

## THE GRACE OF GOD AND THE DEATH OF PREJUDICE Acts 11:1-26

### Acts 11:1-26

This past week I stood with my big 6'10" tall, black pastor friend Ed Bailey, at a silent protest – a prayer protest really – down at the square in Lancaster. I did that because Ed asked me to join him. And as he is my true brother in Christ, I was not going to refuse him. Like Ed, it sickens me that more than 150 years after the formal end of slavery in the United States, men and women of any color, ethnicity or creed may be oppressed, discriminated against or mistreated. The wrongful death of George Floyd is yet just another case where the circumstances only tend to underscore the conviction held by many in the U.S. that to be black means to be **under the foot** (or in this case **under the knee**) of a white oppressor. This shouldn't be. And so the silent protest, Ed Bailey's presence, and his invitation to have me stand with him.

Now the scriptures record a great amount of prejudice. Only in the scriptures it is not a prejudice of white against black, or white against brown, or, as Ruth and I observed when we were in Uganda many years ago, thin nose blacks against broad nose blacks. No, the prejudice recorded in the scriptures was that of Jews against Gentiles, or Jews against half-breed Jews, like the Samaritans. Jesus' story about the Good Samaritan was meant as an **indirect attack upon the prejudice of the Jews** to whom he was speaking. And Jesus' interaction with the woman at the well was an open display of his rejection of the kinds of barriers that had come to be in place as the **pure-bred Jews** flouted their racial or ethnic purity over that of the **half-breed Samaritans**.

Or how about that story of Jesus and the Greek woman in Mark chapter 7?

### Mark 7:24-30

Jesus, of course, understood that his coming was meant to have ramifications for the whole world. Following his resurrection, in sending out the apostles, he said,

All power is given to me in heaven and on earth. Going, therefore, make disciples **OF ALL NATIONS**...

That is, take this gospel message to **every** nation, to every people, to every race and to every language group.

Even the gift of tongues on the Day of Pentecost should have underscored to the apostles that God had an interest in the entire world as some 11 different language groups are mentioned there in Acts chapter 2.

But **prejudice is a hard thing to kill.**

- Though their numbers have been in steady decline, the **Ku Klux Klan** – probably the best known white-supremacist organization in the United States – still claims some 3,000 members.
- By all accounts, acts of **anti-Semitism** in the United States and around the globe have been rising for many years.
- And, as illustrated by the sharp and violent reaction to the killing of George Floyd, many African Americans feel anger at the thought that they are still being judged by the color of their skin rather than the content of their character.

It is with this in mind that Acts 11 teaches us **how** prejudice was meant to die. For in Acts chapter 11, there is an element that is mentioned that **supercedes any challenge to be free of bigotry**. Acts 11 is not the voice of Rodney King saying, "Why can't we all just get along?"

The element I am referring to is just a couple words...found for us in chapter 11, verse 23. It is the words, "**The Grace of God.**"

They say that French Revolution – that extremely bloody, violent, overthrow of the aristocratic monarchy that had ruled the French for centuries – was the way it was because it was a **godless revolution**. Although the French had looked to the Americans and their defeat of their British lords as an example, the French did not follow in the way of the Americans, whose revolution against the British was led, in part, by Presbyterian ministers.

In much the same way, the call to be free of prejudice in our modern world is being touted, not because prejudice goes against the notion of the grace of God, but because it is thought to be inherently right. But this will never work.

We live in a world that is crying for an end to prejudice, but if there is God...if God is not part of the equation...who is to say prejudice is such a bad thing?

Allan Bloom, the now deceased **brilliant professor** of philosophy at the University of Chicago, tells in the opening pages of his best selling book, *"The Closing of the American Mind"* of putting before his freshman students the problem of prejudice when there is no grasp of divine authoritative truth. Bloom writes,

"There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative."

Picking up on that insight into the "minds of mush" observed in most freshmen, Bloom writes of how he would proceed to show these students that they didn't have a leg to stand on. And so he would put before the students the case of a neo-Nazi group and their convictions regarding white supremacy. With no God and no absolutes, his freshman students could, at best, only pose one person's opinions over another's. So instead of TRUTH winning out, it inevitably would come down to MIGHT winning out.

Given that scenario, truth doesn't win the day.

Rather the one with the biggest weapons, or those who can scream the loudest, or create the most chaos – those are the ones that win the day.

Truth, under this scenario, becomes almost meaningless.

Our modern world is trying desperately to fight prejudice – racial and other forms of discrimination – but it is attempting to do so with no underlying sense of an absolute. "Tolerance" is the great cry, but what is meant by that is that those that want to be heard have decided they will be heard, and they will do so by being totally intolerant of anyone who questions what they have to say.

The end of this is not equality.

The end of this is not peace.

The end of this is CHAOS and UNENDING BLOODSHED.

With this as an introduction, let's now deal with Acts chapter 11...

The past two Sundays we examined Acts chapter 10. What we read here in Acts chapter 11 is but Peter's recounting of the events of Acts chapter 10, as he told it to the apostles back in Jerusalem.

The issue before us is the inclusion of the Gentiles into God's great work.

And here we now see that not just one, but **two full chapters** of Biblical text are given over to this issue. That is because this was **not some secondary issue**...some ancillary point of Christian doctrine. No, this was **BIG...REALLY BIG**...challenging some 2,000 years of Jewish teaching and practice. Sure, Abraham had been numbered with the Gentiles, but God had selected him **OUT OF** the land of UR, and from him established an entirely new line of God-fearers. It would become the line of "Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." And from that line, and their descendents, God was going to do something very special.

- God was going to meet with them
- God was going to protect them
- God was going to give them his laws and decrees
- God was going to enter into a covenantal relationship with them
- They would be come His people, and He would become their God.
- And, eventually from them, God would raise up a Messiah to save and lead them

Nothing like it had ever before occurred in the history of mankind. **Israel**, as their nation came to be called, **was going to be special.**

And to help mark of that specialness, all kinds of laws were given to them, through Moses, to mark them off. Laws pertaining to

- How they dressed
- The kinds of fabric used in their clothing
- How they observed days
- How they kept a weekly Sabbath day of rest
- How they engaged in worship
- How their men trimmed their beards
- What they ate
- How they did business, and
- How they viewed one another

On and on and on. These laws were meant to **mark them off** from the rest of humanity. But they came to be understand that "marking off" as **making them BETTER** than the rest of humanity. And so they came to view everyone else as **inferior** to them, **below** them, **less clean, less desirable, and less acceptable.**

In short, by the time Jesus showed up, the Jews had become racists. And, as the book of Acts reveals, that racist mindset had come to be passed on to the early Christian church as it was composed entirely of Jews.

To be blunt, **Peter was a racist**. Back in chapter 10, when he finally arrived at Cornelius' house, he as much as **admits his racism**. Look at it...

### 10:28

Here Peter in effect says, "My attitude, at least in the past, has been that you all are – **like the swine** that we would never think of eating – '**impure and unclean**' and that I shouldn't even come into your house. But God has been showing me that I should change my attitude."

God impressed this new truth on Peter, initially, **by means of a vision** that God gave to Peter. But by the time Peter was retelling his story to the apostles in chapter 11, God had impressed this new truth on Peter by means of a second witness – the witness of the Gentiles speaking in tongues...doing something that could only have come from God.

And so Peter told his story to the apostles back in Jerusalem.

As I said last Sunday, what is **most amazing** about all of this is that the apostles accepted Peter's story. For with that acceptance they were opening themselves up to the **TRULY RADICAL NOTION** that God could or even might use the Gentile believers in Jesus in **JUST AS GREAT A WAY AS HE WAS USING THEM**. And if that was really the case, then that would mean that all of that prejudice that had been built up over hundreds and hundreds of years would have to go. One has to wonder if they **truly grasped** the implications of their acceptance of Peter's story.

This was BIG...I mean **REALLY BIG**.

Luke, the author of this text, as he is writing to one Theophilus – a man with a Greek name – apparently wanted to underscore for him that this prejudice of the Jews had been running deep within the early Christian community for some time. For look how he words verse 19...

### Verse 19

So here, right after the Jewish apostles all accepted the notion that God was apparently going to now also do something spiritually great among the Gentiles, Luke informs Theophilus that up to that point no one would have ever thought in those terms. For up until then, when they were preaching the gospel of Jesus they were preaching "**ONLY TO THE JEWS.**"

- And up to that point, no one thought a thing about it.
- No one questioned if maybe that was wrong.
- It had not even crossed the minds of the apostles – those who had spent years with Jesus – that maybe, just maybe, the Gentiles would like to hear about Jesus as well.

For Jesus had been a Jew, who had come to the Jews, to tell the Jews a message of salvation through His death and resurrection. This was for Israel.  
And the rest of the world...well, it could go to hell in a handbasket.

Yep...Rampant racism.

And now Peter tells his story.

And then, right after that, news came from Antioch about some Greeks who, like Cornelius, also accepted the news about Jesus. So the apostles sent Barnabas to check it out. And when Barnabas learned that it was true, he sent off for Saul – a Hebrew of Hebrews, but one who had been told he would bring the gospel to the Gentiles – asking Saul to join him in Antioch. And so Saul and Barnabas together worked with this new thing...this Jewish and Gentile together thing...this aberration of a thing...called "the church."

And what was anyone to call those who were part of it?

- not Jewish or Gentile believers in Jesus
- not followers of the Way
- but "Christ-ones"...Christians.

And that is what we are to be today.

Are you Jewish?

I'm a Christian

Are you a Gentile?

I'm a Christian

Are you an American?

I'm a Christian

It is no longer to be "I'm from the north" or "I'm from the south."

For

*In Christ there is no east or west  
In Him no south or north  
But one great fellowship of love  
Throughout the whole wide earth.*

### **That's how you kill prejudice**

Not by seeing who can garner the largest crowds  
or by seeing who can make the most noise  
or by seeing who can create the greatest chaos,  
or smash the most windows, or loot the most stores,  
or kill the most cops.

No, the way you kill prejudice is by embracing the fact that "the grace of God" has been shown to all, and that by that grace, we can all come together.

*O beautiful for spacious skies,  
For amber waves of grain  
For purple mountain majesties  
Above the fruited plain.*

*America, America,  
God shed his GRACE ON THEE  
And crown thy good with brotherhood,  
from sea to shining sea.*

Once that grace of God touches a man or woman's life,  
then it no longer matters if they are

- Jew or Gentile,
- from Spain or from Somalia
- white or black
- male or female
- young or old
- rich or poor

For

*In Christ there is no east or west  
In Him no south or north  
But one great fellowship of love  
Throughout the whole wide earth*