

2023 Theme - Focus On What Matters

Sermon Series - The Book of Acts/God's Plan for His Church

Sermon Title - When Following The Lord...

Sermon Text - Acts 11

Sermon Presenter - Pastor Larry

Introduction:

“Just as the Lord calmed a real life storm, He can calm the storms in his children
Tho the wind and the waves seem to stand in the way, He holds us through the fray”

Andrew, those are such powerful words that God put on your heart to write! Thank you for being willing to let God speak through you to our hearts. Folks, in this life we know we will face storms in life! Jesus told us to expect the storms. But He also promised to walk with us through the storms! And in our world and ever changing culture today, the storms are many times man made. And you will sometimes face storms just because you have faith and believe in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord! We are going to discover several things today that you will experience “When following the Lord...” Let's pray and ask The Holy Spirit to teach us! Prayer

Today we will be looking at Acts Chapter 11 and we'll discover some important things that happen when you are dedicated to and committed to living for Jesus. Back in November we had a message about followers of Christ experiencing opposition from the religious rulers of their day and Peter and others were jailed for preaching Jesus. Today we will see that Peter continued facing issues from others as he followed Jesus. Here's the truth, when following the Lord we must...

1. Expect Criticism

Read with me beginning with Acts 11:1...

Acts 11:1 The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.

Acts 11:2 So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him

Acts 11:3 and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them."

Peter knew this was going to happen! Remember what he had told Cornelius and the Gentiles gathered in his home from our message last week?

Acts 10:28 He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean.

Peter had probably thought, "I may take some heat for this one!" And he did. When you're trying to do what is right, Satan will always try to discourage you and you will sometimes face criticism,

cynicism, and opposition. Maybe from members of your own family! What should you do? To answer that I want we'll look at what Peter did, but first I want to use Scripture to teach Scripture this morning. Paul the apostle would later face criticism and opposition to his ministry to the lost just like Peter! Paul gives us some wisdom on how to deal with criticism which he had gained by experience. Towards the end of his letter to the church at Corinth he said...

1 Corinthians 16:13 Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong.

1 Corinthians 16:14 Do everything in love.

Let's camp out here for just a minute by looking at the context of these two verses. Paul was writing to the church at Corinth which he had started during his second missionary journey. He was now about 180 miles by sea from them in Ephesus. He wanted them to know how much he cared for them and told them this...

1 Corinthians 16:5 After I go through Macedonia, I will come to you—for I will be going through Macedonia.

1 Corinthians 16:6 Perhaps I will stay with you awhile, or even spend the winter, so that you can help me on my journey, wherever I go.

1 Corinthians 16:7 I do not want to see you now and make only a passing visit; I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits.

1 Corinthians 16:8 But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost,

1 Corinthians 16:9 because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me.

There's a powerful lesson to be gained here. What do most people do when they face opposition, criticism, and maybe even threats on their well being? Many would just give up and go to a place that would be less inhospitable but not Paul. The Broadman Commentary puts it this way...

"The fact that there are many adversaries is another reason for staying in Ephesus. In that observation by Paul we find something of the staying power that made him a great apostle. He remains because of the adversaries; he does not leave because of them."

Raymond Bryan Brown, "1 Corinthians," in Broadman Bible Commentary: Acts–1 Corinthians, ed. Clifton J. Allen, vol. 10, Broadman Bible Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1970), 395.

And his advice is five fold...

1 Corinthians 16:13 Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong.

1 Corinthians 16:14 Do everything in love.

A. Be on your guard - In other words, be prepared for the criticism by praying and asking God to help you do the right thing in the face of opposition. The preparation of prayer will guard your emotions, your heart and mind from the effects of the criticism. How? By helping you...

B. Stand firm in the faith - Know that God is with you and by faith trust that He is going to help you face the opposition! Your faith will help you...

C. Be courageous - You will have the courage to stand on your convictions and beliefs! Your courage will be based on your faith that reminds you of this...

1 John 4:4 You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.

And this will cause you to...

D. Be strong - It's not always easy to be strong in the face of criticism and opposition, but remember...

Philippians 4:13 I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

But we must never forget the fifth thing Paul says...

E. Do everything in love - If we don't do this then our witness, our message and the gospel of God's love will be severely hindered!

And with these wonderful principles in mind we go back and see what Peter did in the face of the criticism he was receiving from the Jewish believers who were still insistent on a legalistic following of all the laws of the Old Covenant. What did Peter do? I believe he was prepared by being on guard, and stood firm in his faith, was courageous, strong and did what he did in love. As we look at what he did we realize that when following the Lord we must...

2. Appeal to the Truth

Listen to what Peter did in our text with those who were being critical...

Acts 11:4 Peter began and explained everything to them precisely as it had happened:

Acts 11:15 "As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning.

Acts 11:16 Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'

Acts 11:17 So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?"

Truthfulness is always the best policy!

The writer of Proverbs says...

Prov 12:17 A truthful witness gives honest testimony, but a false witness tells lies.

Prov 12:18 Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

Prov 12:19 Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment.

The Psalmist said...

Psalms 43:2 ...Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?

Psa 43:3 Send forth your light and your truth, let them guide me; let them bring me to your holy mountain, to the place where you dwell.

John wrote this about truth...

3 John 1:3 It gave me great joy to have some brothers come and tell about your faithfulness to the truth and how you continue to walk in the truth.

3 John 1:4 I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

People may reject the truth, but we must continue walking in the truth! We can be sad about a person rejecting the truth, but we must not be mad about it, even if they reject you along with the truth you share! I think it's okay to be mad at Satan's blinding influence on people we care about and love, but we should not be mad at them. I think Paul's words to the Ephesians sum this up well...

Ephesians 4:29 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

And we must realize that even though some may decide that you are telling the truth, when following the Lord...

3. Don't Expect an Overly Enthusiastic Response at First

After Peter shared with the leaders how God had reached out to the gentiles, they reluctantly praised God.

Acts 11:18 When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."

Notice, it was "so then" not "Isn't that fantastic!" Why were they half-hearted in their response?

The Problem...

As I alluded to earlier, there were those who felt that before a person could become a Christian, they would have to become a Jew. They believed a person would have to fully adhere to the Jewish law of circumcision, and other Levitical laws, before they could even have a chance of salvation. They were legalists. They did not understand grace or the impact of the New Covenant on what it took to have a personal relationship with God. This was not only a problem for Peter's ministry, but also for Paul's ministry! Paul would later explain with the following Scripture...

The Truth

Gal 6:13 Not even those who are circumcised obey the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your flesh.

Gal 6:14 May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

Gal 6:15 Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation.

In other words it wasn't the removal of a piece of flesh (circumcision) that made a person right with God, but allowing God to remove the wickedness from a person's heart so that they could become a new creation. It's called a circumcision of the heart!

Paul put it this way...

Rom 2:28 A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical.

Rom 2:29 No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code...

The Jewish believers were stubbornly holding on to an outward following of the letter of the law rather than focusing on the heart! Let me just say, if the heart is right with God on the inside then the outside actions will follow! And when people can see Jesus in the way we live we will begin having a real impact for the gospel! This can be summed up in a message from Paul, about what he, Silas and Timothy did when in Thessalonica. Paul said...

1 Th 2:1 You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure.

1 Th 2:2 We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition.

1 Th 2:3 For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you.

1 Th 2:4 On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts.

1 Th 2:5 You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed--God is our witness.

1 Th 2:6 We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else. As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you,

1 Th 2:7 but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children.

1 Th 2:8 We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.

But there is one thing that should not catch us by surprise. When following the Lord...

4. Expect Scrutiny

Back in our text we move from Peter's discussions with the church's leaders back in Jerusalem to the front lines of the Gospel movement...

Acts 11:19 Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews.

Acts 11:20 Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.

Acts 11:21 The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

Acts 11:22 News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.

Remember...The leaders in Jerusalem had sent investigators when the Samaritans (half Jew, half gentile) believed Philip's message about Christ. Peter had been one of the investigators and he obviously saw what God was doing amongst the Gentiles. Now word has gotten back to the leaders in Jerusalem that some Greek speaking Jews were coming to Christ, but also some 100%, full blooded Gentiles were coming to Christ in Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch! Once again, the hardcore Jewish believers were concerned and sent an investigator there as well! It seems that those who had been dispersed during the persecution were now sharing the Good News of Jesus with their new neighbors and some were becoming followers of Jesus! What a blessing! But they were now facing scrutiny by some of their leaders back home. As we'll see they didn't have anything to worry about because they were doing exactly what the Lord wanted them to do. As a follower of Jesus, your message and behavior will always be under the microscope. And in our situation in today's world, our scrutiny is usually not coming from the religious establishment, but from the world. But that's really not such a bad thing. It's not bad to be held accountable. Of course we will never be perfect, however, we should never be hypocritical. In other words, we may make mistakes along the way, but there is a difference between making a mistake and knowingly living a contradiction. I don't think it a bad thing that the world is watching us. It should motivate us to live what we preach! You've heard me say it before, that I'll never be able to completely live what I preach because I preach Jesus and He's perfect. I'll never be perfect on this side of heaven, but the day that I stop trying to live exactly what I preach is the day I will quit preaching! Because that would be hypocritical and that's one thing I pray I never become guilty of! Listen to these words, also from Paul, about the way he, Silas and Timothy sought to live out the gospel...

1 Th 1:4 For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you,
1 Th 1:5 because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake.
1 Th 1:6 You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.
1 Th 1:7 And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.
1 Th 1:8 The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia--your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it,
1 Th 1:9 for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,
1 Th 1:10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead--Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

Those words encourage me greatly! The people of Thessalonica saw how Paul, Silas and Timothy lived what they preached and in spite of severe suffering, welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. In other words, many came to believe and accepted the gospel message in spite of the criticism they suffered. And evidently it was not just criticism, but severe suffering! Paul encouraged them to remember that there was a coming judgment, but they would not have to worry about that because Jesus had taken care of their sin debt on the cross. Paul reminds them that Jesus had defeated death and the grave through His resurrection! So at the end of the day, When following Jesus we should trust that...

5. God Will Turn the Negative Into Positive

So in our text, we now have another investigation concerning the gospel being presented to the Gentiles. What will happen? The believers in Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch had broken some pretty strong Jewish taboos by fellowshiping with the gentiles and even inviting them to become brothers and sisters in Christ. The investigator they sent is Barnabus. Isn't God good? It was Barnabus. You've got to love this. This guy was one of the most Godly men among the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. Listen to what happens...

Acts 11:23 When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.

Acts 11:24 He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

God knows how to take the bad this world throws at us and make good come out of it. As it ended up, they didn't have anything to worry about because God has the amazing power and ability to turn the negative into positive. God has a plan. The question is will we follow that plan. Will we allow God to turn the negative into positive? The Scripture I'm about to read speaks powerfully about God's ability to turn the negative into positive and has some other powerful truths to teach. Romans 8:28ff...

Romans 8:28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

You know I love that verse and you've heard me say many times... This verse doesn't say that all things are good, but that "in all things God works for the good." There are terrible things that come into our lives at times. Not good at all. That's part of our existence in this world. Jesus said...

John 16:33 "...In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

So when we put our trust in God and love Him, He will take the bad and find a way to make good out of it. Why? Because He cares. And how do we know He cares? The next verse tells us that God chose to love us first...

Romans 8:29 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

Let me help you understand that verse in a Biblical context...

Romans 8:29 For those God foreknew
(How many people have been created that God didn't know about?)

Romans 8:29 For those God foreknew, he also predestined
(predestine means to pre-choose, to pre-determine. And when you read this verse in the Context of the Bible as a whole, you'll see that God has predetermined to love you and all humankind,

John 3:16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

(although not all will accept or reciprocate His love)

Romans 8:29 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

(It is God's predetermined plan for us to be conformed to the image of His Son! But it is clear in the context of the Bible that we have a choice in whether or not this takes place. And this does not erode the Sovereignty of God in any way. God in His Sovereignty has made it clear that while He is sovereign, man is responsible for his choices. Paul has already told us this...

Romans 10:13 for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

So remember that God called you first! And if you have responded to that call by calling on His name you are now one of His chosen people and you don't have to fear anything or anyone and here's the reason why...

Romans 8:30 And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

Romans 8:31 What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?

Romans 8:32 He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

Romans 8:33 Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies.

Romans 8:34 Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

Romans 8:35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?

Romans 8:36 As it is written: “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

Romans 8:37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

Romans 8:38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,

Romans 8:39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And this takes us to the last thing you need to understand when following the Lord...

6. God Will Provide Everything You Need

Acts 11:25 Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul,

Acts 11:26 and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

Instead of immediately reporting back to the ones who sent him, Barnabas goes to find Paul so these people can be discipled. He and Paul invest a whole year into this discipleship process!

When people truly want to know God, He will provide a way for them to learn. God provided Barnabas and Paul to teach the new believers at Thessalonica for a whole year! Wow!

So I'll end full circle with some words Peter penned sometime later about providing everything we need to live for Him and share His good news with the world...

2 Pet 1:3 His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.

2 Pet 1:4 Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

2 Pet 1:5 For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge;

2 Pet 1:6 and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness;

2 Pet 1:7 and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.

2 Pet 1:8 For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's pray!