

Getting Called on the Carpet

Devotional

I have a book on creative thinking that is titled, *A Whack on the Side of the Head* (by Roger von Oech [Warner Books]). We all get into mental ruts and often need a whack on the side of the head to jar us into new and better ways of thinking. Also, we all bring a lot of wrong-thinking baggage with us into the Christian life. If we are to grow into being more like Jesus, every once in a while God has to take a 2x4 and gently whack us on the side of the head to help us change our thinking.

We've seen how the Lord whacked Peter in preparation for his going to the house of the Gentile centurion, Cornelius. No Jew would think of going into a Gentile home, much less eating with Gentiles, for fear of contracting ceremonial defilement. The Lord Jesus had clearly told the apostles to go into all the world to preach the gospel to every creature. But in their centuries-old Jewish way of thinking, the disciples thought that Jesus meant for them to go and preach to Jews who were scattered all over the world. But the thought of preaching the gospel to pagan Gentiles and of those Gentiles coming to salvation without first becoming religious Jews was simply unthinkable.

But now the unthinkable has happened for Peter. He wisely had taken six Jewish believers with him to Cornelius' house, who witnessed what God was doing. They all saw the Holy Spirit fall upon the Gentiles in just the same way as He had fallen upon the believing Jews on the Day of Pentecost. But now Peter goes back to Jerusalem and the Jewish believers there call him on the carpet because he "went to uncircumcised men and ate with them" (11:3).

A lot of pastors just skip over these verses, since they repeat the story of chapter 10. But whenever Scripture repeats something, we need to take notice. There is an important lesson here that we might be prone to miss. Our text shows how God changed the thinking of these Christians on a matter that was essential for the spread of the gospel. If the Gentiles had been required to adopt Jewish rituals and ceremonies to be saved, the gospel would not have spread around the Gentile world as it did, and it would be a different "gospel." The Holy Spirit inspired Luke to include this story twice so that the Jewish believers especially would see that salvation is not a matter of adopting Jewish rituals, but rather of God saving people of every race through faith in Christ alone.

But these Jewish Christians needed to change their thinking. The story shows how God began that process, and how He works to change our thinking:

To accomplish His sovereign purpose in salvation, God has to change the wrong thinking of His people.¹

¹ Sermon by Steve Cole found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-27-how-god-changes-our-thinking-acts-111-18>

Open it

1. Describe a time when someone confronted you to your face. What was it about? How did you respond? Were you able to resolve the conflict?

Read it

Acts 11:1-18

Explore it

2. Who heard that the Gentiles had been converted?
3. How was Peter received when he came back to Jerusalem?
4. How did Peter respond back to his fellow believers?
5. What was the response of the Jerusalem believers after hearing from Peter?

Apply it

WHERE DID WE LEAVE OFF?

In Acts 10 we find Peter in Lydda and then in Joppa, where he stayed with a tanner named Simon who lived by the sea. It may be that Peter never made it back to Jerusalem, or he may have made this trip which brought him to Joppa after a return to Jerusalem. Nevertheless, Peter is in Joppa when he receives his vision from God, informing him emphatically and repeatedly (three times) that what God had cleansed he was not to regard as unclean. The meaning and application to this vision soon became clear, as the three emissaries from the house of Cornelius arrived at the door to Peter's house. The Spirit directed Peter to accompany these Gentiles and not to be "uptight" about doing so.

Upon his arrival, Peter found a large group of Gentiles gathered at the home of Cornelius, all waiting to hear the words which God was promised to speak through him, words which would inform them of what they must believe in order to be saved. Before Peter had even gotten warmed up, the Spirit fell upon all the Gentiles who had gathered. Peter had already given them the simple gospel, and they believed it. The Spirit fell upon them so that a kind of "second Pentecost" occurred. Since these folks were now saints, Peter commanded that those who had been baptized by the Spirit be baptized with water. As God had witness to their salvation (in their baptism of the Spirit) so they must bear witness in water baptism. After a short stay with these saints, Peter headed home to Jerusalem.²

6. God had just done a mighty work through Peter at Cornelius' home. What second-guessing or mixed emotions might have muted Peter's excitement?

7. When have you made the most of an opportunity only to second-guess your own efforts?

8. What things in Acts 10:34-48 could Peter look back upon that might calm his concerns?

GIVING HIM A PIECE OF OUR MIND

But Peter was not nearly as welcome in Jerusalem as he had been in Caesarea. There were a number of circumcised Jews who viewed Peter's actions as a direct affront to Judaism and a sinful concession to the heathen Gentiles. Thus, when we come to chapter 11 we find this angry group confronting Peter, demanding an explanation for his actions. That is what Peter will give them.³

² Sermon by Bob Deffinbaugh found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/peter-called-carpet-acts-111-18>

³ Ibid.

9. What would cause the Jerusalem believers to be upset about what Peter had done?

10. What types of things can lead believers to either be disappointed or mad that a certain person or people group has responded to the gospel?

Reports began to reach their ears about what Peter had done and what had happened. Predictably, these reports were fragmentary accounts, for Peter's full account would satisfy their concerns. The parts of the story which did reach the apostles and brethren must have been those which were of greatest concern. They had heard that the Gentiles had been saved, that they had received the word of God (verse 1). They had heard too that Peter had gone to them, and that he had actually eaten with them. They were shocked. They were amazed. They were angry. They were waiting for Peter, so to speak, with their hands on their hips, ready to scold him the moment of his return. In their minds, Peter had a lot of explaining to do, and there was little chance he could talk his way out of this blunder. He had gone too far.⁴

11. It seems that the believers in Jerusalem were responding to part of the story. Why are we so prone to jump to conclusions when we only have part of the story?

Any story sounds true until someone tells the other side and sets the record straight (Proverbs 18:17, TLB).

12. When have you experienced the truth of Proverbs 18:17? How can jumping to conclusions cause harm to our relationships?

⁴ Ibid.

Read James 1:19–20. What tangible steps can we take so that we don't jump too quickly to false conclusions?

MISS A LITTLE....MISS A LOT!

While jumping to conclusions was the start of their problems, Pastor Steve Cole lists three different ways that wrong thinking was hindering the Jerusalem believers from seeing the conversions of Cornelius' Gentile household as a part of God's will.

Mistake #1—HUMAN TRADITIONS ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN SALVATION.

Peter had seen this remarkable response, as a whole house full of Gentiles had believed in Christ and were saved. But rather than rejoicing over what God had done, these saints were grumbling about the matter of Peter's eating with Gentiles! The Old Testament did not forbid Jews from having social contact with Gentiles, although it did specify what sorts of foods they could eat. But these Jewish Christians were more concerned about Peter violating kosher laws than they were happy about the Gentiles getting saved! But before we try to remove the mote in their eye, let's deal with the beam in our own eye! We often do the same thing. We elevate certain traditions or ways of doing things above the salvation of lost souls. We are all for seeing young people getting saved, but they had better make sure that they not delay in looking and acting like those who have been in the church for 50 years!⁵

If any of your cultural baggage (and I'm including your spiritual culture) is getting in the way of your enthusiastic commitment to reaching people from different cultures with the gospel, drop your baggage! Our main focus should be the salvation of lost people to the glory of God. If you see someone come into church who is not "your kind of person" and you don't go out of your way to make that person feel welcome, your heart is in the wrong place!⁶

13. What "cultural or traditional baggage" do churches carry today without knowing it? How do we break free from these things that keep us from being missional and loving to all?

Mistake #2—THE CHURCH SHOULD CONSIST OF "MY KIND" OF PEOPLE.

We all are prone to think that the church is for folks just like us, but not for those who are much different than we are. There is even a principle espoused by the Church Growth movement, "the homogeneous unit" principle. It states that people are attracted to churches that have "their kind of people," and advocates that we should be targeting a certain segment of the society. So you have churches that state that their target is to reach the Baby Boomers, or the Generation Xers. They aim their whole church service to make these kinds of people feel comfortable.⁷

⁵ Sermon by Steve Cole found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-27-how-god-changes-our-thinking-acts-111-18>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

14. Why does a church filled with similar types of people seem attractive? How is this type of church easier to maintain?

15. What blessings and growth can come from a church filled with people who are different from you? How is this type of church harder to maintain?

Mistake #3—GOD HAS TO DO THINGS MY WAY.

These Jewish Christians probably would have said that it's okay for God to save the Gentiles, but first they need to become Jews. But for God to save them just as they are? That doesn't fit with my way of thinking! He has to do it my way! Church members are notorious for saying, "We've never done it that way before!"

Sometimes God surprises us as He surprised Peter by saving people even before we finish our sermon and give an invitation! And the people He saves aren't the kind of folks we would think He would save! We need to allow God's Word to confront our wrong thinking so that we can grow in Christ and be more usable in His purpose.⁸

16. What things are we prone to think that God must do according to our standards when it comes to our church? When do our harmless preferences become harmful and selfish desires?

17. Peter asks a rhetorical question in verse 17 that every believer must ask: Who am I that I can stand in God's way? In what ways are we susceptible to getting in the way of God's plans?

⁸ Ibid.

How do we prevent this from happening in the future?

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

Considering they had all grown up indoctrinated in prejudice, the ease with which the other disciples accepted Peter's conclusions was nothing short of miraculous! No sullen grumbling, muttering under their breath, or opposition. They praised God! Peter was convicted and changed, never to go back. But not everyone's experience was long lasting. Some of the people were filled with praise at first, but they saw things differently later on when they realized just how many Gentiles joined the church.⁹

Pastor Bruce Goettsche does a great job drawing three principles from this passage for us to think through:

WE SEE THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS NEW GENTILE INCLUSION.

We have seen over the last two weeks (and there is more to come) how important an issue this was to the early church. You may not realize it, but it is still an important issue. The question is this: Is salvation granted to us because of what we do, or is it a gift from God to anyone who would believe? It is the crucial debate of the church. Are we saved by grace alone or by God's gift and our hard work? This passage argues that we are saved by God's gift alone.¹⁰

18. How does a robust understanding of the gospel help us to fight all forms of racism, prejudice, and all other forms of superiority?

WE SEE AN EXAMPLE OF HOW TO HANDLE CRITICISM.

Though many critics should simply be ignored, Peter shows Christian maturity in the way he handles the conflict. Instead of getting mad, making excuses, or counter-attacking, he tells the truth, brings in his witnesses, and appeals to the teaching of Jesus.

I wonder, are you facing the critics? Are you defensive? Are you telling the truth or have you tried to avoid the issue? Have you looked at the Bible to see if your critics are correct? Our best response to criticism is to ask God if the complaint is valid. If it is, we need to change. If it isn't, just ignore it. Remember Augustine's prayer: O Lord, deliver me from this lust of always vindicating myself.

⁹ Girard, Robert C. *The Book of Acts (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series) (Kindle Locations 2488-2498).* Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

¹⁰ Sermon, ©2003 by Rev. Bruce Goettsche, July 13, 2003. <http://www.unionchurch.com/archive/071303.html>

Our job is to live to the Lord. We will never please everyone. When the critics speak we should listen, explain, make any necessary changes, and do all these things with love, patience and gentleness. When you have done all this and the person continues to pursue you, it may be time to move on. The critics of the world can paralyze you. You can spend so much time trying to get everyone to like you that you end up losing who you really are. There is only one opinion that matters, and that opinion is the one that is held by the Lord.¹¹

19. In verses 4–17 Peter responds to his friends who are angry with his actions. How can we use his response as a model when we are confronted with incomplete or false accusations?

WE SEE SOME SOBER WARNINGS FOR THOSE WHO CRITICIZE.

These Jewish leaders were upset with Peter before they had all the information. To their credit they listened as Peter explained the facts and then they admitted they were wrong and congratulated Peter on his good work.

Before you start to criticize another, maybe it is a good idea to ask yourself some questions:

1. Do I have all the information? Before you are critical check to see if you know what you are talking about.
2. Is my criticism necessary or petty? Let's face it, we want people to give us a break in life. We want them to understand that we are not going to do everything perfectly. If we want that from others, we should begin by extending that courtesy to others.
3. Do I have the right spirit? Am I being mean spirited or is my criticism meant to be helpful? Am I being aggressive or gentle? Am I seeking to help the person or destroy the person?
4. Am I really trying to advance the Kingdom of God or am I seeking to advance my own preferences, prejudices, and ideas?

If we would ask ourselves these questions before we dare to criticize another, we would criticize much less. If we spent less time criticizing, and more time seeking to help each other with a gentle spirit, we would find people more receptive to our words. And of course, if we spent less time criticizing each other, we would spend a lot less time having to eat our words.¹²

20. Which of the four questions above could you do a better job at in the coming week? What tangible steps can you take to accomplish this?

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

Note: This study guide was compiled and questions were written by Pastor Tim Badal, Village Bible Church. www.villagebible.org/smallgroups