

International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
October 25, 2015

Lesson Text: Acts 11:1-18
Lesson Title: Trusting the Spirit

Introduction

Anyone familiar with the life of Peter knows it was a life of slow but steady growth and maturity. It seems one of the great turning points in his life was the Day of Pentecost. After that memorable day, Peter's attitude toward everything changed. The remarkable and obvious leading of the Holy Spirit made the difference, especially in regard to the acceptance of Gentiles as part of the church.

The setting for today's lesson is the conversion of Cornelius and the founding of the first Gentile church in Acts 10. Cornelius, a man of prayer and of generosity, was a Gentile who worshiped the true God. But he was all of this in Judaism, not Christianity. One day at three o'clock in the afternoon he received a vision in which an angel commanded him to send for Simon Peter. In obedience to the Lord, Cornelius sent for Peter and he came to the house of Cornelius and preached Christ. God honored Peter's preaching and the Holy Spirit came upon Cornelius and all assembled in his house.

The first followers of Christ were Jews who assumed the gospel was for the Jewish people. After all, God was the God of the Jews. He had given them His law and grace. In Jerusalem, there was a group of Jews who believed Gentiles could be saved but they could only be saved by adopting the practices of the Jews. Gentiles, like Cornelius, were welcome to come to their synagogues and observe and learn, but they could not be accepted until they denounced their gods and received circumcision, the sign of the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 17:9-14). It is somewhat understandable how they arrived at that conclusion, but it was not biblical.

Acts 11:1-18 reveals how Peter and the religious leaders were willing to change their minds concerning Gentiles in the body of Christ. It was a change desperately needed. The work of the Holy Spirit made the difference.

The Accusation against Peter (Acts 11:1-3)

Verse 1

“And the apostles and brethren that were in Judaea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God.”

The report of what happened in Caesarea had circulated around “Judaea” until it finally reached Jerusalem, sixty miles away. The “apostles” were apparently still the leaders of the church and the “brethren” is a beautiful New Testament word for Christian men and women. The church leaders and Christians in the church at Jerusalem “heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God.” These Jewish Christians and church leaders were not upset because Gentiles had “received the word of God,” but because Peter had associated with them.

Verse 2-3

“And when Peter was come up to Jerusalem, they that were of the circumcision contended with him, Saying, Thou wentest in to men uncircumcised, and didst eat with them.”

Peter “came up to Jerusalem” either directly from Caesarea, or by way of Joppa. When he arrived in Jerusalem, “they that were of the circumcision contended with him...” “They that were of the circumcision” is a reference to the Jews. These were Jewish Christians who still believed Jews should keep the law of Moses. In their minds Christianity was just a part of Judaism. They believed those who had trusted Christ for salvation and accepted Jesus as Messiah were Christians, but this did not free them from the requirements of the law.

“Thou wentest in to men uncircumcised, and didst eat with them.” Eating with “uncircumcised” Gentiles was a serious sin in the eyes of strict Jews. How did they know Peter ate with them? According to Acts 10:48, Peter stayed with them “*certain days*.” Obviously he ate with them during his stay. They were now his brothers and sisters in Christ; so why should he not eat with them?

Christians today are faced with the same problem by some legalists and separatist. The Bible teaches sanctification and separation from the world, but nowhere in Scripture is the believer commanded to avoid contact with people, lost or saved, because of tradition and unbiblical convictions.

The Answer from Peter (Acts 11:4-17)

Verse 4-6

“But Peter rehearsed the matter from the beginning, and expounded it by order unto them, saying, I was in the city of Joppa praying: and in a trance I saw a vision, A certain vessel descend, as it had been a great sheet, let down from heaven by four corners; and it came even to me: Upon the which when I had fastened mine eyes, I considered, and saw fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air.

“Rehearsed” means Peter started from the beginning and told those who questioned him the story of Cornelius recorded in Acts 10. It is obvious Luke considered the breaking down of the barrier between Jew and Gentile important. It is commonly agreed that Luke was the only Gentile writer in the gospels and epistles. If that is accurate, it is easy to understand his interest in the salvation of the Gentiles.

Peter recounts how he was “in a trance” while “in the city of Joppa” (Acts 10:9-10). As he waited for the noon meal on the roof of the house of Simon the Tanner, God gave him a vision “as it had been a great sheet” being lowered in front of him. Inside the sheet were “fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air.” “Wild beasts” represent undomesticated animals; “fourfooted beasts” represent domesticated animals; “creeping things” are most likely reptiles; and “fowls of the air” are birds. These animals and birds symbolize the whole world and people of all kinds.

Verse 7

“And I heard a voice saying unto me, Arise, Peter; slay and eat.”

The “voice” from the Lord told Peter to “Arise, slay and eat.” The word “slay” carries the thought of a sacrificial slaughter, and not just killing to eat. In the vision, Peter was told to “eat.”

The Levitical law allowed for the consumption of some of these animals (Leviticus 11). But “creeping things” were expressing forbidden (Leviticus 11:41-43). Why would the Lord tell Peter to “eat” something that was forbidden in the law? Peter’s Jewish audience must have been on the edge of their seats in anticipation.

Verse 8

“But I said, Not so, Lord: for nothing common or unclean hath at any time entered into my mouth.”

Peter said, “Not so, Lord: for nothing common or unclean hath at any time entered into my mouth.” The terms “common” and “unclean” had become synonymous. Peter was proud of the fact that as a strict Jew he had never violated any of the regulations concerning eating the clean and unclean. He had no doubt been taught well and raised with a holy respect of the law.

Commenting on verse 8, Doctor Vance Havner writes, “You cannot say, ‘Not so, Lord.’ If Jesus is Lord you cannot say, ‘Not so.’ If you say, ‘Not so,’ then He is not Lord. It must be either ‘Not so’ or ‘Yes Lord.’”

Verse 9

“But the voice answered me again from heaven, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common.”

Doctor Havner was right because the Lord did not allow Peter to slide with his answer. The lesson of this verse is obvious. “What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common.” The Jews considered the Gentiles to be “common” or unclean, ceremonially defiled. In God’s vision to Peter, Peter was taught to look at Jews and Gentiles through God’s eyes.

On the cross of Calvary Christ died for both Jews and Gentiles. He offers salvation to all who will believe upon His name. Lest we forget, apart from the saving grace of God, both Jews and Gentiles are unclean. It is only through the blood of Jesus Christ that sinners are washed and made clean (Ephesians 2:13; Hebrews 13:20; 1 Peter 1:2).

Verse 10

“And this was done three times: and all were drawn up again into heaven.”

This vision of the sheet was shown to Peter “three times” to enforce the truth. Having the vision from God repeated the second and third time was to have the details fixed in Peter’s mind until he would never forget it. It also confirmed the vision was real.

After the third vision viewing, the sheet and everything in it was taken back up in to heaven. The vision came from the Lord and returned to Him. It was without question the work of God.

Verse 11

“And, behold, immediately there were three men already come unto the house where I was, sent from Caesarea unto me.”

As Peter comes out of this trance, “three men...sent from Caesarea” were at “the house” ready to escort Peter to Cornelius’ house. There is a comforting and encouraging lesson to be learned from the word “immediately.” It reminds us everything happening in this story is ordered by the Lord.

Christians can always trust the Lord and the leadership of the Holy Spirit. God’s timing is always perfect. He gave the vision to Cornelius first. The centurion sent his servants to get Peter the next morning. That journey of about thirty miles would take a day and a half. Just before the servants arrived in Joppa, the Lord gave Peter his vision while he was on the housetop. When his vision ended, the details still fresh in his mind, “immediately” the men knocked on his door. Had any of these events occurred a few hours earlier or

later, Peter may have refused to travel with these Gentile servants or enter a Gentile home.

Verse 12-14

“And the Spirit bade me go with them, nothing doubting. Moreover these six brethren accompanied me, and we entered into the man's house: And he shewed us how he had seen an angel in his house, which stood and said unto him, Send men to Joppa, and call for Simon, whose surname is Peter; Who shall tell thee words, whereby thou and all thy house shall be saved.

“And the Spirit bade me go with them, nothing doubting” speaks of a direct impression from the Holy Spirit to Peter that he should go with these servants to the house of Cornelius. “Nothing doubting” means “no questions asked.” Peter never questioned or wondered if this was of the Lord.

By taking “six brethren” with him, Peter could verify the account he gave of what happened in Cornelius’ home. He had sufficient witnesses to protect him from any accusations. Upon arrival, “he,” Cornelius, “shewed us how he had seen an angel in his house, which stood and said unto him, Send men to Joppa, and call for Simon, whose surname is Peter...” The actual vision account is recorded in Acts 10:3-6. It is repeated by Cornelius to Peter in Acts 10:30-33. Now Peter is telling the story for the third time, to his critics in Jerusalem. It was an important incident and the details mattered.

“Who shall tell thee words, whereby thou and all thy house shall be saved” proves that Peter was sent to Cornelius the Gentile to tell him how to “be saved.” It is often taught Cornelius and his friends were already “saved” before Peter came to the house and that what he did was to lead them into the experience of being baptized with the Holy Spirit. Such a view totally ignores this verse. Cornelius told Peter he sent his servants to Joppa to bring Peter to his house so that Peter could tell them how to “be saved” (Acts 10:43-48). Everything happening in this story is about Cornelius the Gentile learning how to be saved through the preaching of the cross.

Verse 15

And as I began to speak, the Holy Ghost fell on them, as on us at the beginning.

Peter is saying he had just began to preach in the house of Cornelius when “the Holy Ghost fell on them, as on us at the beginning.” “As at the beginning” is a reference to the Day of Pentecost. After hearing the gospel, the Gentiles in the house of Cornelius received the same Holy Spirit Peter and the others received on Pentecost. The work of God in salvation among the Gentiles is the same work of God in salvation among the Jews. The same “Holy Ghost” who came at

Pentecost is the same “Holy Ghost” who came upon Cornelius and his friends (Acts 10:44).

Verse 16

“Then remembered I the word of the Lord, how that he said, John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost.”

While standing in the house of Cornelius, witnessing what God was doing in saving Gentiles, Peter “remembered the word of the Lord.” “Lord” in this verse is Jesus Christ. Peter is remembering the promise Jesus gave His disciples before He ascended in Acts 1:5, “*For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence.*” Jesus was talking about what would happen ten days later at Pentecost. Jesus promised the church would be comprised of believers indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

John the Baptist “baptized with water,” but there was a mightier baptism in store for the disciples, and for all believers saved prior to Pentecost. It was the “baptism with the Holy Ghost.” Today, believers receive the Holy Spirit and are baptized into the body of believers, who were baptized on Pentecost, at the moment of salvation (Romans 8:9; 1 Corinthians 12:13).

Verse 17

“Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift as he did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ; what was I, that I could withstand God?”

Acts 11:17 is the main point of this story and the book of Acts. The “gift” Peter is referring to is the “gift” of the Holy Spirit of God. This “gift” is not the gift of tongues, the gift of prophecy, or the gift of healing. It is the “gift” of God which is the “Holy Spirit of God.” The “gift” of the Holy Spirit is not a “gift” that the Holy Spirit gives. It is the Holy Spirit Himself.

Peter speaks about “them” and “us,” a reference to Gentiles and Jews, having the same “gift” of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Peter is saying the Holy Spirit has been given to both Jews and Gentiles when they “believed on the Lord Jesus Christ.”

The Holy Spirit is received when sinners “believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.” That is what binds all believers together, both Jews and Gentiles. What separates us is our traditions, our culture, our race, and preferences. Regardless of our traditions, culture, race, background, or preferences, if God gave the Gentiles the Holy Spirit when they believed and if God gave Jews the Holy Spirit when they believed, we have more in common than we have in difference.

God gave both Jew and Gentile the same “gift.” There is not a Jewish Holy Spirit and a Gentile Holy Spirit. There is not a Holy Spirit for the Baptist and a Holy Spirit for the Methodist. The Holy Spirit is the Holy Spirit. God is not a respecter of persons. He gives His Holy Spirit to every believer who has “believed on the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Teachers Note: Please do not allow those who teach false doctrine concerning the person and work of the Holy Spirit to discourage you as a believer. Some teach the baptizing of the Holy Spirit comes after salvation. The Bible teaches the Holy Spirit comes simultaneously with salvation. The only exception to that is in the early chapters of the book of Acts. Clearly there are people saved in the book of Acts who later receive the Holy Spirit. The believers at Pentecost (Acts 2); the Samaritans (Acts 8); Saul was saved but later received the Holy Spirit in Damascus (Acts 9); those in Cornelius house received the Holy Spirit after salvation (Acts 10). But after Acts 11 as you proceed through the book of Acts and into the epistles, starting with Romans, every time you see the Holy Spirit associated with a believer, He comes simultaneously with salvation. Therefore, the Holy Spirit coming upon a believer after salvation is not the norm. It only occurred during the transitional period in the early days of the church.

Read the words in Acts 11:17 one more time, “God gave them the like gift as he did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ.” There was no way Peter could “withstand God” on this. God did the work and Peter said, “You can trust the Holy Spirit.”

The Acceptance of Gentiles (Acts 11:18)

Verse 18

“When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.”

For these Jews to “hold their peace” and “glorify God” after Peter’s explanation is an amazing event in church history. We are so accustomed to the idea Christ died for all and that all can be saved on equal terms, that it is hard for us to understand what is so significant about this verse. These Jewish Christians had a lot of misconceptions and prejudices to overcome. Once the evidence was all on the table, the Jews realized “God” had “granted repentance unto life to the Gentiles.”

Conclusion

In God’s sight all races and nationalities can be saved (1 Timothy 2:3-4). He offers His salvation to whosoever will call upon His name (Romans 10:13). Therefore, you and I must respond to the truth of God’s Word and tell everyone about God’s saving grace.

All of us have prejudice and tradition. They can be small or large depending upon their basis. Our prejudice and tradition can often keep us from being an effective witness and servant of the Lord. It is foolish to hold to prejudice and tradition. God is far wiser and logical than any man. God is sovereign, we are not. Trust His Holy Spirit to work in your life and reveal biblical truth that will help you believe and be active in spreading the gospel at home and around the world.

Pray for the power of the Holy Spirit and the strength of our Lord to overcome prejudice and tradition (Philippians 4:13).

Amen.