

Are You Standing In God's Way?

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[0 : 00] Continuing in the book of Acts, in Acts 11, we continue the narrative from the point of Peter having shared Jesus with Cornelius and his household.

And the Holy Spirit coming upon those who believed. That was certainly a miraculous and monumental event in the history of the church. One which we can be thankful for, knowing that the gospel has spread also to the Gentiles, of whom we are all beneficiaries of that truth.

The fact that the gospel has spread to the Gentiles, as we are all Gentiles. And what should have been a time of rejoicing over people being saved, we are going to see was a spark for a contentious disagreement upon Peter's return to Jerusalem.

So I'd like to read now Acts 11, verses 1-20. And actually 19 and 20 are kind of a crossover verse, because we're going to cover those next week as well.

That was not me this time. All right. Acts 11, 1-20. Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.

[1 : 31] So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.

But Peter began and explained it to them in order. He says, I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me.

Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. And I heard a voice saying to me, Rise, Peter, kill and eat.

But I said, By no means, Lord, for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth. But the voice answered a second time from heaven, What God has made clean, do not call common.

This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. And behold, at that very moment, three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea.

[2 : 40] And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, Send to Joppa, and bring Simon, who is called Peter.

He will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household. As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them, just as on us at the beginning.

And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?

When they heard these things, they fell silent, and they glorified God, saying, Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life. Verse 19, Father, thank you for your word.

I pray that you would give clarity and understanding, Lord, and in application. In Jesus' name, amen. So, this section here in chapter 11 is largely a repeat of a pretty substantial section in chapter 10.

[4 : 24] Right? It is exactly what Peter encountered, what we read about last week. And he felt it necessary to, you know, Luke felt it necessary to record this again.

So, the fact that such a large section of Scripture is repeated shows really the importance of this event in church history.

And so, Peter shared that. But I don't want to go so much in what it was that was seen and heard and, you know, what took place. We already covered that ground.

But as I was reading this text throughout the week and I was listening to it being read to me on my headphones, and as I was praying through this, I really felt, I felt led of God to see that in these verses, there are three areas that influence believers to find themselves standing in God's way

when it comes to the gospel ministry.

And so, ultimately, the title of this sermon is, Are You Standing in God's Way? And this is a question that I want you to be considering and thinking about as we go through the text.

[5 : 46] Are you standing in God's way? First, in verses 1 through 3, we see the role of tradition. We see the role of tradition as far as influencing people to stand in the way of God.

And this is specifically related to the response from the Jewish believers. So, clearly, news spread quickly about what happened in the house of Cornelius.

When Peter arrived back at Jerusalem, people already knew. I don't think they had Morse code. I don't think they had email or text messaging or anything like that.

Social media was still being developed. So, I don't know quite how it got there so quickly other than, well, people were amazed at what happened and brought the news back to Jerusalem.

And as we see, not everybody was as excited about it as maybe others, certainly as we are today. So, Peter arrives in Jerusalem.

[6 : 53] And he's met, it says, by the circumcision party. This is, I believe, speaking of Jewish believers. And they're not just common folk either.

These are, some of them are former priests. Remember in Acts 6, verse 7, it said, The word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem.

And a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. So, that's who's in this, the circumcision party. They're going to become important as the church continues to spread and grow through the Gentile lands, as they send their representatives, and they've got their own interpreters and teachers and such of the text, trying to encourage Gentiles to not just believe in Jesus, but also to adopt the law and follow the expectations there.

So, basically, to become a Jew first in order to become a Christian. To kind of put it in that term. So, that's who these people are. They're not quite a, I don't think they're quite a force yet, but it will be coming.

But, nonetheless, that's who it is. So, the circumcision party, we're talking about Jewish believers. And there's going to be a lot of them. Because the first members of the church were all Jews, converted Jews.

[8 : 23] Right? I mean, thousands. At least 5,000. So, that's who Peter's running up against when he gets back.

And it says that they criticized him. They criticized him, saying. The word translated criticize, it means to pass judgment through something.

Or to be thoroughly judgmental. Or to, you know, thoroughly investigate. And, like, just really dig deep and be particular. It also indicates that they were separating themselves from Peter in hostility. Certainly, in this, you know, being very critical and judgmental. And they were opposing him and disputing with him. And they said, how dare you? You went to the uncircumcision and you ate with them.

That is, that's no go. That's unacceptable in Jewish culture. And we see that, you know, with Jewish converts, you know, being the first converts in the church, there was much difficulty when it came to converts from outside of traditional Judaism.

[9 : 35] We've seen this already. In Acts 6, you remember the Hellenist widows were being neglected at the distribution? That's why you had Stephen and Philip and others who were selected as what we refer to as the first deacons.

Or commonly referred to as the first deacons. But they were selected to make sure that type of neglect doesn't happen. So the Hellenist widows. So these are, the Hellenists, if you remember, are, they are Jews, but they're Greek-infused Jews.

You know, they've kind of, they're influenced by Greek-Gentile culture, but they're still Jewish nonetheless. In Acts 8, we saw that the Samaritans, when they were receiving the word of God, it couldn't just be accepted on fact that it had spread to the Samaritans, who, remember, are half-breed Jews.

So they've got the, they've got some, you know, Jewish background, but they're not the traditional Hebrew Jews. No, the Hebrew of Hebrews types of people. So that was in Acts 8, and then, you know, remember Peter and John go down, and they're like, oh, yeah, what do you know?

They're receiving the gospel too. And that spread. And then now here in Acts 10, Cornelius and the Gentiles. And, you know, it's, it's just one upset, one upset person after another, or one upsetting

event after another, as these non-traditional, non-Hebrew Jews, or in the case of Cornelius, Gentiles altogether, are hearing and receiving the gospel and are being courted in fellowship, being afforded fellowship with the church.

[11 : 09] And the Jews, they have a, they have a particular pride, especially at this time. They, you know, they were privileged to have received the word and the covenants from God.

And they thought very lowly of Gentiles. They did not, it was not a good thing. And the difference between the Jews or Gentiles, they're, it's very great.

And they're different in just about every way, from what they ate and how they dressed and how they washed and how they worshiped. I mean, everything. It extended to, you know, art, academics, you know, language, social, customs, whatever.

Jews and Gentiles were very different. Jews referred to Gentiles as dogs. Some of you love your dogs. The Jews did not love those dogs.

So that's what's going on here is this, like they're very upset and like, oh, this is unacceptable behavior, Peter. And one thing to keep in mind is that being a Jew is not just a matter of religion, but it's also a matter of culture for them.

[12 : 20] Now, in cultural habits, they're very hard to break. Thus, for a Jew to intentionally spend time with a Gentile, even to eat with them, it was out of bounds.

Their tradition forbade that practice. And I'm probably not telling you anything you don't already know or have not already heard.

But as I was thinking about this text and I was thinking about that reality, almost 2,000 years later, we still struggle with the same kind of mindset the Jews had at this time. And by the way, we're the Gentiles.

And we're still struggling with this. See, people who have grown up in the church or been a part of it for a significant amount of time can get lost in their own holiness and righteousness.

We get lost in our own thought of our own sanctification and how we're better and different than others. We see that denominational differences, for instance, can keep us from fellowshiping with other believers.

[13 : 26] Political and cultural differences can keep us from engaging people on matters of eternal importance. Our opinions tend to get in the way of God's truth pouring out from us toward others.

The Apostle Paul made a point to address this deep-rooted problem that Jewish believers had in his letter to the church at Ephesus. If you want to turn over there with me at Ephesians 2, chapter 2, and you'll see him address this very matter.

And I hope and pray that we will take to heart the reality that the role of tradition has in influencing our gospel ministry.

Ephesians 2, verse 11 through 22 says, Therefore, remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands, remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

But now, in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

[15 : 19] And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one spirit to the Father.

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. So Paul, in addressing the reality of the Gentiles being far off and the Jews being closer to God because of having received the word and the covenants and all that, he's saying, look, you who once were far off have now been brought near.

You who once were not part of the commonwealth of Israel and privy to the blessings that God was giving, you have been brought close by the blood of Jesus.

And it is through the blood of Christ that that dividing wall of hostility between those who are near, the Jews, and those who are far off, the Gentiles, that dividing wall has been torn down, destroyed, because of what Jesus accomplished on the cross and has brought you together and is creating one man out of the two groups.

[16:51] And that's the one body of Christ through the blood of Christ. So there's this bringing in, there's this unity that's supposed to be taking place and happening.

And you can see based on what happened in Acts 11 why Paul would need to speak to this very issue because it was a deep-rooted problem that Peter faced upon his return from Cornelius' household.

But that's the role of tradition that brought the party of the circumcision, these Jewish believers, to be standing basically in the way of God.

Because if it was up to them, Peter would never have gone to Cornelius. And they would never have preached the gospel to the Gentiles. Next, in verses 7 through 9, you see the role of self-righteousness that influences us to stand in the way of God.

And this is based on Peter's response to the vision. I touched on it a bit last week. He says, And so, as I mentioned last week, this vision is a vision about the church.

[18:19] And that you had clean animals, you had unclean animals. Clean animals representing the Jews, the unclean animals representing the Gentiles. And Peter said, told to go kill and eat. And like, Oh, Lord, I can't do that.

That's unclean. And in reality, God said, No, no. Don't call unclean what I've called clean. And it was at that point that the knock was on the door.

Right? And it was Gentiles who were calling on Peter to come and preach to them. It was getting Peter prepared. And so he had to share about this vision that he had.

With these believers because they didn't have the vision. Why, Peter, did you go? Well, let me tell you why. Because I saw this thing and God told me to go with these people without misgivings. So the point here, it's similar to the previous one.

In that religious upbringing greatly shaped Peter's view of himself. He said, Lord, I've never, I've never eaten anything unclean. I've never, nothing unclean has ever entered my mouth.

[19:23] But it also shows that in his own estimation, he could not possibly do as God was instructing him to do. He understood he was having a vision. He understood, you know, what God was telling him to do.

Peter, get up, go kill and eat. And he said, I can't, Lord. No, by no means. He uses a strong, the strongest negative he can in the Greek to express the fact that he said, no, absolutely not. He told God, no. Because of his own self-righteousness. Because of the righteousness that he held based on the law.

When you consider the concept of meeting people where they're at, it often doesn't look pretty. And it does not coexist with holiness and righteousness.

For instance, you know, meeting somebody where they're at, it could be someone who's involved with one person after another, after another, seeking a relationship that's going to bring fulfillment.

[20:31] I read a research not long ago, I think it was a couple weeks back, that mentioned it's socially acceptable today in our culture for someone to have seven or eight different sexual partners before settling down.

And I won't even go into the numbers that were provided by individuals who were particularly spoken to about this and asked about it. Yeah. So, I mean, that's commonly acceptable.

And, you know, that might be somebody that you have to engage with. Somebody that maybe you don't look approvingly at that part of their life. Or it could be an alcoholic whose testimony is that they return home every Friday evening in a drunken stupor.

That was my good friend, my best friend in Florida. That was his grandfather who lived two doors down from where I lived. Every Friday evening, he would waste his check at a bar and come home drunk and can't, you know, incomprehensible.

It was just awful, awful situation. And I wasn't saved at the time and I knew this wasn't good. It could be a person who's addicted to drugs and living on the street. This came up yesterday.

[21 : 49] So I was at a, I had the privilege of attending a bachelor party yesterday. And we did a lot of driving around. So we carpoled and I was in a, I was in a carpool with Dave Chavette, one of our York County sheriffs and his sons who were both former students of mine.

And we were driving in Portland. We drove past one of the, the homeless compound places there. You know, all the tents and everything. People just sprawled out there.

And we're going in that part of town where that is prominent. And Dalen, Dawson's younger brother and his mother are in their, their church.

They attend the point up in Portland. One of the ministries the church has is once a month they go in those areas. They, they have groups of people who go in those areas at like 11, 12, one o'clock, you know, at night.

And to go and share the gospel and to meet people there in that area. And it's not good. You know, I mean, there are people, they've mentioned that they've seen people who basically just got done shooting heroin passed out right there with a needle sticking out of their arm.

[23 : 07] But that's meeting people where they're at. And it's not pretty. And it's not, it doesn't coexist with our thoughts of holiness and righteousness.

It could be someone who chooses not to take care of their home or a personal hygiene. And, and we're called to minister to them or to witness to them. So the point that's being made, it's not to, you know, to pull out the depravity of man and put it on full display and give you every example I can about it.

It's to pull out the reality is that if we're going to meet people where they're at because they are apart from Christ and they are without hope in this world, if we're going to meet them where they're at, it's going to make you feel uncomfortable and it's going to, it's going to knock right up against your thoughts of holiness and righteousness and your sanctification and your self-righteousness.

And you're going to be tempted to think of how much better you are than they when in reality apart from Christ you're not. whatever the case may be, whatever the person is, no matter what their situation is, it's not far-fetched to find ourselves thinking so highly of ourselves that we're not willing to reach someone where they are at.

And our own, our own cleanness is preventing us from having contact with the unclean in our society. But I want to point to you to Philippians chapter 2 verses 5 through 7 where it says, have this mind among yourselves or in yourself which was also in Christ Jesus who though he was in the form of God did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied himself by taking the form of a servant being born in the likeness of men.

[24 : 56] He was God, holy, righteous, but he didn't count that as something to be grasped and held on to. Rather, he gave that up a bit and he took on the form of man and lived in depravity.

I mean, his holiness far surpasses our own ascribed holiness and he took it upon himself to engage the world of sin and depravity for our sake. Are we willing to do the same for our neighbor's sake? What's the role of self-righteousness in your thinking? Is it causing you to stand against God? And finally, in verses 19 and 20, I mentioned we're going to look at this next week, but I felt it important to include in the context of this sermon.

You see that, no, those who are scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch speaking the word to no one except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists, also preaching the Lord Jesus.

So you see this here. This is the role of old habits. The role of old habits. So this verse, as I said, is what we're going to look at a little more next week.

[26 : 28] I'll probably spend less time on these two verses than I am now. But it still brings to the forefront an area in which we can find ourselves standing in God's way. Some of those who scattered due to the early persecution in Jerusalem, remember that in Acts 9, persecution that started and was intense under Saul, who eventually would become Paul.

And these people, they went to Phoenicia, Phoenicia's work Tyre and Sidon, it's about 100 miles, 150 miles north of Jerusalem. They went to Cyprus, which is an island off of the Phoenician coast in the Mediterranean Sea.

They went to Antioch, which is about 300 miles from Jerusalem. They scattered, they went. And despite the great distance that they traveled, the people they sought to reach were only the Jews.

They preached to only the Jews. until verse 20 when it says that others would branch out and talk to the Hellenists, these Greek-infused Jews. But we're still talking about Jews.

It did not matter what culture they were going into. They maintained their mindset of preaching to Jews only. Jews were the only ones allowed to hear the gospel of hope and mercy.

[27 : 46] They did not consider what could be different to the detriment of the Gentiles they might have engaged with. They didn't think of the fact that they could speak to Gentiles, that they could share the gospel with someone other than Jews.

For local churches today, unwillingness to change how we do things can keep us from reaching our communities where they are at. being so set in our ways of doing things and not being sensitive to cultural changes and adjusting to them can cause churches to lose their influence and ultimately their light in the community.

Once the last time you heard someone say, I've got a quote here. Once the last time you heard someone say, we've always done it this way. It was probably said with good intention because it's generally synonymous with if it ain't broke, don't fix it.

However, resting on your laurels is often subterfuge, a last-ditch effort to remain relevant. Simply relying on past achievements can lead to stagnation.

You think I would read that, maybe I read that out of some like How to Grow Your Church book. No, that was actually taken from a Forbes article called The Most Dangerous Phrase in Business.

[29 : 06] We've always done it this way. And what that tells me is that the world understands that you can't just sit back and rest on your laurels.

You can't just sit back and do things always the same way and expect the same results. You have to adjust. You have to change. You have to, well, be observant.

Not speak to just the Jews, but understand that the gospel is for all people in all contexts everywhere. So, there's no cut and dry answer to how to go about ministering the gospel.

The opportunities and ways in which it is approached are as various as the personalities of people in the pews. Who you speak to, your context, your opportunities, it's very different.

You know, me, my opportunities versus any one of your opportunities is going to look very different. And then, if I pit any of you two against each other, it's going to look very different.

[30 : 15] But the question that's been facing the church since the beginning is, are you standing in God's way? Our God is big and He has a big vision for the gospel ministry.

Matthew 28, 19, go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. All nations, all nations do not think alike.

They do not have the same culture, beliefs, background, influences in and of themselves. In our small-mindedness, is our small-mindedness causing us to step in the way of the gospel going into the world?

Is our small-mindedness causing us to step in the way of the gospel going into Shapley, community, Sanford, Acton, Limerick, Newfield?

Are we being influenced by the role of tradition in our lives, refusing to reach out to those we are told not to reach out to? Are we being influenced by the role of self-righteousness in our lives, refusing to reach out to those in desperate situations with the hope that they need?

[31 : 25] Are we being influenced by the role of old habits in our lives, refusing to explore new or different approaches of reaching people? Let's take the time to evaluate our hearts and our minds in light of these questions and pray that the Lord would soften us and mold us into the image of Christ, who did not see the holiness of God as something to be grasped and held onto, but gave it up to insert himself into humanity.

as dirty and sinful and depraved as we are. And may we come to a place in our lives where we can say, as the Apostle Peter has said in this passage in Acts 11, who was I that I could stand in God's way?

Let's pray. Lord, there's some challenging texts, there's some challenging thoughts. Lord, I pray that you would give your mercy and grace.

Lord, you'd pour out your spirit on this church, that you would challenge us, mold us into the image of Christ, who gave up his own holiness and righteousness to dwell among sinful man.

Lord, who gave up his heavenly dwelling to be among the quagmire of sin. But Lord, he did so without sin. He did so in perfect righteousness.

[32 : 56] And he did so for our sake. And he did so for the sake of those around us, those we engage with, those we see. Lord, I pray for the witness of the body here at First Baptist Shapley. Lord, that we would have a witness that brings you honor and glory, that our words and our actions would not be scrutinized to be a reproach to your name, but Lord, that our actions and our words would be seen as consistent in light of the gospel of Jesus who gave himself for all people. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.