

July 21, 2024
As You Are Going: Change Your Thinking
Acts 11:1-18
Vernon Advent Christian Church

Into...Have you ever been absolutely sure you are right about something? You know you are right. Nothing could change your mind. But then something happens and you find out that you were wrong. So, you have to change your mind. Has that ever happened to you? How did you react? Wrong thinking made right can be a pretty traumatic experience for us. But it can also open a door to a whole new point of view and a dramatic change in the direction of our lives. And that can change the lives of those around you, can't it? It can have an effect on your family, your friends, your neighbors, and your co-workers. In short, wrong thinking made right can have a positive influence on everyone you know.

To be clear, I am not talking about changing our minds in regard to the truths of God's Word and trying to fit them into our 21st century opinions as the "God's Still Speaking" crowd does. As we've said here before, God is, indeed, still speaking. But he's not saying anything different than what he has already said, as illustrated by this meme I came across this week. So we're not talking about changing the truths of scripture, we are talking about aligning ourselves with what God is doing so as to be more effective for the mission he has invited us into. And in order to do so, God, sometimes, has to change our way of thinking.

A couple of weeks ago, in the first part of Acts ch. 10, we saw how the Lord changed Peter's thinking in preparation for his going to the house of the Roman centurion, Cornelius. No Jew would think of going into a Gentile home, much less eating with Gentiles, for fear of becoming ceremonially unclean. The Lord Jesus had clearly told the apostles to go into all the world to preach the gospel to every nation. But in their minds, the disciples thought that Jesus meant for them to go and preach to Jews who were scattered all over the world. 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 as we saw last week at the end of ch. 10 when Peter took six others with him to Cornelius' house, and they all witnessed what God was doing. They all saw the Holy Spirit fall upon the Gentiles in just the same way he had fallen upon the believing Jews on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2. And now Peter goes back to Jerusalem to report to the other Jewish believers what all has taken place and that is where we pick the story in Acts 11 starting in vs. 1. If you are able, please stand with me as I read God's word. [Read Passage]

It would be easy to skip over these verses, since they repeat the story of chapter 10. But whenever Scripture repeats something, we need to take notice. And I believe there is an important lesson here that we might miss if we just skipped over it. These verses show us 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, namely circumcision and dietary laws, the gospel would not have spread around the world as it did, and, in fact, it would be a different "gospel." The Holy Spirit inspired Luke to write out this story in back to back chapters so that the Jewish believers, especially, would see that salvation is

not a matter of adopting Jewish law and traditions, but rather of God saving all people through faith in Christ alone.

But these Jewish Christians needed to change their thinking. And this story shows how God began that process, and how he works to change our thinking as well. In order to accomplish his mission in salvation, God has to change the wrong thinking of his people.

And in order to do that, we must first understand God's mission. **God's mission includes the salvation of some from every nation for his glory.** Way back in the first book of the Bible, God told Abraham of his missional purpose in Gen. 12:3, where He told him, "And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." Later God told him, "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 22:18). That seed of Abraham was not just the Jewish nation, but specifically Jesus Christ, God's promised redeemer. And all of the scriptures tell his redemptive story through the lens of this promise. And that promise will be ultimately fulfilled when Christ comes again as we read in Rev. 5:9-10 where John the Revelator wrote of Jesus, "Worthy are you to take the book and to break its seals; for you were slain, and purchased for God with your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God, and they will reign upon the earth." Thus, God's purpose is to glorify himself through the salvation of his people from every nation through the seed of Abraham, Jesus Christ.

And that purpose is in its beginning stages in our text today in vs. 18, where the Jewish believers say, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted the repentance that leads to life." The Greek word for "Gentiles" is *ethne*, often translated "nations." So, while the Jewish Christians did not yet grasp the full ramifications of what God was doing, they clearly saw God at work and changed their thinking to align with him. For thousands of years the nation of Israel had been God's chosen people, now all the nations are on equal standing before God through the cross of Jesus Christ. Everyone who comes in faith and repentance to Christ becomes a part of God's kingdom of priests, made up of both Jews and Gentiles in one body. These early Christians were starting to catch a glimpse of what God had been doing all along.

I could spend the rest of our time this morning elaborating on this point but, for your sake, I will summarize my thoughts concerning God's mission to save people from every nation into this one statement made up of two parts: 1) salvation is God's doing. And 2) He uses us to accomplish his purposes.

A major theme in these verses, and in all of scripture, is that God takes the initiative in regards to salvation. It's in every part this story: God gave the vision to Peter of the sheet being lowered from heaven. God, not Peter, originated this process. It was God that sent his angel to Cornelius with instructions as to how to get in contact with Peter. He orchestrated the arrival of the Gentile messengers from Cornelius with Peter's vision, and specifically told Peter to go with them without any hesitation. He sovereignly saved those in Cornelius' house and sent the Holy Spirit upon them even before Peter finished his sermon. Again, as verse 18 states, "he granted to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life." Salvation comes totally from God and he gives it to us as his free gift to sinners who do not deserve it.

At the same time, He uses us; fallible, frail, and sinful humans to accomplish his purposes. Notice, the angel did not preach the gospel to Cornelius, but rather told him that Peter would speak words by which he and his household would be saved (11:14). (example of Moses) God takes the initiative in the work of salvation and he sovereignly grants repentance to those, who through his grace, believe. But he chooses to do it through us, his people, obediently telling others the good news of the gospel.

As I said, I could spend the whole message on this point, but we need to move on. Because, not only is it important that we understand the mission, that salvation includes people from every nation, but it is also important for us to understand that **we all bring wrong thinking into the mission.**

Part of the process of our sanctification, or the living out of our walk with Christ, is the transforming of our minds as we grow in our relationship with him and embrace the truths of his Word. Rom. 12:2 says, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” That word, “conformed” means, “do not let the world put you into its mold.” As Christ followers, we are no longer to think as the world thinks, but we are to follow Jesus and be obedient to him. But that is a lot easier said than done. We all carry previous concepts and ideas, and ways of thinking into our walk with Christ and into the church. Not only that, but we’re heavily influenced, whether we realize it or not, but what we listen to and watch on tv. But we must allow God to continue to renew our thinking through the truths of his word rather than be influenced by the news or our social media feeds of choice.

Now, let’s look at how Peter’s critics in Jerusalem were thinking wrongly in our passage and see if we see this type of thinking in ourselves? First, it’s clear that their traditions were more important than what God was doing. Peter had seen this remarkable act of God, as a whole house full of Gentiles had believed in Christ and were baptized. But rather than rejoicing over what God had done, vs. 2, they criticized him, saying, vs. 3, “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.” These Jewish Christians were more concerned about Peter violating Jewish laws than they were happy about the Gentiles coming to faith in Christ! This sounds an awful lot like the same criticism the Pharisees and teachers of the law said about Jesus, “He eats with tax collectors and sinners,” which makes sense since that is the traditions these Jewish Christians grew up with.

But before we get too self-righteous, although we don’t like to admit it, we often do the same thing. We elevate certain traditions or ways of doing things above what God may be doing all the time without even realizing it. A lot of the time we are more concerned with what we’ve always done and not concerned enough with what God is doing. May God help us.

This bleeds into a second wrong way of thinking in that they mistakenly thought that God had to do things their way. These Jewish Christians had no problem with Gentiles coming to know Jesus, but first they needed to become Jews. For God to save them just as they are? That didn’t fit with their way of thinking!

Now, I have no stats to back this up, only my own experience, but I believe one of the most common phrases in any church is not a catchy motto, or even a bible verse, but probably the phrase, “We’ve never done it that way before!” Why are people leaving the church and churches closing at an unprecedented rate? Could it be that the church is no longer meeting the needs of the people they serve in the community? There is nothing wrong with tradition and things we have done in the past. But we need to always evaluate what we are currently doing to be effectively reaching the lost for Christ. Most of the time we are too busy doing things our way and the way they’ve always been done that we’re blinded to what God may be doing in our midst. What happened to the early church when they had nothing to lose but to be faithful to God and display His love to all they met? They grew! What has happened to the Church today? We’ve settled. We’ve stopped risking. We’ve resorted to excuses like “We can’t do that” or “we’ve never done it that way before”. 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 mission.

This brings us to the last point from our text this morning, that its **God who changes our wrong thinking so that we can accomplish the mission**. Aren't you glad, as children of God, that he doesn't leave us where we are? If Peter had stuck to his protest, "By no means, Lord," God couldn't have used him to preach to Cornelius' household. If we want God to use us in his mission of being glorified through the salvation of the nations, we must let him change us and change our thinking. How does he do it? By the many ways found in our text. This isn't an exhaustive list by any means, but a good place to start.

1) First, God changes us as we seek him. It was while Peter was praying that the Lord gave him this life-changing vision. If Peter was not diligent with his time with the Lord, he might have missed what God wanted to do through him. God will not change your thinking if you rarely spend time with him, not because he can't but because we aren't even making ourselves available.

2) God, also, changes us through uncomfortable situations. Peter didn't start out his prayer time thinking that he needed to come up with a creative new ministry idea. Rather, God intervened. And what God said shocked Peter, it made him uncomfortable. Often, the Lord has to make us uncomfortable to get us to change. If we're comfortable, we don't feel any need to change. But if we're suddenly hit with a new situation that's outside our comfort zone, we realize that our old ways of thinking will not do. We have to listen to the Lord and trust Him to do something we can't do in our own strength as Peter did.

3) We also see in our text today that God changes us by continuing to pursue us. The Lord had to repeat the vision three times for Peter. He repeats this story twice for every reader of scripture, so that we get the point. And, the process of God's changing their thinking was not finished with Peter's explanation here. A party of Jews who professed to be Christians insisted that a person had to be circumcised and follow the Law of Moses to be saved. The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) had to work through this important issue, and Paul wrote Galatians to refute this serious error. Even Peter later fell into this wrong thinking, as Paul mentions in Galatians 2:11-15. But God continues to pursue us, again and again, until the truth sinks in.

4) God changes us through the truth of his Word. Peter wins over his critics by re-telling his experiences of how God worked. He could have asserted his apostolic authority: "I'm an apostle and you all need to submit to what I did." But he would not have changed their thinking, he would have only ordered their obedience. Lasting change has to take place in the mind, and we must be convinced that the new way of thinking is in line with God's Word.

Lastly, God changes us so that he can use us in greater ways to fulfill his mission. These things happened about seven years after the Day of Pentecost, and the gospel was still bottled up pretty much among the Jews! Philip had seen the Samaritans get saved and the Ethiopian eunuch. But the apostles were pretty much still in Jerusalem ministering to the Jews only. God had to shake the church out of his comfort zone to get the message flowing to the Gentiles. This started with the persecution following the stoning of Stephen and the dispersion and now God was changing their thinking in regards to his mission.

In these verses, and the re-telling of this story, we see that it's important for us to recognize what God is doing and change our thinking to align with him. We know that we can't do this in our own strength but must make ourselves available to his correction. God's purpose is to be glorified as his people reach out to those from every nation with the good news of the gospel. If our thinking is not in line with God's purpose and mission then we need to allow God to change our thinking. It is only then that we can be effective and truly be a church on mission. Let's pray.