

## Acts 11:1-30 ~ Teacher's Lesson Circumcisers Criticize Cephas

**Introduction:** Today we are going to discuss accepting any believer into our church that God sends us, church leadership, and the importance of giving to those who bless us spiritually.

**Review:** In our last episode, we saw how Peter preached the Gospel to a Roman Centurion named Cornelius, who subsequently believed, along with his whole household. Then, to everyone's amazement, the Holy Spirit came upon the Gentiles and they spoke in tongues, just as the Jews had done at Pentecost. It was a Gentile Pentecost.

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**\*\*\*\*How did Peter silence the criticism of the circumcision party (1:1-18)?** To silence his critics, Peter patiently explained how the Gentiles were baptized by the Holy Spirit exactly as the Jews had been at Pentecost. Since God had accepted them, how could Peter not accept them?

### **1. Why did the circumcision party think it wrong to eat with uncircumcised men (11:2)?**

See 10:28. The real concern is not that they were uncircumcised, but rather that they did not follow Jewish traditions that had been added into Mosaic dietary regulations. Being uncircumcised was merely symbolic of the fact they were ceremonially unclean.

**Insight:** There will always be those within the church who are immature. This causes them to sometimes major on the minors.

**Joke:** "Aside from that Mrs. Lincoln, how did you like the play?"

**Example:** Do you remember how, in the movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*, the dour bank examiner arrived just as George Bailey got news that his brother had been awarded the medal of honor for saving a whole troop transport full of men? The unmoved bank examiner replied something like, "I suppose they do those things", and then said, "I hope the bank had a good year".

**Reality Check:** When newly saved people come into the church, they often still smell of smoke. Older believers, who are still immature, can be legalistic and judgmental: "I don't want to go to church with divorced people!" "I don't want my kids to see him—he's covered with tattoos!" "Did you see that outfit she wore to church?" "Look at all those new people; they're taking over!" "His hair is too long!" "I think she smokes!" "Did you hear the language he used when he gave his testimony?!" "I saw him coming out of the liquor store!" "Those are all public school kids!"

**Application:** The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing! It was not the apostles and brothers (11:1) who criticized Peter. It was the circumcision party, an immature subset of the whole church (11:2). We must be careful not to let a few rotten apples spoil the whole barrel! New believers have to be protected from the circumcision party!

**What verb did Luke use in 11:4 to describe how Peter responded to the circumcision party?** Peter “explained” it to them.

**2. Peter didn’t tell them off. He didn’t ignore them. He didn’t lecture them. He didn’t pull his apostolic rank. He patiently “explained” (11: 4) it to them. What does this tell us about Peter’s leadership style?** See 2 Timothy 2:24-25. Peter was not a heavy-handed dictatorial church leader. He was a servant leader who patiently explained the situation to his mistaken critics.

**ESV 2 Timothy 2:24-25** The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone . . . enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness.

**Why do you suppose God said the same thing three times in the sheet vision (11:10)?** Evidently God will keep repeating a lesson until we learn it!

**3. What was the theological significance of Peter’s sheet vision (11:5-17)?** The answer lies in 11:17. Even though it is true that Mosaic dietary restriction are no longer valid in Jesus, the lesson of the sheet concerns the tearing down of the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile (*ethnos*, 1:18). Thus the Spirit fell on both the Jews (at Pentecost) and the Gentiles (at Cornelius’ house).

**ESV Ephesians 2:14-16** He [Jesus] 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 and 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.

**What is the answer to Peter’s question (1:17)?** Peter knew not to stand in God’s way!

**4. How might you apply Peter’s question to your own life? (1:17)?** Though this originally applied to Jews and Gentiles being joined together in Christ, it applies today to every situation: black and white, Chinese and Japanese, Arab and Jew, English and Irish, whatever.

**Secondary Application:** Mosaic dietary laws are now obsolete.

**ESV Mark 7:18-19** "Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.)

**Water Baptism:** With Cornelius, Spirit baptism (which is salvific) came first, then water baptism (which is symbolic) came second, 11:15-17, 10:44-48. Water baptism is an outward sign of an inward act. Water baptism never saved anybody and is not necessary for salvation. Water baptism is not part of the Gospel. For example:

**ESV 1 Corinthians 1:17** Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel . . .

**Baptism Application:** Water baptism has been called the first act of obedience in the Christian faith. Someone who believed in Jesus but who was not water baptized was unheard of in the New Testament. To refuse water baptism is a sign you might not have experienced Spirit baptism.

**How did the circumcision party respond to Peter's explanation (1:18)?** God granted them the ability to see the error of their ways! They matured in Christ and accepted the Gentiles.

**Application:** We all have wrong thinking about the things of God. We must be open to changing our thinking. **Examples:** It has been said that we are all born Arminian; it is only through the study of Scripture that we realize the truth about predestination. Other common examples: the differing roles for men and women in ministry, your duty as a Christian spouse, end-time events, baptism, the gifts of the Spirit, etc.

**Repentance: The circumcision party declared that God had granted repentance to the Gentiles (11:18). What is repentance (11:18)?** It is from *metanoia*, "a change of mind, a change in thinking." The Gentiles changed their minds about sin and about the Roman gods. They turned from their sins and put their faith in Jesus as Jehovah God.

**5. Predestination: Based on 11:18, when a person repents, why is that?** See *John 6:65*. It is because God grants repentance! In and of ourselves we cannot come to Jesus (*John 6:65*).

ESV **John 6:65** . . . no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.

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**\*\*\*\*How did Barnabas and Saul get a year-long teaching gig in Antioch (11:19-26)?** So many people turned to the Lord in Antioch that the Jerusalem church sent Barnabas there to disciple them, and Barnabas called Saul over to help him.

**How did the Gospel come to be preached in Antioch (11:19)?** See *7:54-8:4*. Jewish Christians who had been forced out of Jerusalem by persecution preached the Gospel in every place in which they found themselves scattered.

**Geography (11:19):**

- Phoenicia was a coastal area along the Mediterranean in modern Lebanon.
- Cyprus is an island in the extreme north-east of the Mediterranean Ocean, about 65 miles west of the Syrian coast and 40 miles south of the Turkish coast.<sup>1</sup>
- Antioch is a city in Turkey, about 300 miles north of Jerusalem. Its modern name is Antakya.<sup>2</sup>

**6. Why was it that they spoke the Gospel to no one except Jews (11:19)?** They left Jerusalem before the Gentile Pentecost and so were of the mindset that salvation was only for the Jews (or that a Gentile had to convert to Judaism before coming to Jesus).

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<sup>1</sup> "Cyprus", NationsEncyclopedia.com.

<sup>2</sup> *New Bible Dictionary*, 51, 257, 935.

**Who was it who first spoke to the Hellenists (11:20)?** The Jewish believers originally from Cyprus and Cyrene spoke to the Hellenists.<sup>3</sup>

**7. Why would Jewish believers from Cyprus and Cyrene have been more open to speaking to Hellenists than Palestinian Jewish believers were (11:20)?** They were from Gentile areas and a lifetime of contact with Gentiles so were less prejudiced against them.<sup>4</sup>

**Application:** A church should reflect the ethnic diversity of the area around it.

**According to 11:21, why did so many Hellenists turn to the Lord?** It was because God's hand was with the evangelists.

**8. Based on 11:21, what should you remember when you share the Gospel with someone?** We need always realize and remember that it is the Lord who converts people. A successful witness is one who shares Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit and leaves the results to God. God predestined the end (salvation) but He also predestined the means (the foolishness of preaching the Gospel).

**Review: What did the Jerusalem church do when they heard about the conversions in Antioch (11:22-23)?** They sent Barnabas to help.

**9. What application could be drawn for our church from 11:22-23?** Older churches should send and fund mature brothers to exhort and teach new Christians in pioneer areas.

**Personal Application:** *How are you involved in helping take the Gospel worldwide? Do you pray for evangelists in other countries? Do you give money to missions? Do you ever take missions trips?*

**10. Verse 23 states that Barnabas was "glad" when He saw God's grace. Why is that significant?** Barnabas was glad the Gentiles had come to Jesus and been incorporated into the church. He was open minded and ready to let go of Jewish prejudice (tradition).

**11. Of all the people that could have been sent, why did the Jerusalem church send Barnabas (11:22-23)?** See 4:36-37, 9:326-27, 11:24a. Barnabas had a proven track record as a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.

**Application:** Every believer should have it as His goal to be like Barnabas: good, full of the Holy Spirit, and full of faith. *Does that describe you?*

**According to 11:24b, what happened after Barnabas got to Antioch?** A great many (more) people were added to the Lord. *How cool is that?!*

**Why did Barnabas leave Antioch (11:25)?** He realized he needed reinforcements, so he scooted over to the city of Tarsus to get Saul to come help him.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "Hellenists" is here a term that referred to Greek-speaking Gentiles (the Greek word for Greek is *hellenisi*).

<sup>4</sup> Cyrene was a city in North Africa (modern Libya).

**12. Why do you suppose Barnabas went in person to get Saul rather than simply sending for him (11:25)?** See 9:23-30. Paul had moved to Tarsus to escape death threats. He was living there under an ancient Federal Witness Protection Program! Perhaps Barnabas feared Saul might not come, considering the previous death threats in Damascus and Jerusalem. Perhaps Paul was discouraged.

**What did Barnabas and Saul do in Antioch for the next year (11:26)?** They met with the church and taught.

**Application:** There is no substitute for good teaching when the church meets. Jesus charged the apostles to make disciples, “teaching them to obey” all Jesus commanded. Any church where teaching is not taken seriously is a weak church.

**13. Why is it noteworthy that, in Antioch, the disciples were first called Christians (11:26)?** It is noteworthy because for the first time, those who believed in Jesus were not identified with the Jews. Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire (Rome and Alexandria were bigger).<sup>6</sup> Most of these converts in Antioch were Gentile. To a Gentile, “Christ” was not recognized as a title, but would have been heard as an odd name.<sup>7</sup> Thus those who believed in Jesus Christ were understandably called “Christians”.

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**\*\*\*\*What occasioned the new Christians in Antioch to help the older believers in Judea (11:27-30)?** When a famine came upon Judea, the disciples in Antioch determined to send them relief.<sup>8</sup>

**ESV 2 Corinthians 8:13-15** . . . as a matter of fairness your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. As it is written, "Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack."

**Fairness Application:** Prosperous churches should share their resources with less prosperous churches as a matter of fairness.

**14. How is 11:27-30 an example of Romans 15:27 being carried out? See 1 Corinthians 9:11.**

**ESV Romans 15:27** . . . if the Gentiles have come to share in their [the Jews'] spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings.

**Application:** We owe a material blessing to those who have blessed us spiritually.

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<sup>5</sup> Tarsus is a city in modern Turkey, about 75 miles north of Antioch.

<sup>6</sup> *ESV Study Bible*, 2105.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce, 241.

<sup>8</sup> Claudius (11:28) was the Roman Caesar from A.D. 41 to 54 (*New Bible Dictionary*, 215).

**ESV 1 Corinthians 9:11** If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?

**15. Why were prophets going from Jerusalem to Antioch (11:27)?** *See 11:22.* These prophets were doubtless part of a continuing effort by the Jerusalem church to help the new church in Antioch.

**16. Since this famine was worldwide, why were the disciples in Antioch in any position to send help to the disciples in Judea (11:29)?** Evidently what Agabus predicted was a series of local famines that happened throughout the Roman Empire during the reign of Claudius (A.D. 41-54).<sup>9</sup> In this instance, Antioch was not impacted, but Judea was. Josephus indicated that this Judean famine happened around A.D. 46.<sup>10</sup>

**17. Based on 11:29, what determined how much each person gave?** Each gave in according to his ability, or in proportion to his means. Even if every person gave a tithe, those with more wealth would give more than those near the poverty line: Ten percent of one million is a whole lot more than ten percent of thirty thousand.

**18. Why do you suppose both Barnabas and Saul carried the donation to Jerusalem (rather than just one of them)?** Although no reason is stated, it was likely for accountability's sake and to be completely above board. No doubt Barnabas and Saul were absolutely trustworthy, but going together would remove any accusations or suspicions.

**Who received the relief money on behalf of the church (11:29)?** It was sent to the elders.

**Polity Insight:** The existence of elders in the Jerusalem church shows a development in its organization. Perhaps the apostles appointed elders to oversee the Jerusalem church so the apostles could be freed to minister to the universal church. That the elders dealt with the funds for dispersal ran parallel with the earlier practice of laying donations for the needy at the apostle's feet, 4:34-35. Perhaps the deacons of Acts 6 had been promoted to be elders.<sup>11</sup>

### So What?

**19. Big Picture: What is the purpose of this chapter? Why did Luke write it?** *See 10:34-35, 11:26, Galatians 3:28-29, Revelation 5:9-10.* This was a pivotal turning point in the history of Christianity. The Jerusalem church's acceptance of uncircumcised Gentiles as full, card-carrying members was key to the advance of the Gospel worldwide. Rather than remaining a Jewish cult in a remote area of the Roman Empire, Christianity could now grow to become a worldwide movement consisting of people from every conceivable background. That they were called Christians rather than Jews flags a new chapter in the church's expansion.

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<sup>9</sup> *ESV Study Bible*, 2106.

<sup>10</sup> Marshall, 216.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

ESV **Galatians 3:28-29** There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

ESV **Revelation 5:9-10** . . . by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom . . .

**20. What can we learn about helping other believers from the relationship that developed between the church in Jerusalem and the church in Antioch (11:19-30)?** Existing churches are obligated to help establish new churches, and those churches with more material resources should help those who have less resources.

**Of all the saints in Jerusalem, the church sent Barnabas to help the new church in Antioch. Barnabas was described as a good man who was full of the Holy Spirit and full of faith (11:24). He was glad for God's grace to the Gentiles and he was able to exhort them. (11:23). What needs to change in your life to make you more like Barnabas?**  
*Rhetorical.* To start with, If you are a woman, obviously you would need to become a man (joke). Are you glad when you witness other people getting saved? Do you encourage and exhort others in their faith? Are you a "good" person? Are you full of the Holy Spirit? Are you full of faith?

\*\*\*\* = ask this question before reading the text aloud. Doing so will cause focus.

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