

Acts 11:1-30: Is Your Love Attached to Conditions.....Is God's?

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I. Introduction

Have you ever discriminated against someone because of their race? What about their social, economic, religious, or cultural status? What about their handicap or gender? Perhaps you've never treated someone differently based on any of these things. Have you ever treated someone badly because they mistreated you, they offended you in some way? Does your love go this far, does it cover a multitude of sins the way God's does? How can we love people the way God does?

II. Acts 11:1-30: How Can We Love Regardless of a Person's Offense (whatever it might be)?

11:1-3, Peter had a long struggle getting to a place where he fully accepted Gentiles brothers and sisters. He even stayed with Cornelius and his family a few days after giving these Gentiles the Gospel. The news of all this did not go unnoticed. The rest of the apostles and others heard about everything that Peter did, including the fact that he kept company and ate with Gentiles. When he got back to Jerusalem, a particular group of Jewish believers—who were “of the circumcision,” which means that they were extremists who believe that Gentiles couldn't become Christian unless they got circumcised—confronted Peter about what he'd done with Gentiles. They were so zealous that Peter's status as the chief apostle didn't matter to them.

11:4-17, in response, Peter explains exactly why he now sees Gentiles as brethren with whom he can fellowship and eat. He was in Joppa praying and the Lord showed him a vision: a great sheet came down to the rooftop where he was. On the sheet were kosher and unkosher animals and the Lord told him to kill and eat. But Peter refused because he'd never eaten anything common or unclean. The Lord then rebuked him, “What God has cleansed you must not call common.” This happened three times and the great sheet disappeared into heaven. At that moment there were three Gentiles at his door and the Spirit told him to go with them to Caesarea doubting nothing. So he took six Jewish brethren with him and they went to Cornelius' house. Cornelius told them how God sent an angel who said to him, “Send men to Joppa, and call for Simon whose surname is Peter, who will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved.” As Peter began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on all the Gentiles as it did on Peter and the rest of the apostles at Pentecost (2:1-4). Then Peter remembered the words of the Lord before His ascension when He commissioned them to bear witnesses to Him to the end of the earth, “John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (1:4-8). Peter ends with, “If therefore God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?” Peter is absolutely clear that God gave the Gentiles the same exact gift of the Spirit as He gave the apostles at Pentecost without requiring anything from Gentiles, even though they were Gentiles!

11:18, the extremists who took issue with Peter were dumbfounded; God in essence shut their mouth. And instead of continuing to argue, they responded with praise, they glorified God saying “Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.”.....how did Peter see Gentiles before, how does he see them now and why? How did the extremists see the Gentiles at first and why? How do you see people who are—for whatever reason—offensive to you and why?

11:19-21, in Acts 8 after persecution against the church arose, the Jewish believers were scattered and we were told of Philip's evangelistic efforts with the Samaritans. Acts 11:19 picks up where Acts 8:4 left off and tells us what happened with others who were scattered. They went as far as Phoenicia (the coast N. of Israel), Cyprus (island in Mediterranean), and Antioch (city in modern-day Syria). However, they only reached out to the Jews in these mostly Gentile territories. How are these Jewish believers looking at the masses of Gentiles in these territories and why? But by God's providence, some of those scattered were Greek-speaking Jews; we know because they were from Cyprus and Cyrene (N. Africa). When they arrived at Antioch, they reached out to the Gentiles and preached the Lord Jesus to them. How did the Lord want these Jews to see the Gentiles (Ephesians 2:11-22; Colossians 3:11)? He wanted them to see them the way He did, which is why the hand of the Lord was with them and a great many turned to the Lord!

11:22-26, word got back to the epicenter of Jewish Christianity, the church in Jerusalem. So they send Barnabas to investigate. When he gets to Antioch and sees the grace that God had bestowed upon the Gentiles, he was glad and encouraged them all to continue wholeheartedly with the Lord. Why did Barnabas see the Gentiles differently? "For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith." His name means Son of Encouragement; it was given to him by the apostles (4:36-37). Barnabas walked with the Lord's Spirit, therefore, he could only see the Gentiles the way God saw them. Barnabas was sent to investigate, but he decided to stay in Antioch and live among these brothers and sisters as he brought a great many more into the Kingdom. At some point Barnabas leaves for Tarsus to look for Saul. Why? Because he knows that the Lord appointed him apostle to the Gentiles. It's been about 10 yrs since Saul left for Tarsus. He finally finds Saul and brings him back to Antioch. They stay for a whole year and become part of the church family in Antioch, which is where the disciples were first called Christians. At that time, if you were named after someone, it meant that you were their slave. "Christian" means Christ's or a servant/slave of Christ. It was likely meant as a term of derision, but Christians saw it as a badge of honor. Antioch became the epicenter of Gentile Christianity.

11:27-30, something incredible happens next. God teaches the Jewish believers how to see their Gentile counterparts by using a famine. The Lord sends a prophet named Agabus from Jerusalem to Antioch to give them news that the Roman Empire will be devastated by a great famine. The response from the Gentile church at Antioch is incredible: they each determine to send relief to those in Judea! Whatever animosity there may've been towards the Jews for any discrimination they may've shown, it was gone. The Gentiles didn't see the Jewish believers as enemies or discriminators; they saw them as brothers and sisters! So they gather the money and send it with Barnabas and Saul to the elders of the Jerusalem church.

How do you treat those who offend you (for whatever reason)? Antioch was the third most important city in the Roman Empire next to Rome and Alexandria. It was, densely populated, urban, multiethnic (due to its location, in addition to Romans, Greeks, and Jews there were Africans, Persians, Indians, and Chinese), and it was thoroughly pagan socially and spiritually. It became the epicenter of Gentile missions (Acts 13:1-4, 15:35, 40; 18:23). How did God want the Jewish believers to treat the people of this troubled city (Acts 2:40-47; 4:32-37... 1 Peter 4:8)?

III. Conclusion

Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. But some of them ..., when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Greeks, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, ...