

Chapter 27: Repentance that Leads to Life

Acts 11:1–18

On the surface, the narrow concerns of those “of the circumcision party” (vv. 2–3) seem a million miles away from our lives today. Why would anyone who has received the grace and mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ begrudge that same gospel from coming to other groups of people? Yet, the church in every age struggles with unnecessary boundary keeping that would seek to keep those who are not “our people” from coming to Christ for salvation. Alternately, some would seek to remove all boundaries whatsoever, avoiding the necessity of “repentance that leads to life” (v. 18) as the only way to come to Christ. Against both of these errors, this passage offers us a critical principle for reaching the farthest-off people with the gospel in order that they might come to Christ by repentance and faith: *Christ’s Holy Spirit alone makes you clean of guilt and shame.*

Ceremonially Unclean (Acts 11:1–3)

Jesus had commissioned his apostles to be his witnesses not only in Jerusalem and Judea, but to Samaria and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Nevertheless, certain Jewish believers in Judea become concerned when a report reaches them about Peter’s mission to the household of Cornelius. Unsurprisingly, the report spread quickly: “Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God” (v. 1). We should not be too quick to judge these brethren, since Peter himself had struggled three times to obey God’s call to eat (formerly) unclean foods in his vision before going without hesitation to the house of a Gentile. In the mind of those Jewish ceremonial laws, faithfulness to God had always required separation from the unclean Gentiles. As Calvin summarizes, “they did dream that it was impossible that the Gentiles could be mixed with the sons of Abraham, and be made one body with them, (the ceremonies being taken away,) but that there should be great injury done to the covenant of God.”¹

Even so, Luke informs us that criticisms against Peter’s actions emerged from only one group within the larger church: “So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, ‘You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them’” (vv. 2–3). Literally, the phrase means “those of the circumcision”; however, the sense clearly identifies not all those who were circumcised, but only the group of people “who contended for circumcision as being necessary for membership in the Christian Church.”² Specifically, they imagined that “that Gentiles need to observe the law, keep away from unclean food, and be circumcised to show their participation in the covenant (Gen. 17:9–14...).”³ Again, we should not be too critical against their perspective, since “at this point Christianity was seen as a movement within Judaism. It followed that if Gentiles became Christians they also became Jews by so doing and should thus undergo the normal procedure for

¹ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:457.

² Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 438.

³ Bock, *Acts*, 406.

converts to Judaism.”⁴ At this stage, many of these will be satisfied by Peter’s account that follows (v. 18); however, the same term “of the circumcision” will appear in Galatians 2:12 to describe the Judaizer legalists who, in a formal, thoroughgoing way, “mixed the gospel with the old Jewish ceremonial legalism by contending that this latter alone was the true gospel.”⁵

One important thing to note in this passage is that Peter does not brush off these believers’ question (or, perhaps, their criticism). They make a pointed critique of a practice, arising from their interpretation of Scripture. Even the great Apostle Peter himself is not permitted to brush the question off by an appeal to absolute authority. As Calvin writes, “because the Lord will have prophecy judged, his servants must not refuse this condition, that they prove themselves to be such as they will be accounted.”⁶ Indeed, so far, even those believers from Samaria had been circumcised, and their complaint against Peter’s action “was perfectly correct—if, indeed, the Mosaic regulations were still in force; then the only way into the church was through the synagogue.”⁷ Therefore, Peter’s response is exemplary, not only for what Peter says, but also in the gentle, patient, correcting spirit with which he speaks (2 Tim. 2:24–26).

What God Makes Clean (Acts 11:4–15)

Peter’s testimony is noteworthy not only for how closely it follows the narrative Luke provided for us in the previous chapter, but also for the small differences. Bruce notes several:

In vv. 5 and 6 there is a vividness in Peter’s description of the great sheet which contrasts with the comparative colourlessness of the third-personal account in Ch. 10:11f. Whereas Ch. 10:12 distinguishes three types of animals, Ch. 11:6 distinguishes four, adding “wild beasts” to “fourfooted beasts of the earth” (*cf.* Gen. 1:24f.). The version of Peter’s refusal in v. 8 is even closer than the version in Ch. 10:14 to Ezekiel’s protest, when directed to eat unclean food: “Ah Lord Jehovah! behold my soul hath not been polluted;...neither came there abominable flesh into my mouth” (Ezek. 4:14).⁸

These changes are important in two ways. First, the fuller descriptions of different animals in his vision further underscore the absolute abolition of food laws dividing the clean from the unclean. Every single animal has now been counted clean, without exception. Second, by echoing Ezekiel’s complaint, we see a clear difference from the applicability of those provisions in the Old Testament to this new reality. Whereas the Lord altered his instructions so that Ezekiel might avoid ceremonial uncleanness (Ezek. 4:15), the Lord persists three times in calling Peter to eat from all the animals of

⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, 266.

⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 438.

⁶ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:459.

⁷ “To appreciate this point we must remember that until this time all the believers, even those in Samaria, were recruited from the circumcised. To bring in uncircumcised men, to enter into full fraternal relation with them in their own houses and at their own tables was a revolutionary innovation.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 439.)

⁸ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 234–35.

the earth. What had been a legitimate concern in the Old Testament is no longer a concern that should hinder Peter.

In connecting his vision of the animals with the arrival of the messengers from Caesarea, Peter ties together the two aspects of the original complaint: not only had Peter *gone* to uncircumcised men, but Peter also *ate* (i.e., ate unclean food) with them (v. 2). Yet, “the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house” (v. 12). Polhill observes that, “For Peter it was the heart of the matter. There are no unclean people. God accepts Gentiles.”⁹ When we hear Peter relate Cornelius’s testimony, we come to another difference from the original narration of the event in Acts 10 by the addition of the phrase, “by which you will be saved, you and all your household” (v. 14).¹⁰ Salvation would not require strict adherence to Jewish ceremonial law (neither circumcision nor food laws). Rather, salvation would only require faith in “the message” that Peter would proclaim.

Cleansed through Repentance that Leads to Life (Acts 11:15–18)

In v. 15, Peter draws an explicit comparison to their experience at Pentecost with what happened among the Gentiles: “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them *just as on us at the beginning*” (v. 15, my emphasis). Then, Peter describes the event as a baptism of the Holy Spirit, echoing Jesus’ explanation that had prepared the disciples for Pentecost (Acts 1:4–5). Polhill writes, “Jesus’ prediction was fulfilled for the apostles at Pentecost; for Cornelius and his fellow Gentiles it was fulfilled with the coming of the Spirit at Cornelius’s house. Certainly for Peter it was a Gentile Pentecost.”¹¹ For Peter, the logic of this similarity was undeniable: “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). Indeed, Jesus had called the Holy Spirit “the promise of the Father” (Acts 1:4), and the Gentiles had received the same gift/promise as the Jews had, without distinction. If God had given his own Holy Spirit to dwell in these Gentiles, on what basis could anyone continue to separate anyone who had shared in common faith in the Lord Jesus Christ?

The final verse is encouraging: “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). We should note two important points from this reaction. First, the church at Jerusalem rightly attributes the *cause* of the great blessing that had fallen upon the Gentiles as “repentance that leads to life.” As Peterson notes, this constitutes “a radical reorientation of allegiance and devotion....Not simply repentance of particular sins, but a rejection of everything that hinders the reception of salvation through faith in Christ is meant.”¹² In modern times, some have appealed to the story of the inclusion of the Gentiles to justify the inclusion in the church of those who persist in various kinds of sexual immorality; however, the Gentiles were included by abolishing *ceremonial* requirements since they had repented from their *moral* failures unto the life extended to them in the salvation of Jesus Christ. Those who insist today that the church may rightfully receive anyone who persists in homosexuality, transgenderism, or other kinds of sexual immorality have failed to recognize that the Gentiles were brought into the church through *repentance* unto life. The ceremonial law has been

⁹ Polhill, *Acts*, 267.

¹⁰ Schnabel, *Acts*, 510.

¹¹ Polhill, *Acts*, 267.

¹² Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 349.

abolished, but “the moral law doth forever bind all.”¹³

Second, this controversy is representative of many kinds of controversies that frequently arise in the church. Regardless of the subject, controversies are always an opportunity for the whole church to come to a greater understanding of what God has revealed by his Word. Therefore, the church should not attempt to settle controversies with a naked appeal to the church’s authority, since God alone is Lord of the conscience. Rather, the church should always settle controversies upon the Word of God. Calvin puts this point well:

The end doth show that those were not moved with malice which did contend with Peter; for this is an evident sign of godliness, in that being thoroughly instructed touching the will of God, they cease forthwith to contend. By which example we are taught, that those are not to be despised who, being offended through unadvised zeal, reprove any thing wrongfully; but that their consciences must be appeased by the Word of God, which are troubled by error, and that their docility is tried at least thus far forth. As touching us, we do hereby, in like sort, learn whereupon our judgment must depend, namely, upon the sole and simple beck of God.¹⁴

May the Lord help us to continually reform our thinking according to God’s Word. Thus, one of the great mottos of the Reformation was, and remains, *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei* (“The church reformed, always reforming according to the Word of God.”)¹⁵

Discussion Questions

1. Why did the report of Peter’s ministry among the Gentiles spread so quickly (v. 1)? Who challenged this decision (v. 2)? What do we know about those associated with them from the rest of the Bible? What were their concerns (v. 3)? To what degree were those concerns legitimate? How did Peter himself struggle with those concerns (see Acts 10)? What kinds of boundary-keeping questions prevent you from bringing the message of Christ to those far off today?
2. What do we learn from Peter’s willingness to answer these questions that had challenged his actions? How should leaders especially learn from Peter’s eagerness to explain his own actions in light of the clear Word of God? What did God’s Word say about formerly unclean food (v. 7)? Why was the food permissible (v. 10)? What did God’s Word say about associating with Gentiles (v. 12)? What was the Word of God that the Gentiles needed to hear (v. 14)?
3. What did the Holy Spirit do among the Gentiles (v. 15)? How similar was this action to what the Jews had experienced on the Day of Pentecost (v. 16; cp. Acts 1:4–5; 2)? How had the Holy Spirit

¹³ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 19.5.

¹⁴ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:463.

¹⁵ R. Scott Clark, “Always Abusing Semper Reformanda,” October 14, 2024 <<https://learn.ligonier.org/articles/always-abusing-semper-reformanda>>. Accessed February 13, 2026.

settled the question of whether Jewish ceremonial laws still applied in the New Testament church? What was the response of those of the circumcision party (v. 18)? What can we learn from their willingness to be corrected in light of the clear teaching of God's Word?

4. How do you feel unclean because of your sin and distance from God? What does this passage teach about the necessity of repentance—rather than ceremonial law-keeping—to find the cleansing that your soul seeks? What does this passage teach us about the needs of other people who feel so far distant from the Lord? How might you repent from your unwillingness to reach them with the gospel of Jesus in order that they might find repentance that leads to life?