



feeding...gathering...carrying...leading. (Isiah 40:11)

Dear Church Family,

The miraculous conversion of Saul put a temporary halt to the persecution of the church (Acts 9:31). We also are told that the conversion of Saul is a part of God's plan to bring the gospel to the Gentiles, *for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel*. But Saul does not fulfill this prophecy right away. His initial preaching is to Jews where he faces the same rejection and death threats that he himself was carrying out against the church. The pivotal point of including Gentiles in the gospel will come through Peter, not Saul. This is similar to what we saw with Philip in Samaria. While other disciples besides the apostles are just as powerful in preaching and signs and wonders, there is an important tie to the apostles when the gospel spreads to a new people group. And so in chapter 9 we move from Saul back to Peter first with the account of two miracles performed through Peter and then the account of Peter and Cornelius. These miracles, healing the lame man and raising a dead woman, give us a picture of how the gospel is spreading through signs and wonders. But they also serve to further establish that Peter is clearly moving in the power and presence of Jesus. This will be important as he is about to do something with Cornelius that is going to be difficult for the early church to understand as acceptable and approved by God.

It is a theme in Luke and Acts that the idea of God reaching out to Gentiles can be offensive to a Jewish audience (Luke 4:24-28, Acts 22:21-22). We can see why in the story of Peter and Cornelius. Peter states that even Cornelius knew *that it was unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation*. This restriction on association with Gentiles is not actually in the OT law, but it is an idea that came from OT dietary laws. Association and visiting would involve hospitality which would necessarily involve food. The OT law does declare many foods that Gentiles would serve as unclean and to be avoided. This is why the vision that Peter receives deals with unclean foods that he is being offered to eat. Peter refuses because many of those foods are explicitly declared unclean in Leviticus. Lev 20:25-26 states, *you shall therefore separate the clean beast from the unclean, and the unclean bird from the clean. You shall not make yourselves detestable by beast or by bird or by anything with which the ground crawls, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean. You shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine.*

We might think that it is foolish of Peter to refuse a command of the Lord, but he is keeping a clear command of Scripture by doing so. And this was not an insignificant command but essential to the identity of the Jews as God's holy people. To eat of these animals would be to make himself detestable in God's eyes, to no longer belong to God as holy. This is why the vision needs to be repeated three times and coincide with the visit of the men from Cornelius. It is a sound and true principle that special revelation from God will never contradict Scripture. This is important for not being led astray by false spirits. Only in this case, the special revelation does contradict Leviticus. How do we understand this? Why is God now declaring food clean that he previously declared unclean? It is the finished work of Christ, his cleansing blood that has changed what is required for holiness. This is because it is only the work of Jesus that can make anyone, Jew or Gentile, holy.

The external holiness codes of the OT were designed to keep the Jewish people from becoming assimilated into surrounding cultures and losing their distinctive identity as God's people. Things such as the food laws did keep them separate. But even when they kept these laws, it did not make them holy because such laws did nothing to deal with the uncleanness of the sinful nature within. This is a key message of the gospel to the Jews. Gentiles are equally clean and holy in Christ as Jews. The truth that goes along with this is that without Christ, Jews are equally unclean and sinful as Gentiles. (Rom 2:11)

So the work of Christ not only makes the holiness codes of the OT not necessary, but now they are actually a hindrance to God's purposes. They may give a Jew the wrong impression that by keeping them they are holy in God's sight. Also they are a hindrance to the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles. Just as Jesus ate with sinners to bring them to repentance and salvation, Jewish believers who are carrying on the mission of Jesus need to associate with Gentiles to bring them to repentance and salvation.

With both Saul and Peter in Acts 10-11 there is a need for special revelation from God for them to be in alignment with what God is doing. Without that special revelation, both of them would end up opposing God when they thought they were honoring Him. When we consider special revelation like prophecy, hearing from the Spirit directly rather than through Scripture, we do rightly emphasize the dangers of being led astray if we are not testing these things with the Word. However, this section of Acts calls into question whether it is enough for us to have Scripture and our understanding of Scripture without also some special revelation from the Spirit from time to time in order to be aligned with God's purposes in our own lives. (I addressed how Acts 10-11 is used by some to justify adopting a view of sexual ethics that is more in line with how our culture thinks than what Scripture teaches. You will need to listen to the message for the significant differences between Acts 10-11 and the debate about sexual ethics in the church today.)

Is anyone else jealous of all the activity of God that we see in these chapters? Miraculous healings, Jesus directly encountering Saul, angels and visions and voices directing Cornelius and Peter? Does anyone else read this and think, "I wish my life was more like that. That God would show up in such clear and dramatic ways?" Yes, I am called to walk by faith, which is things unseen. But as Stuart said last week, it sure is encouraging when God manifests His presence in ways that can be seen and experienced.

Acts awakens this hunger, but I cannot make it happen by filling certain necessary check boxes. However, I was struck by Cornelius and what is said about him. He is described in 10:2 as a *devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually*. These two characteristics are then repeated twice. What pleases God? Prayer and giving to the poor. Do I focus enough on trying to be like Cornelius in those two areas?

We celebrated communion together, embracing a hunger for more of the Holy Spirit in our lives but also rejoicing in what we do have in Christ. We have been declared clean and our names are written in heaven (Luke 10:20).

Pastorally Yours,
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