

The Rest of the Story

Studies in the Book of Acts

***“We will move the world not by criticism of it, nor conformity to it –
but by combustion within it of lives ignited by the Spirit of God”***

Vance Havner

Text

Acts 11:1-18

Topic

Legalists threaten to add the keeping of
the Law of Moses to God’s free gift of salvation

Title

The Silence of the Legalists

Acts 11:1 Now the apostles and brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God.

Acts 11:2 And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him,

Acts 11:3 saying, "You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them!"

Acts 11:4 But Peter explained *it* to them in order from the beginning, saying:

Acts 11:5 "I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, an object descending like a great sheet, let down from heaven by four corners; and it came to me.

Acts 11:6 When I observed it intently and considered, I saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air.

Acts 11:7 And I heard a voice saying to me, **'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.'**

Acts 11:8 But I said, 'Not so, Lord! For nothing common or unclean has at any time entered my mouth.'

Acts 11:9 But the voice answered me again from heaven, **'What God has cleansed you must not call common.'**

Acts 11:10 Now this was done three times, and all were drawn up again into heaven.

Acts 11:11 At that very moment, three men stood before the house where I was, having been sent to me from Caesarea.

Acts 11:12 Then the Spirit told me to go with them, doubting nothing. Moreover these six brethren accompanied me, and we entered the man's house.

Acts 11:13 And he told us how he had seen an angel standing in his house, who said to him, 'Send men to Joppa, and call for Simon whose surname is Peter,

Acts 11:14 who will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved.'

Acts 11:15 And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning.

Acts 11:16 Then I remembered the word of the Lord, how He said, 'John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'

Acts 11:17 If therefore God gave them the same gift as *He gave* us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?"

Acts 11:18 When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, "Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life."

Introduction

Some ways that you can tell you might be a legalist:

1. You might be a legalist if... You believe water baptism is necessary in order for a person to be saved.
2. You might be a legalist if... You believe that observing the Saturday Sabbath is necessary in order for a person to be saved.
3. You might be a legalist if... You believe that speaking in tongues is necessary in order for a person to be saved.
4. You might be a legalist if... You believe that observing certain sacraments is necessary in order for a person to be saved.

What is legalism? Legalism is the strict or excessive conformity to a legal code or set of rules. It is expressed by Christians in two ways:

1. By attempting to base salvation on the performance of good works or on the strict observance of rules and regulations.
2. By imposing rules on yourself and others that are not based on clear biblical teachings or principles.

It's easy enough to prove from Scripture that a person is saved by grace *alone* through faith *alone*. In every generation, however, there are those who come along and attempt to **add** something to salvation by grace through faith.

Water baptism is a good example. There are groups that teach water baptism is necessary in order for you to be truly saved. If you're not water baptized; or if you were baptized in a manner they feel was

improper; **then according to them you are not saved!** For them salvation is by grace through faith **plus** water baptism.

It is these 'plusses' that men add to God's free gift of salvation that constitute legalism and encourage legalistic behavior.

The apostle Peter was confronted by the original legalists. They were Jews who had received Jesus Christ as their Savior but still held to a strict adherence to the Law of Moses. The idea that a Gentile could be accepted by God without first converting to Judaism was unacceptable to them. Once a Gentile did convert he would be expected to obey the Law of Moses. He would be expected to be circumcised, restrict his diet to those foods listed in the Bible, perform ritual washings, and do no work on the Sabbath.

Whether it's these first century issues or others like those I mentioned earlier, it's important we silence the legalists. Peter did it by giving a gracious testimony that glorified God. So will we.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Reveal The Grace Of God In Your Serving, and #2 Revel In The Glory Of God In Your Speaking.

#1 Reveal The Grace Of God
In Your Serving
(v1-3)

Luke was the author of the Book of Acts. He wasn't typing-out pages on his laptop or even scribbling on yellow pads. He was writing on expensive scrolls. Yet he kept telling this same story over-and-over, devoting a full sixty-six verses to it.

The conversion of Cornelius is so important. We might take it for granted that "whoever will believe" can be saved. But in the first century it would have been easy to assume that a person must also keep the Law of Moses in order to be truly saved.

That is exactly what a contentious group in Jerusalem believed. They were waiting for Peter's return in order to confront him.

Acts 11:1 Now the apostles and brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God.

Six Jewish believers from Jerusalem had accompanied Peter to Caesarea. It seems they preceded Peter home and told what had happened at Cornelius' house.

Acts 11:2 And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him,

All the believers in Jerusalem were Jews and would therefore have been circumcised from birth. **Those of the circumcision** is a description of Jews who believed that a person was saved by grace through faith *plus* keeping the Law of Moses.

Acts 11:3 saying, "You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them!"

Peter's actions ignored the traditional separation of chosen Jews from Gentiles as common and unclean. Who was he to set aside the Law of Moses and centuries of traditional interpretation?

We'll see in the following verses that he was a servant following His Lord. **It was God who set aside the Law and the traditions.**

What I want to point to now is that Peter was revealing the grace of God in His serving. This whole story is full of grace:

1. Peter had been in Joppa staying with Simon the tanner. Even though Simon was a Jew, most Jews had few dealings with him. A tanner came into contact with dead animals and with blood. It made him ceremonially unclean according to the Law of Moses. For Peter to stay in Simon's house was huge. It spoke of the grace of God on many levels. God was revealing to Peter that grace superseded the Law of Moses. He no longer had to worry about its ceremonial restrictions.
2. The vision Peter received three times revealed the grace of God. The Gentiles who had been considered unclean by the Law of Moses were now declared clean by God. Again grace superseded the Law.
3. When Peter arrived at Cornelius' house he ministered to them, revealing God's grace though it was considered unlawful.

4. God visited the Gentiles gathered there with the grace of salvation and the gift of His Holy Spirit.

The prerequisite to silencing any legalist is to be serving God by revealing His grace in every situation. Grace does not violate the Law; it elevates it by superseding it in ways that speak of the love of God toward His creatures.

You're probably not a legalist but we all have a tendency to act legalistically. We make up our own mind about how to conduct ourselves in certain areas then project our convictions on to others.

Maybe you have come to believe that a Christian cannot go to the movies or watch TV; or that a Christian woman cannot wear make-up or pants or cut her hair or be in Church with her head uncovered. Maybe you believe a Christian cannot get a tattoo or a piercing.

If I hold others to my own personal standard in an area where the Bible gives them liberty then I am acting legalistically. I want instead to be serving God in a way that reveals His grace.

Check yourself for areas of legalism. Learn to enjoy your convictions as part of your relationship with Jesus without projecting them on to others.

- being changed to bring change -
At the same time you should be careful about your liberty in Christ. All things may be lawful for you, but they are not necessarily good for you. Certain behaviors may be OK but hinder your progress as a Christian. You are under command to never stumble another weaker believer by flaunting your liberty or encouraging them to participate in an activity that violates their conscience. You are to love them enough to limit your liberty.

You should err on the side of revealing grace towards others and simultaneously practice strong discipline towards yourself.

If you want to silence legalists you must first be revealing God's grace. Then you must,

#2 Revel In The Glory Of God In Your Speaking (v4-18)

Peter was called to account for his actions:

Acts 11:3 saying, "You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them!"

Peter had violated the Law of Moses. This was a personal attack.

I mention the personal nature of it to point out the sweet grace in Peter's speaking. He did not defend himself. He did not even argue with the legalists. He simply gave a testimony that revealed in the glory of what God had done.

It was a perfect response because you can't argue with God and hope to prevail!

Peter recites the events we've by now become very familiar with:

Acts 11:4 But Peter explained *it* to them in order from the beginning, saying:

Acts 11:5 "I was in the city of Joppa praying...

You will be much more apt to reveal the glory of God in your speaking to others if you've been spending time speaking to God in prayer.

Acts 11:5 "I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, an object descending like a great sheet, let down from heaven by four corners; and it came to me.

Acts 11:6 When I observed it intently and considered, I saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air.

Acts 11:7 And I heard a voice saying to me, '**Rise, Peter; kill and eat.**'

Acts 11:8 But I said, 'Not so, Lord! For nothing common or unclean has at any time entered my mouth.'

Acts 11:9 But the voice answered me again from heaven, '**What God has cleansed you must not call common.**'

Acts 11:10 Now this was done three times, and all were drawn up again into heaven.

In a previous study I explained to meaning of the vision:

1. The sheet represented the Church.

2. The clean animals were the chosen Jews, previously under the Law of Moses.
3. The unclean animals were the common Gentiles, previously excluded by the Law of Moses unless they converted to Judaism.
4. All of them were now equal and chosen.
5. All were in the Church and would be taken to Heaven when Jesus returned.

The vision repeated **three times**. The number **three** was significant to the Jews. The Law of Moses required there be three witnesses to a matter. God was giving His own witness to superseding the Law of Moses but did so within the parameters the Jews were familiar with. *What grace on His part!* He was amending the Law, so to speak, and showing its original intent.

The Jew was never to be so separated that Gentiles were hated and despised. Jews were meant to evangelize. Isaiah 42:6 reads,

Isaiah 42:6 "I, the LORD, have called You in righteousness, And will hold Your hand; I will keep You and give You as a covenant to the people, **As a light to the Gentiles,**

Peter continued:

Acts 11:11 At that very moment, three men stood before the house where I was, having been sent to me from Caesarea.

Acts 11:12 Then the Spirit told me to go with them, doubting nothing. Moreover these six brethren accompanied me, and we entered the man's house.

Acts 11:13 And he told us how he had seen an angel standing in his house, who said to him, 'Send men to Joppa, and call for Simon whose surname is Peter,

Acts 11:14 who will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved.'

Notice the supernatural elements:

1. God sent an angel to visit Cornelius.
2. God gave Peter a vision.
3. At exactly the moment God gave Peter the vision, Cornelius' men were at the gate seeking Peter.

This was *never* Peter's idea! He seemed to have broken the Law of Moses, but he could not be proven guilty. God's fingerprints were all over this supposed 'crime scene.' The spiritual forensics all pointed to Him.

Acts 11:15 And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning.

No altar call. No urging. No pleading. God did this in the hearts of these Gentiles. The Gospel Peter shared was the power of God for salvation to whoever will believe.

Acts 11:16 Then I remembered the word of the Lord, how He said, '**John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.**'

Acts 11:17 If therefore God gave them the same gift as *He gave* us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?"

God broke down the barriers; God superseded the Law by His grace. All Peter had done was make himself available and then follow God's lead.

Acts 11:18 When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, "Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life."

The word for **silent** can be translated either *held their peace* or *bring peace*. Thus we can't be sure if these guys were *grudgingly* silent or if they were *gladly* silent.

Either way **they became silent** at least for the time being. Really the only thing that can silence legalists is the glorious testimony of the grace of God undeniably at work.

You may never change the mind of someone who believes you must be water baptized to be saved; or that you must keep the Sabbath to be saved; or some other 'plus' that they have added to salvation by grace alone through faith alone. But you can somewhat silence them.

Let me give you the bottom line. The legalists were silenced when they heard that the Gentiles had received the baptism with the Holy Spirit. It was that experience they could not argue.

If you and I are baptized with the Holy Spirit we will reveal the grace of God in our serving and we will revel in the grace of God in our speaking. We will have joy unspeakable and full of glory that cannot ultimately be refuted. There will be something supernatural about our testimony that will expose the legalists as acting in ways to hinder rather than help spiritual progress.

Applying the Word...

If you are a believer... Let God reveal to you either areas of legalistic thought OR areas in which you are sinning by hiding behind your liberty in Jesus Christ.

Not a Christian? The Gospel is the power of God to salvation to whoever will believe!

