



GETTING INSIDERS TO GO OUTSIDE

SERIES: *LIFE UNLEASHED*

Acts 11:1–18

20th Message

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May 1, 2016

Having grown up in all Jewish neighborhood, it's no secret to those who know me what my favorite movie is... *Fiddler on the Roof*. It opens with Tevye singing the movie's theme song: "Tradition"!

A fiddler on the roof. Sounds crazy, no? But in our little village of Anatevka, you might say every one of us is a fiddler on the roof, trying to scratch out a pleasant, simple tune without breaking his neck. It isn't easy. You may ask, why do we stay up there if it's so dangerous? We stay because Anatevka is our home ... And how do we keep our balance? That I can tell you in one word ... **Tradition.**

Because of our traditions, we've kept our balance for many, many years. Here in Anatevka we have traditions for everything... how to eat, how to sleep, even, how to wear clothes. For instance, we always keep our heads covered and always wear a little prayer shawl... This shows our constant devotion to God. You may ask, how did this tradition get started? I'll tell you—I don't know. But it's a tradition ... **Because of our traditions, everyone knows who he is and what God expects him to do.**¹

We come today to a tense crossroads in the book of Acts—that moment when those who represent change become a threat to those who hold to long-standing traditions. The battle continues in every generation. On one side are the visionaries and forward thinkers who long to be relevant to the world around them, and on the other, are those who place a high value on truth and the traditions of the past and are wary of assimilation with the world. As Bruce Waltke notes, "Observing rites not only separates the faithful from the unbeliever but also safeguards them from assimilation into the world around them."² The battle between the two parties can be fierce, especially when one side believes their traditions have been ordained for all time.

In Israel's case, God called her out from the nations to be set apart, distinct from the pervasive idolatry around them, so that she might be a light to the nations. To inculcate the notion of purity and protect the nation from assimilation, Israel was commanded to make fine distinctions between what was clean and unclean through a *radical symbolization*³ in every area of their daily lives—from how they managed their crops, how they dressed, and what kind of food they ate. So you can imagine how difficult it would be to suddenly shift gears and throw the door wide open to outsiders, who have no interest in maintaining those distinctions.

The struggle continues today. For those of us who make the Scriptures our authority, it is not always easy to determine what was culturally conditioned and what was intended to be normative, whether it be concerning days of worship, styles of music, modes of baptism, administering the Lord's supper, the roles of men and women in leadership, or differing modes of church government.

In our text today, Luke offers us an example of a way forward that keeps pace with God's Spirit, while preserving the unity of the body in the bonds of peace (Eph 4:3).

I. Challenge by the Traditionalists (11:1–3)

Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them." (Acts 11:1–3 ESV)

F. F. Bruce writes,

The news of Peter's revolutionary behavior, in entering a Gentile house at Caesarea, reached Jerusalem before he himself did. The Western text expands v.2 to read that he stayed in Caesarea 'for a considerable time' and that 'he did a great deal of preaching throughout the regions' around Caesarea after that.⁴

However long it took, the news of Peter's acceptance of the Gentiles into full membership of God's people apart from the requirements of the Jewish laws aroused great alarm in Jerusalem, especially from those of the "circumcision party," a hardline group within the Jerusalem believers. Their concern was not without warrant, for earlier Stephen and the Hellenist believers had stirred such a violent reaction from the Jews for what seemed to be an utter disregard for Jewish law, that it resulted in Stephen's martyrdom and the expulsion of believers from Jerusalem. Now if word gets out that a leading apostle is following suit and associating with Gentiles with no regard for Jewish laws, the repercussions can only get worse. As Bruce notes, their fears are valid, for "It was not long after this that Herod Agrippa I, appointed king of Judea by the Emperor Claudius in A.D. 41, executed the apostle James and then, 'when he saw that it pleased the Jews,' arrested Peter as well (12:1ff.)."⁵ By the time Peter returns home, he will be walking into a hornet's nest. Immediately upon his arrival, those who were particularly zealous for the law condemn him and demand to know why he would dare enter the house of uncircumcised men and eat with them.

Place yourself in Peter's shoes—returning home after a life-changing mission, you are overflowing with elation, like an explorer who has just discovered a new continent. You can't wait to share your joy, but before you can even open your mouth, you are confronted by criticism and attack. How would you respond? Would you take it personally and become defensive going on the attack? Or would you cower and cave? What would you do? The old Peter would have taken a sword and cut off someone's ear, and then later denied he ever went into Cornelius' home. But now we discover how God's Spirit has transformed him to take the more mature path and in the end he is able to get the insiders to go outside.

II. Setting Forth the Story (11:4-17)

A. Peter's disturbing vision

But Peter began and explained it to them in order: "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. (vv. 4-9)

After years of walking with Jesus, Peter learned how Jesus effectively used "stories" to subvert entrenched ways of thinking that were blinding people to the advancement of God's kingdom. In Peter's retelling of the events we can see how he carefully reshapes it to calm the fears of his hearers. He is careful not mention that he was staying in a tanner's house (an unclean occupation), which would suggest he was already wrestling with tensions in his theology. To avoid any confusion, he begins by identifying himself as one them, a loyal and devout Jew who was observing one of his regular times in prayer, and in that context of devotion he experienced an encounter with God.

From that neutral starting point he invites them to travel with him on a divinely orchestrated journey that led him to a place geographically and theologically he never dreamed he would go. There is not an ounce of defensiveness or argumentation in his presentation. It is simply a *setting forth* of the facts of what God did, just as Israel's poets set forth the *mighty deeds* of God in the book of Psalms.

First there is the unexpected vision of the great sail being let down from heaven from its four corners, which upon closer examination contains an array of clean and unclean animals, to which he adds to their horror, "wild beasts." As Peter is mesmerized by what he sees, he is further jolted by what he hears, a divine voice commanding him to "Rise, sacrifice and eat!" The thought of eating anything unclean provokes his revulsion. His response is adamant and his choice of words similar to that of the prophet Ezekiel, "Ah, Lord God! Behold, I have never defiled myself. From my youth up till now I have never eaten what died of itself or was torn by beasts, nor has tainted meat come into my mouth" (Ezek 4:14).

But the divine voice persists and will not be silenced. The command is repeated a second time and then a third, each concluding with the emphatic announcement, "What God has made clean, do not call common." The fact that the vision and Peter's refusal is repeated three times removes all doubt that Peter was becoming lax in his devotion to Israel's dietary laws. It is going to take more divine prodding to get Peter to cross that bridge.

B. The arrival of the messengers and the unexpected journey

And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. 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 (words) by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' (vv. 11-14)

Just as the curtain closes on Peter's vision, Cornelius' messengers arrive at the gate. God doesn't give Peter any time to sort out the meaning on his own. The Spirit interprets the vision for him. He commands Peter to go with the messengers and warns him to *make no distinction*, suggesting they might be Gentile. The same verb was used by Luke to describe their *criticizing* of him in verse 2. Peter doesn't mention his conversation with the messengers, where he learned that the one sending for him was not just a Gentile, but a Roman centurion (like fraternizing with the enemy); nor does Peter let on that he invited them into his home to be his guests.

Though Peter was obedient to the Spirit's voice, he shows that he was still wary. Knowing the gravity of the situation, he felt the necessity to take six Jewish believers with him as eyewitnesses (three times the number the Law required! Deut 17:6) to what God was doing, and *here they are* present for you to see. Thus having seen the vision, heard the divine voice and obeyed the Spirit's command, *we entered into the man's house*.

Once they arrived, their host "announced" (*apaggellō*) that he had seen an "angel" (*aggellos*) stand in his house. Thus a holy angel entered into the man's house before we did, and told him, "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." Peter does not mention Cornelius' name nor the fact the God was acting in response to the prayers of a Roman soldier. (Did Peter think this was too much for the theology of the "party of the circumcision?") And once again Peter's street address—666 Tanner Ave (i.e. the tanner's house)—is missing. The last phrase "he will declare to you words by which you will *be saved*, you and your household," is indeed what happened, but was knowledge that came after the fact. All that the angel told Cornelius was that God had answered his prayers, and therefore Cornelius discerned that when Peter arrived, he had come with a message from God (10:33).

C. The gift of the Spirit confirming the Lord's word

"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.'" (vv. 15-16)

Now with his audience on the edge of their seats, Peter reaches the climax of his narration, summarizing his sermon in six words (in Greek) "as I began to speak." He has skillfully diminished his contribution to a bare minimum, in order to enhance the surprising initiative of the Holy Spirit—"The Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning." As he witnesses the event he remembers Jesus' words at his ascension, "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." Forty days they waited, and then it came, the Spirit poured out without measure on the day of Pentecost. It was *the beginning* of God's new creation on earth. The fact that Peter notes that, "the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning," suggests Peter views this event as a second Pentecost. What a far cry this is from the critics' accusation that Peter had defiled himself. He has reframed the event as being a privileged witness to the *second Pentecost*.

D. The question

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? (v. 17)

Looking back over Peter’s journey, there is no doubt that every step and every turn was divinely planned, orchestrated, interpreted and implemented. It was the Lord, insisted Peter, who gave him the vision and who explained its meaning. It was the Spirit who commanded him to go with the messengers to Caesarea and enter Cornelius’s house with *no hesitation*. And it was God who took the initiative by baptizing Cornelius and his companions with the Holy Spirit, confirming the words spoken by Jesus at his ascension as Lord. As Peter stands under this torrential downpour of God’s Spirit, he asks his critics “who was I to be able to hinder God?” It would be as foolish as trying to stop a tornado.

III. Response: Criticism gives way to praise

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.” (v. 18)

Having listened intently to Peter’s story, the critics become silent, and silence gives way to glory. Peter had very little to do in this story, it was God’s story through and through. With one accord they give glory to God that he has given the gift of repentance—that is turning away from a life of idolatry and turning towards the One true God and Savior—which leads to eternal life. Repentance is not feeling sorry for my sins and vowing to give them up. It is the divine gift of being able to forsake all other gods and turn to the one true God, Jesus Christ as Lord, and it is now offered to the nations.

This is a wondrous story chalked full of implications for our life in the Spirit.

IV. Getting Insiders to Go Outside

1. Expand your vision: The necessity to keep up with what God is doing

The Spirit of God is always on the move doing new things. Therefore our walk of faith “is our often breathless attempt to keep up with the redemptive activity of God, to keep asking ourselves, ‘What is God doing, where on earth is God going now?’”⁶ Whenever life becomes routine and comfortable, we must beware that the enemy may be lulling us to sleep. Go outside, break out of the rut, open yourself up to the fresh air of the Spirit’s leading and allow God to surprise you with the gift of going to places you never thought you’d go and embracing people you never thought you’d meet. It all begins with prayer.

2. Champion the cause of outsiders

Though God is always on the move and doing new things, “the gospel is not about the solo efforts of one enlightened and progressive leader who takes it upon himself to baptize gentiles.”⁷ The kingdom is not just about making converts, it’s about adoption into a worldwide family that is rooted in Israel’s patriarchs and is fed and nurtured at the same table of the apostles and prophets. If God is on the move, he wants the whole church on the move together, not in isolation. It takes courage for Peter to face criticism and champion the cause of Cornelius, a Roman. But it is crucial for the health of the church. It takes humility for the traditionalists to let down their guard and take the time to listen to someone’s story. So we find with

each new advance of the Spirit in Acts that God’s servants return to Jerusalem to give account to the leadership to make sure the whole church is up to speed with the new work of God.

The charts below represent outsiders, whose cause the church needs to champion, from those within our ranks closest to home (Jerusalem), to those who are outside our immediate geographical or cultural context (Samaria), to those at the ends of the earth. The first represents a sampling of those Jesus and the apostles championed; in the second, those who need an advocate to champion their cause today.

Championing the Cause of Outsiders

	Alienation	Depravation	Oppression
Jerusalem	Prodigal Son	Famine	Homeless Christians
Samaria	Samaritan woman		
Ends of the earth	Cornelius		Roman Slaves

Championing the Cause of Outsiders

	Alienation	Depravation	Oppression
Jerusalem	Women, singles divorced, gays, other cultures	Homeless inmates in prison	Abuse in the home & workplace
Samaria	Illegal aliens	East Palo Alto	International Blvd Oakland
Ends of the earth	Refugees	Liberia	Mumbai

3. Being diligent to preserve the unity of the body in the bond of peace (Eph 4:3)

And the reverse may also be true, it takes humility for visionaries and innovators to submit their experiences to godly leaders. Although God is always doing new things, N. T. Wright warns that,

There is equally a danger in mere human innovation. (Not all bright ideas are good ideas; not all good ideas are from God.) There have been, in the last century or so, many movement which have claimed to be spirit-driven, but which have resulted in all kinds of shameful behavior. There is a constant need, particularly among Christian leaders, to be anchored in prayer, humility and deep attention to the word of God and particularly (as here) the words of Jesus.⁸

Throughout the book of Acts we see that there is a steady flow of leaders who are sent from home base to nurture, strengthen and unify new church families into one body.

4. The need for perseverance: Tradition dies hard!

Though this was a monumental advance for the church, we mustn’t be naive that the battle is over and that everyone is going to be happy with the decision. Traditions die hard, especially when they involve giving up one’s privileged status. Richard N. Longenecker suggests this may be “one reason why the church soon found it

appropriate to have as its leader the Pharisaically trained and legally scrupulous James the Just rather than one or more of the apostles.”⁹ The pressure to preserve the tradition became so strong that even Peter, at one point, caved into the pressure and separated himself from the Gentiles “fearing the circumcision party,” drawing many of the Jews with him (Gal 2:11-14). Had the apostle Paul not publicly confronted him, the church would have suffered an incurable wound and disastrous division.

There is a cost to holding to tradition when God moves on. In the movie *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye lost one of his daughters. Perhaps we may aspire to fly light like the Solar 2 which recently flew over the Golden Gate Bridge from Hawaii, solar-powered. We can go anywhere in the world on the wings of the Spirit, but only if we travel light and we leave our baggage behind—all our cultural baggage or ideas of how we dress, or cherished rituals or our traditions. We can embrace anybody as we follow the Spirit’s lead. That’s my prayer for us as a church.

1. Sheldon Harnick, lyrics, Jerry Bock, music *Tradition* (1964)
2. Bruce K. Waltke with Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology, an Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 454.
3. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 281.
4. F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 233.
5. Bruce, *Acts*, 234-35.
6. William Willimon, *Acts, Int* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 99.
7. Willimon, *Acts*, 99.
8. N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone: Part One, Chapters 1-12* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 174.
9. Richard N. Longenecker, *Acts* (EBC 9; ed. Frank E. Gaebelin and J. D. Douglas; Accordance electronic ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), n.p.

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