

May 18, 2025

Acts 11:1-18

We are all products of our culture. The way we think, act, speak, and live is heavily influenced by how we were raised, the books we read, the music we listen to, the stories we are told, all contribute to the cultural values and assumptions that we have. For instance, Americans are very time oriented: when we say church starts at 9:00, church starts at 9:00! But in many places in the world, especially the global south and Spanish-speaking countries, time is not looked at the same way, and if an event starts at 9:00 AM, people would maybe begin to show up at 9:15, and things wouldn't start until around 9:45. And if you were to give anyone grief about that, they'd consider you very rude. When I went to Colombia years ago, I was expected to kiss every woman in church on the face because that is how men and women greet each other, and if I would have just stuck my hand out like I do to all of you, they'd consider me to be extremely rude. The different cultures have different strengths and weaknesses. They are different, not necessarily better or worse. The problem is that Christians are often more influenced by their culture than by the Scriptures. The Bible is God's book. Therefore, it always confronts the sinful aspects of one's culture, and Christians are always going to have to struggle with the job of distinguishing God's rules and their cultural rules, and remembering which ones are which. There are stories from over a hundred years ago of German Lutheran missionaries going to Native American reservations to share the Gospel with them, and some of them insisted that the first thing they did was teach them German so they could "worship the right way." Of course, over time they repented of that and remembered that their cultural values and God's Word were not the same thing. This isn't new. In fact, the first Christians also struggled mightily with distinguishing God's Holy Word and their own cultural preferences, and let their cultural ideas infiltrate their faith. The first Christians, including the Disciples of Jesus and those they immediately brought to faith in Jesus were all first century Jews, and one of the cultural beliefs of First Century Jews was this: "We are God's favorites, and if anyone wants to be accepted and forgiven by God, they must become like us. They must be circumcised like us, eat like us, and dress like us." And today, we are going to see how the Gospel changed their worldview, and perhaps needs to change ours. **The Gospel Changes Worldview.**

At this point in Acts, the Gospel has been spreading throughout Israel and even beyond Israel, but not so much to Gentiles, or non-Jews. But in the chapter before, Peter goes to the house of a Roman army officer named Cornelius who had converted to worshiping the true God, although he hadn't heard about Jesus. And Peter came, sat with him and his family, ate with them, and they came to faith and were baptized. And this got around quickly. This was a big deal. And when Peter, who was recognized as one of the leaders of the Christians came back to Jerusalem, people weren't celebrating and saying, "Hey, good job, Peter! That's amazing that they believe in Jesus, too!" No. Instead, they harshly criticize him and say, "You went into the house and ate with uncircumcised men." Biblically speaking, that wasn't sinful. Yes, the Old Testament regulations did prohibit eating unclean food, but it never says that Jews can't eat with non-Jews.

But over time, Jewish believers, perhaps from an earnest desire to glorify God with their obedience, said, “we shouldn’t just avoid unclean food, but also avoid unclean people.” And although that wasn’t in the Scriptures, they treated that cultural belief as if it was. And Peter then tells them exactly what happened- which also is told in the last chapter almost identically- which means that what we read today is recorded twice in the book of Acts. Why would the Holy Spirit inspire Luke to record it twice? Because it’s deeply, deeply important.

Peter was in Joppa, a coastal city in Israel northwest of Jerusalem, and he was praying, and God sent him a vision of a white sheet with all kinds of animals, most of which would have been considered “unclean”- meaning that if Peter even touched one of those animals, let alone ate one, he would be considered unclean and wouldn’t be able to worship God in the Temple. And God tells him, “get up, kill, and eat.” And Peter says, “No way! Nothing impure has ever touched my lips! I’d never do that!” And God says, “If I say it’s clean, who are you to tell me that it’s not? Do not call something unclean if I’ve called it clean.” And then they have that same conversation three more times because Peter just could not get it!” After the vision, Peter wondered what this vision could have possibly meant- it seems like the meaning was pretty clear- the clean and unclean laws of the Old Testament no longer apply- and Jesus made that clear as well when he said that what makes someone truly unclean isn’t what enters their mouth, but what comes out- our sin makes us truly unclean before God, and only a perfect sacrifice can make us truly clean- and Jesus has. Peter should have understood that, but it was hard! Immediately men from Caesarea, a city north of there, came and said, “We’ve been sent to get you for Cornelius, who was told by God to send for you. And God has to tell Peter, “go.” And when Peter gets there, he’s clearly uncomfortable, he is not okay with being in that house, but Cornelius asked him, “We want to hear the message that brings life.” And Peter told them about Jesus, his death for the forgiveness of their sins, his resurrection, and they were filled with the Holy Spirit just like Peter and the other Christians were. They believed and were saved. And then it hits Peter: “If God declares them to be clean, who are we to call them unclean? If God saved us and gave us his Holy Spirit only through faith, not because we deserved it, then why would we make them earn it by being circumcised or eating like us? If Christ’s sacrifice alone makes us holy, why can’t it make them holy? If God has declared that these people are chosen, saved, and forgiven through their faith in Jesus, why on earth would I stand in the way of that because it challenges my cultural beliefs? If my cultural belief disagrees with God’s clear word, then my cultural belief is wrong- not God.” “They had no further objections” is a polite way of translating the Greek. Another way to translate that phrase could be, “they were silenced,” or “they were quieted,” or my personal translation: “That shut them up.” But in a good way. They rejoiced and said, “We are saved by faith in Jesus alone, not by our good works, not by our obedience, and they are too. God has brought them to repentance just like us, and they are saved just like us.” Finally they realized was true what they themselves were singing in the Psalms: *May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine on us—so that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations. May the peoples praise you, God; may all the peoples praise you.*

Now, you are not first century Jews, so you may not struggle with the same cultural preferences that they do. In fact, I praise you for the fact that you as a congregation have been so welcoming and filled with joy over all the college students that have come into this church over the past few months. Now, perhaps if in the future we had a large number of Spanish-speaking Christians in this church and people were bothered by that, we'd have to talk, but I get the impression that you'd be overjoyed by anyone coming in to hear the Word of God and joining our family- regardless of what they look like or where they come from or what cultural customs they have. If that's not true for any of you, it should be. But I'd like to challenge you to consider what possible negative aspects of American culture may be having on your faith life. Americans are notoriously self-centered. It's all about "me." "What's in it for me? Am I getting my way? Are my preferences getting fulfilled? What about me? What's best for me? The most important thing I'm concerned about is that I'm happy, fulfilled, and getting my way, and if that's not happening, something's wrong." That's the American way of thinking, and there are ways that that cultural way of thinking infiltrates the Christian church. If a Christian's mindset is, "What I believe and how I spend my money, my time, my Sunday mornings, and how I live is ultimately my business and if I need any help from the pastor or church, I'll reach out, but otherwise mind your own business," you are more shaped by your culture than you are by God's Word. When a Christian says, "No one can tell another person what to believe, we should just focus on being good people and not worry about beliefs and theology," they are being more shaped by American culture than the Word of God. If a Christian says, "No one, especially not church, can tell me what to do with my money," and if that Christian can find plenty of space in the budget for sports, entertainment, vacations, vehicles, and all the things that they cannot take with them after this life, and being generous with the Gospel ministry is the last thing on their minds, that Christian is enslaved to American culture and greed. And this last one is especially pervasive among Christians: worship preferences. We all have them. That's okay. But as soon as we start to put our preferences on par with Scripture and say, "That's the only way God pleasing worship looks like, that's the only way Christians can do things, this is what a Christian worship service should look like." We can't say that- Scripture give us principles and we can say there are some practices that don't line up with the principles of Scripture, but to say "The only godly way to worship is in this language, this style, this liturgy, this hymnody," is to put our preferences on par with Scripture- which is a way of self-worship. Regarding worship principles, I will tell you the very same thing I tell the students: Your worship preferences are not on par with Scripture. Yes, we should do our best to make everyone be edified and not needlessly offend, but if your mindset going into church is, "If I'm not getting what I want, or if the music I like isn't being played, I'm going to a different church today," or if you are even considering transferring churches not because of open sin or false doctrine or a desire to serve, but because your preferences aren't being met, that's selfish, that's American "me first" culture, not the Holy Spirit.

And the cure for our cultural idolatry is the same cure for Peter's cultural idolatry. The Gospel. What melted the hearts of Peter and his fellow Christians from their disdain for "unclean people" was remembering that they were just as spiritually unclean and unworthy, and Jesus gladly died for them and sent his Holy Spirit to dwell in them. What heals us of our self-centeredness is remembering how Jesus gladly forgot himself made you the center of attention. Everything he did, every time he suffered, every whip on his back, every pound of the nail, every thorn, every minute hanging and bleeding to death, every ounce of agony suffering the wrath of Hell was all for you. That has saved you. That has made you perfect. That is what makes you what you truly are. God sees you as if you were just as selfless and generous as Jesus himself. That's who you are. And just like the Holy Spirit filled the Christians with joy, the Holy Spirit will fill you with joy and self-forgetfulness as you, little by little (it's hard), are shaped less by the world, and more like Jesus. The Gospel challenges your worldview, but it also changes your worldview in the most beautiful way. Amen.