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## Recognizing God's Work

### Acts 11:1-18

**Intro:** As we have seen, **ch10** deals with one of the most important events that Simon Peter ever participated in as an Apostle as well as, one of the most crucial events in the history of the church. Peter had the privilege of bringing the message of the Gospel to the Gentiles, as represented by the man Cornelius and his family. The importance of this event cannot be overstated. Just consider the alternative: If Gentiles had not been accepted into the church as believing Gentiles, without first becoming Jews, the Church would have never become the world-wide missionary force it has been throughout its long, storied history. It would have remained a limited sect of Judaism itself.

The results of **ch10** mean that from now on, people would become members of God's family by faith in Jesus Christ alone without being required to go through the door of Judaism first. In addition to that, Jews who were already Christians were now to have fellowship with their Gentile brothers and sisters who had not become Jews but had still believed in Jesus. There was to be only one church—not two, which is what would have happened.

So, while the events of **ch10** are exciting to read about, while the ramifications of these events had far reaching consequences for the Church in the world and while it must have been an amazing blessing for Peter and his fellow Jewish believers to experience, we must remember that there was still a church full of Jewish Apostles and Jewish believers back in Jerusalem who were not quite on the same page with what God was doing as Peter was at that moment. This reality is going to lead to a rather sticky situation back on the home front and it is important for us to consider what tactics Peter uses to convey what God was doing in his heart and life to those back in Jerusalem.

We noted at the end of **ch9** how God had already been dealing with Peter about this subject and how Peter was slowly being lead in the direction of accepting others as equals in Christ but, as far as we know from Acts, the church in Jerusalem had not been exposed to any of this. Just think about what this meant to those Jewish believers. It required a major readjustment

of everything they had been taught from the OT. They were fiercely conscious of their special privilege as Jews which was only heightened by the fact that the Messiah had appeared and spoken to them and now that their long awaited national destiny was about to be realized, “God’s doing something different?”

The acceptance of Gentiles into the church meant they also had to accept a reinterpretation of ancient prophecies, to accept the concept of a national Israel melting into the church, to accept losing their ethnic identity as a chosen people and the privilege and unique place they had in the world because of it. The events of **ch10** meant that these Jewish believers now had to question and reevaluate everything they had been taught about being a Jew. This was no small task. This was not something they could just cast aside on a whim – it speaks to the core of their own personal identity. Accommodating this new reality required spiritual insight, faith, a love for others and an inspired view of God that is rarely found in any but those who are completely sold out and submitted to God.

This reality cannot be overstated. The way the Jews expected Gentiles to become Christians required an adjustment and it needed to be addressed forcefully and directly and that is exactly what the Holy Spirit will accomplish through Peter in our text today. But, what we need to take note of is that Peter’s handling of this situation was not heavy-handed. While he refused to back down from the truth God had revealed to him, he also didn’t beat the people up because of their lack of knowledge in this matter. He addresses both the situation and the people with love and truth.

**1-3** – When Peter returned to Jerusalem, it seems the church had already heard about what happened in Caesarea. Some of the Jewish brethren approached him and expressed their objections. Notice: they didn’t have a problem with Gentiles becoming Christians. They knew better than that. What they objected to was that Peter went into the home of Gentile and ate with them. Their objection was that Peter broke kosher. The reason this really bothered them was because if it was right for Peter to do that, then it would obviously be right for Gentiles to come into their homes and into their church as Gentiles; as their equals! That’s where their prejudice really lay. “Let the Gentiles accept Jesus as their Savior but can’t they have their own church?”

We should keep in mind that these Jewish believers did not yet understand the relationship between Law and grace, between Jews and Gentiles, between Israel and the church. In fact, years later, Paul would write in his letter to the Ephesians how that the entrance of the Gentiles into the church was a mystery that had not been revealed in the OT ([Eph 3:1-6](#)). What we need to realize that at this point in church history – it was still very much a mystery. There were a lot of converted priests in the church at this time that would still have been zealous for the Law. Even ordinary Jewish believers would have had trouble making the transition. It wasn't just a matter of religion; it was also their culture and cultural habits are very hard to break.

The real problem here is that these individuals were more concerned with what Peter did with the Gentiles than with what God was doing in the Gentiles. They were giving preference to their own traditions and expectations over God's will and eternal plans. The point that was being made here is that God takes people as they are. They don't have to become something else before they can come to Jesus. Now, having said that God takes people as they are, we must also be reminded that God doesn't leave us as we are. He will accept us in whatever condition we happen to be in at the time but He does so with a plan to bring about change in our lives – in the way we think, speak and act. God saves us as we are but our salvation is just the initial step in His transforming us into the image of His Son.

**4-17** – Now, of course, Peter had nothing to fear. He didn't do this of his own accord. He'd only been following orders from headquarters. Peter's response to this objection of his obedience to the Lord's leading speaks volumes to the amount of transformation the Holy Spirit had accomplished in his heart. In the Gospels, Peter is known for being a brash, hot-tempered – even caustic in his attitude and demeanor. But here, when being wrongfully confronted for simply being obedient, Peter doesn't react the way we might expect him to.

Peter didn't react in anger nor did he try to play the apostolic authority card. He could have said, "I'm an apostle. God speaks to me and through me. He directed me through this entire circumstance. If you don't like it, you can just leave my church." There are plenty of ministers that deal with controversy that way. Now some may object saying, "Doesn't God's call come with a level of authority?" Well, yes and no. Yes, God's people are responsible to follow and submit to the God appointed authority in their lives, be it in

church, at work, in the home or in society (gov't). But, specifically in church, it's not just the people who are responsible for submitting to divine authority, the God-appointed leaders are also responsible for submitting to God – even more so because they represent God to the people.

In our study of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel, we saw the stark difference between the reign of Saul and that of David. Now, both were chosen by God and anointed by Samuel to be king; both acknowledged their calling; both made some horrendous mistakes but their reigns as kings over Israel ended quite differently. David's reign carried Israel into its Golden Age while Saul's brought only confusion, fear and chaos. David lived to be an old man while Saul died in battle. The difference between these 2 was that, when given the opportunity, Saul refused to submit to the Lord while David was quick to do so when his sin or error was revealed. God's people are greatly blessed when they follow a leader who is following hard after Jesus.

Peter didn't get angry, he didn't react harshly – he didn't even get defensive. Instead, he began with a humble, yet detailed, recitation of all that had transpired. The original Greek indicates that he started at the very beginning and explained everything exactly as it happened. If there was any question as to the veracity of his presentation of the facts, there were 6 other believers who went with him to Caesarea who could corroborate his testimony.

But, Peter's testimony is not just a repeat of what we read in **ch10**. As we go through this, we are given a glimpse into how Peter was directed by the Lord to make this great leap of faith. This then helps us to understand how God reveals His will in our lives as well. How do believers know the will of God? How does God direct His people? Well, what was Peter doing when God began to lead him into this new direction?

First thing we notice is that Peter was praying. That's an important starting point. This wasn't just a crazy idea Peter got one day, "Hey, why don't I take the Gospel to some Gentiles?" Peter wasn't brainstorming a new way to grow the church (or spit-balling), he was praying – he was actively seeking God's will, whatever that might be. It was while Peter was seeking God's will that God began to lead him in this matter. In **Ps 32:8**, God says, "I will guide you with My eye." If God is to guide us with His eye, He must first catch our eye. So we need to look to Him regularly in times of personal Bible study

and prayer. That's what Peter was doing by praying—trying to catch God's eye to see which way God might lead him. It was while he was in that frame of mind that God provided the new direction.

Next, Peter received a revelation. Clearly, this is not a normal occurrence for most Christians. Peter was an apostle; we're not. He was about to usher in a watershed event to the church; we won't – ever. This was a mystery and God was using a rare and unique method to reveal that mystery to the proper authority. Now, the revelation was about food but Peter realized it was more than that. God was now focused on purifying people's hearts, not their diets.

More importantly, God was showing him that those He was calling to faith in Jesus were *not* to be called unclean. Peter's thinking on food was being changed, which would, in turn, change the way he thought about other people. The only way anybody, Jew or Gentile, would ever really become clean was by the work of Jesus Christ, and that work was now being offered to *everybody*.

I'm not saying that God is limited or restricted from giving special revelation; it's just, if He does, it's extremely rare. The primary and only sure way God guides His people today is through the Bible. So, God guided Peter through prayer and a divine revelation which is similar to our times of prayer and Bible study. When we open our hearts to God, asking for His leading and then study His Word, God will take His Word and apply it directly to our situation.

Next, Peter appeals to circumstances (11). While he was praying and immediately after he received the vision, the men from Cornelius were standing at the front gate. The timing was not coincidental. The sovereignty of God means nothing happens by accident. What if they had arrived an hour earlier? Peter would've sent them packing. What if they showed up a day or 2 later? Peter would likely have not made the connection between them and the vision. But, they came exactly at the time Peter received the vision. The vision had been repeated 3 times and there were 3 men. All this allowed Peter to see God's hand in the circumstances. We don't always perceive God's hand but He always has a purpose for every event – good or bad – that occurs in our lives.

So first, Peter was praying. Then, he had the equivalent of an in depth Bible study. Then, circumstances began to fall into place. The order is important. Too many Christians look for circumstantial leading; they rely on circumstances without first praying and studying Scripture. Thus, they are often misled - terribly. But, circumstances can be read in different ways. Sometimes, things come into our lives and we think its God's circumstantial leading but we're only interpreting the events to make them what we want them to be. We can only safely trust circumstances after we have first been praying and studying. Circumstances are only good direction if they confirm what God is teaching.

Another indication of the Lord's leading was that Peter found the ground prepared to receive the Gospel. When he arrived at Cornelius' house, he was greeted by a group of Gentiles who were ready, willing and waiting to here the Gospel message. But we must be careful here. This doesn't mean that if they hadn't been ready to receive, that Peter hadn't been lead by God. Lack of success isn't evidence of a misstep in following God. Sometimes God leads us into difficult situations and we are called to grow in our faith by sticking to our calling. But, if you go some place where the ground is prepared and people respond to the gospel, that is obviously a great confirmation.

Remember, Peter had a lot of trouble preaching in Jerusalem. He was arrested and beaten for it. He was not out of the will of God then, just because he had difficulties. But here the household of Cornelius was waiting and eager, and that was an important encouragement.

Finally, the most obvious proof that Peter was, in fact, following the Lord's guidance was that God showed His acceptance of the Gentiles by sending the Holy Spirit upon them, just as He had been sent upon the Apostles on the Day of Pentecost. We're not told if the arrival of the Holy Spirit occurred with the sound of a mighty, rushing wind or flaming tongues of fire but these Gentile converts did speak in tongues. Now, it's interesting that Peter had to go all the way back to Pentecost to find an example of what happened at Cornelius' house. Apparently, the baptism of the Spirit, accompanied by speaking in tongues, was not an everyday occurrence in the early church.

But, in light of the free outpouring of the Holy Spirit on these new Gentile believers, Peter's question in [vs17](#) is both appropriate and profound. In the

face of such obvious divine favor, how could Peter oppose or even question it? The implication being – if he couldn't oppose the work of God in the lives of the Gentiles, neither could any of them.

Peter prefaced his conclusion by referencing the words of Jesus (16). So, from the start, Peter was led by Scripture and now, his experience and decision have been confirmed by further reflection on God's Word. Of course, he didn't have the NT like we do today – it hadn't been written yet. But, Peter had heard Jesus teach this, he remembered what he had heard and now, the words of Jesus were beginning to direct his thinking. Can we say that for ourselves?

**18** – Ultimately, Peter's demeanor, humility, attention to detail and appeal to the words of Jesus had the proper effect on his fellow believers. The Jewish believers in Jerusalem were convinced that the salvation of the Gentiles as Gentiles was truly of God and they gave evidence of their belief by praising God for it. What happened in Caesarea may not have been what they would have preferred. It certainly wasn't what they had expected. But, the evidence was clear that this was the work of God and if God was working, then God should be praised.

The initial response to Peter's testimony was that the Jewish believers accepted the Gentiles as full members of God's family. But, although they were convinced by Peter's presentation, it was only for a time. Yes, they praised God but not for long. These same questions will come up and be battled over again and again. The problem is that prejudices die hard and it would be a long time until all the objections against the Gentiles would be answered. Eventually, all would come to realize the truth that the only reason any of us are saved is because God does not show favoritism. So, what matter is not if other people fit in with us but whether they have been accepted by God.

How can we know the Lord's will for our lives? 1<sup>st</sup>, you need to be willing to *do* God's will even before you know what it is. God doesn't give us the option to choose whether we want to follow His will. He waits until we're ready to obey Him then tells us what we should do. 2<sup>nd</sup>, God speaks through Scripture. He never leads us contrary to it. If we're to be led by God, we must be in His Book. We must know it and understand its principles. 3<sup>rd</sup>, you must look to God on a regular basis. This is where a regular time of prayer

and Bible study comes into play. God leads by His Word so we must be in it, looking to catch His eye. 😊