

Bouncer or Ambassador?
Acts 11:1-18

If I were to divide the world into two types of people, it would be to say that there are rule keepers and rule breakers. Some people just have an internal compulsion to follow the rules, even if those rules are questionable. Other people seem to enjoy life only when they're bending if not breaking the rules all together.

Some people like to keep society from descending into chaos. But sometimes we keep rules that no longer serve any purpose. Sometimes our rules only serve to put up walls between ourselves and others. For instance, many Christians—consciously or unconsciously—make up rules to decide who is and is not acceptable to God.

A friend was invited to go to church with a neighbor who served as one of the Elders. This was in the '70's mind you. After church the visitor said, "Your pastor is going to hell."

The Elder replied, "Why is my pastor going to hell?" The man said, "His hair is too long." The Elder thought for a moment, then asked, "And how long is too long?" The man said, "About like mine." What a coincidence! Hair that was the length of this man's hair was acceptable. A hair longer, (pun intended), and he was going to hell.

Sometimes rules keep us from descending into chaos, but sometimes rules keep us from understanding the awesome power and potential of God.

All of us are guilty at times of passing judgment on people who are different from us, as if we're God's bouncers. We decide who let in and who to keep out.

And to be honest, it's not a new problem. Our lesson today is about the new and growing community of Jesus-followers that sprang up after Jesus' death and resurrection.

Jesus' apostles were leaders in this young community of faith. They were doing exactly what they *thought* Jesus called them to do: spread the good news of Jesus the Savior beginning with the nation of Israel first.

But then somebody broke the rules, and that somebody was Simon Peter—the leader of the apostles. Simon Peter did a no-no. He went into a non-Jewish home, ate a meal with those uncircumcised heathen, and shared with them the message of Jesus! What was he thinking? And when Peter got back to Jerusalem, he was in for a tongue lashing from Jewish believers.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon once had a woman from his church corner him and spew out a long list of criticisms at him. Spurgeon stood there, heard every word, and just smiled.

When she paused for a breath, he responded, "Yes, thank you, I'm quite well. I hope you're the same."

Confused, the woman started over with her long list of criticisms, and when she paused to breathe Spurgeon responded, "Yes, it does look like it's going to rain. I think I had better be getting on." At this point, the woman just gave up, turned to walk away, and muttered, "Bless [him]! He's deaf as a post. What's the use storming at him?"

Isn't that great! Fortunately, Peter didn't pretend that he was deaf when the circumcised believers criticized him. He simply told them what God had done for him. That while praying, he saw a large sheet descend from heaven filled with all kinds of animals, reptiles and birds, both clean and unclean.

In Leviticus 11 you'll read that God commanded the Hebrew people not to eat certain animals, birds and reptiles as a sign of their holy relationship with God. Peter and the other circumcised believers would never consider breaking this rule. But in Peter's vision, a voice from heaven commanded him, "**Get up, Peter! Kill and eat.**"

Peter protested. "**Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.**" The voice spoke from heaven a second time, '**Don't call anything impure that God has made clean.**' This happened three times.

After Peter had this vision he was approached by men from Caesarea who invited him to share the message of Jesus with a Gentile family. And when Peter shared the gospel with the Gentile family, they received the Holy Spirit. Gentiles! Receiving the Holy Spirit! What will God think of next?!? And suddenly the walls that kept Gentiles out of the early church came a tumbling down.

What's most crucial to see in today's lesson is Peter's response because it's a powerful example of how to pivot our mindset from being God's bouncer to being God's ambassador.

Peter ends his story by saying, "**So if God gave them the same gift He gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ (he was referring, of course to the gift of the Holy Spirit), who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?**". In other words, Peter is saying, if God gave Gentiles the gift of the Holy Spirit, how could they be excluded from the church?

And I wonder. Are there times when you or I stand in God's way? Are there times when our beliefs, attitudes, prejudices or actions interfere with the work of God in our community? Are there times when we withhold the love and truth of Jesus Christ from certain people or groups because we think they're unacceptable to God?

I wonder. Do we stand in God's way or do we stand in God's will? That's a lot to think about and digest, so to help us answer those questions, I want to ask three more.

The first question is, "**How big is your spiritual family?**" That's what Jesus came to do—to enlarge our spiritual family - and it's a central teaching of the Bible. "**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.**" God so loved the *world*—that's a pretty big family.

Notice the accusation thrown at Peter at the beginning of our Bible passage: "**You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.**" You see, back then it was taboo for Jewish believers to eat with non-Jews.

So for Peter to go into a Gentile house—and the word *Gentile* simply refers to a non-Jewish person—for Peter to go into a Gentile house and share a meal was a bold statement that Jews and Gentiles were equal in God's eyes. That Gentiles were as fully acceptable to God as were Jews.

That's the whole reason Jesus came into this world, shared the message of God, and died on the cross—to gather all God's "children" into His kingdom. And that's our job too. If we claim to be a follower of Jesus, that's our calling, that's our mission, that's our life's greatest goal and priority: to bring as many people to the love and truth of Jesus Christ as possible. So, how big is your spiritual family?"

The second question is, "**How great is God's grace?**" In our passage this morning, when Peter first had the vision of the sheet filled with animals, reptiles, and birds, he backed away because some of them were unclean for God's people. Then the voice spoke from heaven and said, "**Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.**"

Think about that for a moment. We don't have the power to make anything clean. We can't even clean ourselves up enough to qualify for God's approval. Only the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ is enough to make us clean in God's eyes. So who are we to stand in judgement of others?

When you read through the book of Acts one message is abundantly clear: God's love is greater than our limitations. God's plan is greater than our prejudices.

The third question is, "**How can I get in on the party?**" Because when you finally realize the goodness of God, the greatness of God's grace, and the wonder of God's plan for humanity, you can't help but celebrate.

Look again at the final verse in our lesson this morning, verse 18: "**When they heard this,**"—*they* referring to the Jewish believers—"they had no further objections and praised God, saying, 'So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.'" They praised God. From accusations and division to praising God. That's certainly a reason for a party, isn't it?

So how do we get in on the party? And how do we invite as many people as possible too? And who should we invited to the party?

Paul talks about it in Galatians 3:28, "**There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.**"

We're not God's bouncers; we're God's ambassadors. It's not our job to put limits on God's love; it's our job to share the love and salvation of Jesus Christ with everyone we meet, so that all God's children can someday be gathered into His kingdom.