

Grace Church
Roanoke, Virginia

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Lesson #27

ACTS
How to Deal with Prejudiced Christians
Acts 11:1-18

Are you a Christian who has prejudices? If you answer “no” then you are deeply deceived and know nothing of your own human nature. If your answer is “yes” then you are an honest Christian and you are probably battling through your prejudices, attempting to bring them under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

As Christians, we bring many of our cultural, religious and personal prejudices of our unsaved life over into our saved life and a good portion of our progressive sanctification is changing these prejudices so as to have a Christ-centered viewpoint of life. Most of us are under the power of prejudice more than we realize. Prejudice is nothing more than a form of legalism in which we think ourselves better than someone else. Prejudice is a superior attitude in which one feels himself a step higher than another person. It is all very subtle but prejudice comes out in a feeling of superiority of one race over another, or the superiority of one man over another because of education or class. It can also be religious prejudice where one feels himself superior spiritually to another man. Prejudice is with us all and it must be faced honestly before Christ and put to death when it raises its ugly head.

The overcoming of prejudice is one of the main themes in Acts 10 and 11. You remember how God desired that the gospel should be preached to the Gentiles. In order to open the door so the gospel could go to Gentiles, God gave two men a vision. Cornelius, a Gentile centurion, a devout man, a religious man, a praying man and a seeking man was given a vision and told to seek out a man named Simon Peter, who would give him a message by which Cornelius and his household would come to believe in Jesus Christ and be saved. As Cornelius sent three men to Joppa to find Simon Peter, Christ gave Peter a vision. He saw a huge sheet filled with unclean and clean animals and was told to kill and eat these animals. This whole vision was horrifying to Peter because a good Jew never ate unclean animals, but Peter, after some deep struggle, obeyed and went to Cornelius in Caesarea and preached to him, his family and friends the message of Jesus Christ and they were saved. The vision Peter saw not only told him that under the new dispensation it was right to eat unclean animals, but the deeper spiritual meaning was that the gospel of Christ was to go to unclean Gentiles and they could be made spiritually clean in Christ. Peter was learning to set aside his prejudices for the furtherance of Christ and His kingdom.

TOTALLY UNDERSTAND THE BIAS OF THE PREJUDICED CHRISTIAN (Acts 11:1-3)

“Now the apostles and the brethren who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.” -- The news that Gentiles were trusting Christ and claiming to be part of the Church spread all through Judea and it obviously reached the Christian headquarters in Jerusalem. Even in those days of no radio, television or telephone, news spread very rapidly from person to person. This, as you know, is not the best way to get all the facts since men tend to leave out important facts, stretch the truth and exaggerate the things they think are important. Apparently, all kinds of reports, some true and some false, were pouring into Jerusalem and the Apostles and brethren were stunned at what they heard.

“And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him saying, ‘You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.’” -- Peter came to Jerusalem to make a full report about what was happening to the Gentiles in Caesarea who were trusting Christ. Apparently, Peter wanted headquarters to hear the story from the horse's mouth because he knew there would be many who would oppose the gospel going to Gentiles and making Gentiles equal with Jews in Christ. Peter could understand since just a few weeks before he was of the same opinion as those who were opposing Gentiles in the body of Christ. The “circumcised” in this context must refer to Jews who were converted to Christianity but felt strict adherence to the Old Testament and Jewish traditions

were essential to be a true Christian. The “circumcised” may have opposed Gentiles becoming Christians at all. They wanted the gospel to go only to the Jews and they would not recognize any Gentiles who claimed to be Christians. However, the majority of these Christian legalists probably felt it was all right for a Gentile to trust Christ but in order to do so he would have to be circumcised and be a strict Law keeper. Even if Gentiles truly trusted Christ, they were looked upon as second class citizens in the Church. What really bothered the Jewish-Christians was that Gentiles were put on an equality with Jews in privilege and standing in Christ. Furthermore, these legalistic Christian-Jews were really upset because Peter ate with these Gentiles who had trusted in Christ and this was a major “taboo” for a Jew who believed in no socializing between Jews and Gentiles. These legalistic Christians, who thought themselves superior to Gentiles in Christ, began to dispute with Peter and caused great contention, but apparently Peter kept his cool.

These legalists, though wrong, had the right to argue with Peter. This shows conclusively that Peter was not the first pope, that he was not infallible and that he did not speak ex cathedra. These legalists contended with Peter and felt the freedom to do so. Had they thought he was a pope, they would have never disputed with him.

The reason Peter could tolerate these legalistic Christians was that he knew where they were coming from. He understood their background. He knew the source of their prejudices and he believed God would change their hearts when they had all the facts.

TELL THE FACTS FROM YOUR PERSPECTIVE (Acts 11:4-12)

“But Peter began speaking and proceeded to explain to them in orderly sequence, saying, . . .” -- Peter recounted the whole story as he understood it. He gave the simple, unaltered and unvarnished facts. He told the whole story and the whole truth. The temptation would be to bend the truth so as to appease the anger of the Christian legalists, but Peter told it like it was and let the chips fall where they might.

“I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, a certain object coming down like a great sheet lowered by four corners from the sky; and it came right down to me, and when I had fixed my gaze upon it and was observing it I saw the four-footed animals of the earth and the wild beasts and the crawling creatures and the birds of the air. And I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Arise, Peter; kill and eat.’ But I said, ‘By no means, Lord, for nothing unholy or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ But a voice from heaven answered a second time, ‘What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.’ And this happened three times, and everything was drawn back up into the sky.” -- Peter told of this supernatural vision and of his own personal struggle to overcome his own instilled prejudices against the Gentiles. Before this vision, Peter thought more along the lines of these legalistic Christians. He fought and struggled with the Lord Jesus over his bigotry, even to the point of saying, “Not so, Lord!”

“And behold, at that moment three men appeared before the house in which we were staying, having been sent to me from Caesarea. And the Spirit told me to go with them without misgivings. And these six brethren also went with me, and we entered the man’s house.” -- Peter told how God supernaturally brought the three men from Cornelius to the home where he was staying at the very same time the Holy Spirit told him they were arriving. This was a clear evidence of the providential working of God in Peter’s life.

Peter was a wise man to take six Christian-Jews along with him so they could be witnesses to the preaching of the gospel to Gentiles. Peter must have known that these suspicious, legalistic Christians in Jerusalem would never accept just Peter's word as to what happened in the house of Cornelius.

TELL THE FACTS FROM OTHER'S PERSPECTIVE (Acts 11:13, 14)

“And he reported to us how he had seen the angel standing in his house, and saying, ‘Send to Joppa, and have Simon, who is also called Peter, brought here; . . .’” -- Peter accurately told how God had given Cornelius a supernatural vision to seek out Peter to give him and his family a message.

When dealing with prejudiced Christians, we must state all facts accurately whether these facts deal with us or

others.

“... and he shall speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and your household.” -- Peter spoke words, gave a message, and people were saved. Cornelius and his household would never have been saved unless Peter gave them the facts of the gospel. Peter did not give Cornelius dogma, or traditions, or do a miracle - he spoke the living words of the gospel which pointed Cornelius and his household to the Living Christ.

Here we have a clear case of household salvation. God saved an entire family. Apparently this did not include infants because only those who heard the words of the gospel were saved. Infants cannot comprehend the message of salvation in Christ. Because God does save households, this is a biblical basis to claim the salvation of our children from God. There is no absolute guarantee our children will be saved, but it is reasonable to assume that if God saves households, we can claim our children for the Lord, believing God will save them in His timing.

TAKE A BIBLICAL BASIS FOR YOUR POSITION (Acts 11:15, 16)

“And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, just as He did upon us at the beginning.” -- Before Peter could even finish the introduction to his sermon, the Holy Spirit came upon these Gentiles and they believed in Christ. We know the Holy Spirit came upon them because they began speaking in tongues. There was, on this particular occasion, the outward manifestation of the coming of the Holy Spirit on these Gentiles when they believed. This is the same thing that happened to the Jews “at the beginning,” which is a reference to the Day of Pentecost. What happened to these Gentiles was not a second Pentecost, but it was like a second Pentecost because there were outward, physical manifestations of tongues.

Up to this point in the history of the Church, after seven or eight years, there had been three occurrences of tongues - the Jewish Pentecost in Acts 2, the Samaritan Pentecost in Acts 8 and the Gentile Pentecost in Acts 10 and 11. These tongues were manifested with each extension of the gospel and were a sign to unbelievers and Jews that God was with this new movement of Christianity. Tongues were not necessary to prove that one was saved or Spirit-filled, for there were multiple thousands in the New Testament Church who never spoke in tongues.

“And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, ‘John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’” -- Peter grounded the whole experience in the house of Cornelius to the inspired words of Christ. He appealed to Acts 1:5 where the Lord said, “You shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” What occurred on the day of Pentecost was the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit which unites all true believers in Christ with Christ so as to form the body of Christ, the Church. “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (I Cor. 12:13). There was only one Pentecost and what happened in Acts 8 and Acts 10 and 11 was merely an outgrowth of the Day of Pentecost, a follow through on Pentecost.

What Peter learned was that the Gentiles were spiritually baptized into Christ, forming the Church, and Jews and Gentiles share equal standing and privilege in Christ.

When dealing with Christian legalists, always appeal to the Scripture as your only authority, for a legalist must bow to the authority of God's Word if his faith is genuine.

Every Christian has been baptized by the Holy Spirit into Christ, forming the body of Christ. Every person who has believed in Christ has the permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit with equal standing and privilege in Christ. However, every Christian must appropriate the power of the Holy Spirit in his life by faith. He must be filled with the Spirit. He must walk in the Spirit. Every Christian has the Holy Spirit but now he must appropriate the power of the Spirit in his life through faith. If you are a Christian, you have the Holy Spirit's power residing in you. This power is yours, right now, today, for the taking. You have it! By faith, you must release this power!

TENACIOUSLY HOLD TO WHAT GOD IS DOING (Acts 11:17)

“If God therefore gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was

"I that I could stand in God's way?" -- Peter contended that the bringing of Gentiles into the Church was God's doing, not his. It was God's decision to break down the middle wall of partition which separated Jew and Gentile. It was God's sovereign choice which gave the gift of the Holy Spirit to both Jews and Gentiles who believed in Christ. Peter moved out with God. He could not maintain a barrier which God did not recognize. To recognize this barrier would be to oppose God.

Do we recognize the clear working of God when it happens and do we get in line with the moving of the Spirit? Do we pray for and encourage other groups of Christians when the Spirit is working for them? Are we so legalistic and separatistic that we cannot rejoice when God is doing something great in some other Christian's life but our own or in some other local church but Grace Church?

One of the best ways to silence Christian legalists is to do what God clearly commands in the Bible and do it with much love and understanding, for the legalist is bound by his own man-made rules and traditions.

TOLERATE THE PREJUDICED CHRISTIAN UNTIL GOD CHANGES HIS ATTITUDES (Acts 11:18)

"And when they heard this, they quieted down, and glorified God, . . ." -- When these Christian legalists received all the facts, they became silent. They were dumbfounded at what God was doing and they could not fight the pure facts. They were silenced, not by argument, not by harsh and angry words, but by the humble and patient presentation of the truth. Peter presented the facts, and finally the light broke in on these legalistic Christians. Their prejudice gave way under the truth. These legalists began to glorify God because of Gentile salvation. One of the obvious marks of a legalist is his sadness of countenance, but here we have them glorifying God. Sadness was turned to joy, and that is the first step in freedom from the slavery of legalism.

These legalists had to admit Peter was right. It took great faith and much maturity to admit they were wrong. This was a giant step forward for them. In fact, it is a giant step forward in any man's life when he acknowledges his errors when God shows them to him.

". . . saying, 'Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life.'" -- The Jews in Jerusalem, even the extreme legalists, began to see that God was giving repentance that leads unto eternal life to Gentiles as well as Jews. Repentance is necessary if a person is truly going to be saved, if he is truly going to have eternal life. Repentance means to change one's attitude, and this may be accompanied by godly sorrow for sin. What must we change our attitude about? We must have a change of attitude about God, ". . . solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 10:21); that is, we see God as the Creator and Sustainer of this world and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. We must change our attitude about Christ, "And Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'" (Acts 2:38); that is, remission of sins comes only through Christ. We are to see him as Savior, Lord, Master and King and we are to bow down and worship Him as God. We must also change our attitude about our sinful life style, ". . . but kept declaring both to those of Damascus first, and also at Jerusalem and then throughout all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance" (Acts 26:20); that is, a person is to feel a wrongness about his sin and is to turn from it with a desire to bring forth spiritual works consistent with repentance. "Therefore bring forth fruit in keeping with your repentance" (Matt. 3:8). Repentance, therefore, is a change of mind that leads to a change of heart that leads to a change of action and behavior. Repentance is to do an "about face" in attitude which will affect one's life style and produce a hatred of sin.

The old children's hymn defines repentance this way:

"Repentance is to leave
The sins we loved before,
And show that we in earnest grieve,
By doing so no more."

We have not preached the whole gospel if we have not preached repentance as well as believing in Christ for one to

be truly saved. We must call upon men to repent, to surrender their minds and wills to Christ. This is absolutely necessary for reception of eternal life.

How does one repent? He repents by changing his attitudes about God, Christ and his lifestyle. But where does the desire to repent come from? From God, for it is God who grants or gives repentance. We must repent and believe in Christ, but this faith and repentance is induced by the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit. God works efficacious, infallible and special grace in people so they can believe and repent. God does not supply everything in salvation except faith and repentance. No, He supplies everything, even faith and repentance, so that a man can say that salvation is of God and of no human act, merit or work. Every true Christian can shout from the housetop, "Salvation is of the Lord."

CONCLUSION

Have you repented and believed in Christ? You may believe He is the Son of God, being both God and Man, who died for you and rose from the dead, but have you repented? Have you changed your mind about Christ and your sinful lifestyle? Have you surrendered to Christ? Have you done an "about face?"

Repentance that leads to eternal life comes from God, and yet you are responsible to repent and believe in Christ. "Repent, therefore, and be converted that your sins may be blotted out" (Acts 3:19).