not all criticism is created equal:

- Inaccurate and malicious criticism.
- Accurate *but* malicious criticism.
- Accurate and fair criticism.
- Emotionally, spiritually, and socially immature people respond to ALL criticism (no matter how accurate or fair it may be) the same way: with defensiveness and antagonism.

HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND?

"Don't rebuke a mocker, or he will hate you; rebuke the wise, and he will love you. Instruct the wise, and he will be wiser still; teach the righteous, and he will learn more" (Prov. 9:8–9).

- Criticism is never fun, but it can help us grow.
- We use accurate criticism to change.
- We use inaccurate criticism to explain/clarify.
- We use malicious criticism to show Christ.

The criticism against Peter was a bit unfair, because his accusers didn't have the full story.

- Very patiently and calmly, Peter told the full story of how God instructed him to take the message of the gospel to the Gentiles (vs. 5–17).
- Peter's clinching argument in v. 17 was that if God was doing all of this (and if God had chosen to deal with the Gentiles the same way He treated the Jews), who was Peter to think that He could oppose God?

When we respond biblically in the face of criticism, we let God fight our battles and leave room for Him to work: God is the one who changes people's hearts.

- Verse 18 tells us that this group had a change of heart and "glorified God."
- God had to reveal the same truth to the Christians in Judea as He did to Peter. As He did, there was unity and rejoicing.

BEFORE YOU CRITICIZE...

Ask: Do I know the full story? What are my motives? Does this involve me? Am I the right person to bring this up? Am I bringing this criticism in a helpful manner?

- When you get criticized...
- Ask: Is this accurate? What do I need to explain/clarify? How can I show Christ?
- Leave room for God to work and fight your battle.

GOOD NEWS (ACTS 11:19–21)

Chapter 8 tells us that many of the Christians in Jerusalem had "been scattered" all over the known world because of persecution.

- Now, we get to see God's sovereignty at work within this less-than-ideal set of circumstances.
- These religious refugees preached the word wherever they went.
- Three places are mentioned: Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch.

It's commendable that these scattered Believers were evangelizing, but for a time they were only preaching the gospel to Jews (v. 19).

- They would have gone into synagogues and preached to other Jews in a very Jewish context and manner.
- But the text tells us that some of them came to a place called Antioch and started sharing their faith with Greeks also (v. 20).

And as they did, the "Lord's hand was with them, and a "large number who believed turned to the Lord" (v. 21).

- So many of us are afraid to share our faith because we're insecure and not confident in our ability to get it right.
- This text tells us that as we step out in faith and obedience to share Jesus with others, the Lord's hand is with us.

OUR GREAT FEAR OF BEING MISUNDERSTOOD AND REJECTED

This is one of the greatest barriers keeping us from having real, meaningful conversations with others about our faith.

- Our fear of rejection often reveals that we have attached our identity to being liked, respected, or seen a certain way. Sharing our faith feels unsafe because it might cost us in a huge way.

These Believers in verse 20 aren't driven by how they will be received; they are driven by what they had seen and heard (their testimony of the resurrected Jesus).

- We are not responsible for how people respond.
- We are responsible for being clear, faithful, and loving enough to share Christ.

HOW DO WE SHARE OUR FAITH?

Make your own faith public first.

- Earn the right to be heard by investing in them as a person and loving them like Jesus.
- Invite someone to church.
- Ask them what they believe about God, the afterlife, or what life is about.
- Ask how you can pray for them.
- Share Jesus and keep it simple.

ANTIOCH (ACTS 11:22–30)

THE CHURCH IN ANTIOCH (V. 22)

Antioch of Syria (modern-day Turkey) was one of the largest cities in the First Century Roman world, accommodating a population of perhaps 300,000. Antioch was a very diverse place with a sizeable Jewish community and a large Gentile population.

- When the church leaders in Jerusalem heard what God was doing, they sent Barnabas.

BARNABAS: THE ONE WHO SEES GRACE (V. 23)

Barnabas is first mentioned in Chapter 4 as a very generous supporter of the church in Jerusalem, and here we see his ministry in Antioch.

- What did he see when he got to Antioch to serve as an overseer? He "saw the grace of God."
- Do we have eyes to see and encourage the work that God is doing amongst us? Or do we focus on the challenges and problems?

BARNABAS THE ENCOURAGER (V. 24)

Barnabas ("Son of Encouragement") was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith.

- His ministry in Antioch was to encourage the Believers there to remain true to the Lord with devoted hearts.
- As Barnabas encouraged and built up the church, the Lord continued to add more people to their numbers.

SAUL AND BARNABAS (VS. 25–26)

After Saul of Tarsus was converted, Barnabas was instrumental in vouching for his conversion before the church at large.

- Barnabas went to Tarsus looking for Saul and brought him back to Antioch as his "associate pastor," and they ministered together for a whole year.
- They taught "large numbers"—a big church.

THE FIRST "CHRISTIANS" (V. 26)

It was in Antioch that the disciples were first referred to as "Christians" ("slaves of Christ," "belonging to Christ," "little Christs"). Most likely, outsiders meant it as an insult, but the name stuck.

- Interestingly, this descriptor began being adopted by the Christians themselves, as they saw it as a compliment to be identified by Christ.

HEARING ABOUT A NEED (VS. 27–28)

The church was growing, committed to sound teaching/leadership, and living out their faith in real ways; they were also a generous church.

- Verse 27 tells of a prophet named Agabus who came to Antioch and prophesied of a coming famine that would greatly impact everyone in the known world but particularly those in Judea (to the south of Antioch).

A GIVING CHURCH (VS. 29–30)

What was the church's response? Everyone, according to their ability, gave financially to help those who would be most affected.

- The areas to the south of Antioch (in Judea) were apparently hit the hardest by the famine.
- So, they took up a collection, and Barnabas and Saul took the money to the elders of the church of Jerusalem.

LIVING AS A "CHRISTIAN" (SLAVE OF CHRIST)

- The title "Christian" isn't a label we customize to mean whatever we prefer; it's an identity shaped by faithfulness to Christ and His Word.
- To become a Christian, one must turn from their sin and trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord.
- To live as a Christian, one must live a life that reflects and follows Jesus as Scripture describes Him (not as we prefer Him to be).
- Be kind, compassionate, meek, forgiving, and gracious towards others (even when we're criticized), but also be willing to speak what is true with conviction and clarity (vs. 1–18).
- We must make our faith public and live our lives on mission to share Christ with others so they can know Him (vs. 19–21).
- Give generously and serve willingly to meet the needs of the people around us (vs. 22–30).
- A Christian is identified by their allegiance and commitment to Christ more than anything else.
- What defines you? "I am not what I do. I am not what I own. I am not what others say about me."
- "I am defined by the life of Christ in me."