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Rejoicing in God's Work

Acts 11:19-30

Intro: Ch11 details for our instruction how the church in Jerusalem received and related to the Gentiles who had accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord in Caesarea and later, in Antioch. It's the perennial church dilemma: how to get along with "the saints below." This term comes from an old poem I heard Warren Wiersbe quote some 35+ years ago and the profound truth of it is so apropos to Church life that it has stayed with me all these years. "To live above, with saints we love; oh, that will be glory. To live below, with saints we know; now, that's another story."

This is the reality that the believers in Jerusalem were now faced with. Since the beginning of the Christian era, the Gospel had been extended exclusively to the Jews. Tradition said that Gentiles had to first become Jews to be accepted into Judaism and that same mindset continued to persist in the church. Gentiles had been saved, but they had been saved out of Judaism. Now, through the ministry of Peter, salvation has come to actual Gentiles in the person of Cornelius and his family and the evidence of their faith was the obvious and unmistakable filling of the Holy Spirit accompanied with signs. While this new development initially caused some consternation among the believers in Jerusalem, upon hearing Peter's testimony about the event, backed up by no less than 6 other eye-witnesses, the Jerusalem church glorified God because they also recognized that God was working in the Gentile world as well.

The first response we see from the Jerusalem Christians is that they accepted these new Gentile believers. Yes, there would continue to be some dispute over the Law and observance of the kosher lifestyle but there was never any question as to the veracity of the salvation of the Gentiles. This speaks to the modern church too. Christians are to receive one another and not argue or disagree over cultural differences or minor matters of personal conviction. Paul addressed this same topic at length in ch14-15 of **Romans**. We are called to follow the example of the early church and receive any and all those whom Jesus has also received.

Acceptance wasn't the only response the Jerusalem Christians had to the

salvation of the Gentiles. As we will see in our text today, the Gospel was beginning to make inroads into the Gentiles world in other areas. Because of the persecution in Judea, believers were fanning out all over the Roman Empire and they were taking the truth of the Gospel with them wherever they went and they were sharing that truth to everyone they met and their testimony for Christ was having quite an amazing impact among the Gentiles – as well it should. Word of this explosion of new converts got back to the church Jerusalem, as it always seemed to, but how will they respond to this news?

19-21 – Luke continues the story of the expansion of Christianity to the Gentiles and the catalyst for this is the severe persecution against Christianity in Judea. Previously, believers were moving up into Samaria and Galilee and along the Mediterranean coast; areas that had a large Jewish presence. But now, they're launching out into the deep – so to speak; going to locations well away from the heart of Judaism. Sure, there are still Jews in all of these places but the vast majority of the populations are Gentiles, and not Gentiles influenced by Judaism but out-right pagans!

The focus of our text is on Antioch. This would be the Antioch in Syria. There were about 15 others. Seleucus I, one of the inheritors of Alexander the Great's Empire, liked to go around and build cities and name them after his father, Antiochus so, no confusion there. But, at this time in its history, Syrian Antioch was a city of more than half a million people. It was 300 miles north of Jerusalem and 20 miles inland from the Med Sea and it is considered by many to be the 3rd greatest city in the Roman Empire. Antioch was mainly a business city. The wealth of the Orient flowed through Antioch on its way to Rome. With commerce comes money and with money comes power. Antioch was also an important political center. When you have power and a lot of money at hand, the next logical step is corruption.

Antioch was a morally corrupt city. It was so bad, even the pagans of the day recognized its wickedness. It had a cosmopolitan population and all those different cultures dragged in all their different deities. The local shrine was dedicated to Daphne, whose worship included immoral practices. Outside the city was the "Grove of Apollo," a grove of trees that served as an outdoor brothel. It was to this city that persecuted believers brought the Gospel. Here, we see these Christians preaching not just to Jews; not to those who were part Jewish and part Gentile; not even to Gentiles who were

God-fearers, but to those we would call utter pagans because Antioch was an utterly pagan city.

These unnamed disciples from Cyprus and Cyrene are genuine heroes. They began the first mission to the Gentiles (Hellenist) in Antioch. This is the first example we have of Christians deliberately targeting Gentiles for evangelism and their efforts produced tremendous results. Of course, their ministry was blessed because “the hand of the Lord was with them.” You can turn people to a personality, a social club, an institution – even a church without the hand of the Lord but you cannot turn people to the Lord without the hand of the Lord being on your ministry, on your efforts.

The phrase “believed and turned” is an accurate description of the necessary work of the Spirit in producing both saving faith and repentance in the hearts of unbelievers. Because God was with these disciples and the Holy Spirit was working through them, their ministry was blessed and multiplied (a great number).

22-24 – I don’t believe there was anything untoward in this statement, as though the Apostles in Jerusalem had their spies out everywhere looking for new outbreaks of the Gospel among the Gentiles. No, these unnamed disciples had come out of the Jerusalem church so it was only right that they share the great news of God’s work in Antioch. The leaders in Jerusalem still had the responsibility to shepherd the scattered flock which now, apparently, included Gentile congregations as far away as Syria. Not only did the Jerusalem church accept Gentile converts as brothers and sisters in Christ, they were also concerned for their spiritual well-being. They wanted to make sure the Gentile believers were encouraged in their new-found faith. Who better to do that than the son of encouragement himself?

We have already been introduced to Barnabas. We saw him at the end of **ch4**, where he sold a piece of property and brought the proceeds to the Apostles to help meet the needs of the growing church. His real name was Joseph and he was not just a Jew, he was a Levite - a member of the priestly tribe. He was also from Cyprus, a Gentile area. So although Barnabas was a prominent Jew, he must have known many Gentiles and was familiar with the racially mixed environment found in Antioch. He was a generous person and a great encourager. The apostles called him Barnabas to acknowledge this wonderful spiritual quality. It’s probably for this very reason he was sent to Antioch instead of one of the Apostles. Whatever the

reason, sending Barnabas proved to be a wise choice.

For one reason, when he arrived and saw the evidence of God's grace on these Gentile believers, he was glad! There was something in the work and atmosphere among these Gentile believers that made Barnabas able to see the grace of God. There is a principle here for us today. In whatever gathering of Christians we choose to associate ourselves with, it's important that others be able to see the grace of God amongst us. They should never see an emphasis on self, on man-made rules or on human performance. The emphasis of our gatherings should always be the grace of God. If others are able to see that – it will make them glad!

Now, we might say, "Of course he was glad! Why wouldn't he be? God was working; people were being saved." But, it was a new situation, and it wasn't a foregone conclusion that a Jew (Levite) would rejoice in it. He could've opposed preaching to Gentiles all together or accepted it begrudgingly, "If God is determined to include them, I won't stand in His way." But Barnabas didn't react that way at all. When he saw the fruit that the Gospel was bearing in the Gentile community, he was delighted. These were not his people; this was not his home. But God was working, and he was pleased. But, Barnabas didn't just come to check up on them – he came to help and help them he did.

True to his nickname, Barnabas encouraged these new believers. Maybe he thought that if God was working, he should be working too. So he exercised his gift of encouragement and began to strengthen these new believers. He emphasized a dedicated heart as he taught them the Word of God. The phrase, "continue with the Lord" isn't meant to imply that they were to keep themselves saved. The same grace that saves us can also keep us. The idea of continuing with the Lord means loving the Lord, walking in His ways, obeying His Word and serving Him with your whole heart. It means we belong to Him alone and we should cultivate our devotion to Him.

Why did Barnabas respond in such a positive and encouraging way to the salvation of these Gentiles and not in the other ways we have mentioned? The answer is found in [vs24](#) where we have the equivalent of a "spiritual profile" of the man. Luke says he was a good man. That's interesting because in [Luke's](#) own Gospel ([18:19](#)), when the rich, young ruler approached Jesus and called Him, "Good teacher..." which was equivalent

to good man, Jesus said, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God.” His point was that if the young man wanted to learn from Him, he needed to start with a higher view of Jesus than Him merely being a good man. Either Jesus was the good God or a bad man. Yet here, Luke calls Barnabas a good man without any difficulty or embarrassment. Why?

The answer follows immediately after. Barnabas was a good man because he was full of the Holy Spirit and faith. Meaning, he had the Spirit of Jesus Christ within him and he had faith, which is a fruit of the Spirit. It was because of the presence of the spirit of Jesus within him that when he arrived in Antioch, he was able to rejoice at what was happening. The Spirit within him was bearing witness with the Spirit that was in the Gentile converts, and he rejoiced in the marvelous work God was doing among them.

What is the filling of the Holy Spirit? What does it look like in the life of a believer? Most Christians today believe that the filling of the Spirit is always accompanied by some demonstration of the gifts of the Spirit – most commonly, speaking in tongues, demonstrative healing or some prophetic utterances. This is the modern view of being filled with the Spirit but what does the Bible say? We’ve already seen in our study of Acts that one of the premiere proofs of the Spirit’s filling is ability to magnify and glorify God. We saw it in [ch2](#) on the Day of Pentecost; we saw it in [ch4](#) after the Apostles were beaten for preaching Jesus. We even saw it in [ch10](#) as Peter was preaching to Cornelius and his family. The filling of the Holy Spirit compelled those who were filled to praise God and declare His glory!

But that’s not the only evidence of being filled with the Spirit. [Eph 5:18-21](#) gives more insight into this subject. There is a dual command in [vs18](#) to not be drunk with wine but do be filled with the Spirit. Paul is contrasting the conduct of the world (drunk) with the Christian condition (be filled). While there is much to contrast, there are also some similarities. If a person wants to stay drunk, they have to keep drinking. In the same way, if a Christian wants to stay filled with the Spirit, they must continually seek to be filled. In fact, Paul’s grammar clearly says this – be constantly being filled with the Spirit.” We must be continuously filled with the Spirit because we’re broken vessels and we leak.

The rest of the passage reveals what being filled with the Spirit actually looks like. The Spirit-filled life is marked by worship, gratitude and mutual

submission. There's more evidence found in our text, though it's not easily seen.

25-26 – We learn something else about Barnabas here, something for which he should be praised – something rarely seen in ministers today. Another clear proof that the true Spirit of Jesus Christ was filling Barnabas' life was the fact that he was self-effacing, modest – unassuming. Remember, Barnabas was the official delegate from Jerusalem. He was probably one of the more prominent figures in the church. As such, he could've been quite the authoritarian. "I'm the official representative from Jerusalem. I'm going to tell you how to run your church. Do it like Jerusalem does it and report to me." Barnabas didn't seem to have any of that spirit in him. No, he rejoiced in what was happening and encouraged the work. The result of this was a great many people were added to the Lord. Now Barnabas needed help!

This new "mixed" church had very little knowledge of God's Word. What did they need to keep them from going off into one crazy direction after another? They needed sound teaching. But, to have that, they needed someone who could teach these new converts. Who could do it? Who was capable of leading Gentiles through a systematic study of OT doctrine? Barnabas knew that wasn't his gift – he was an encourager. Even tho he was basically "in charge," he knew he wasn't the one to teach these converts but there must be someone – then he thought of Saul.

So, instead of retaining his position of prominence and risk watching the fruit wither on the vine, Barnabas goes out of his way to search for and bring back a man he had known years before in Jerusalem and whom he recognized as being just the one to help the church. He is willing to lay aside his privileged position for the spiritual benefit of others.

Is this not exactly what Jesus Christ has done for us (**Phil 2:5-8**)? I refer to this passage so often because I need to be reminded again and again what the Spirit of Jesus truly looks like. He was willing to set aside His glory to come to our world and die for us. He lowered Himself to become like us so that we might be raised up to become like Him. Exhibiting this spiritual quality is probably the greatest evidence of the filling of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life.

Did it work? Was Saul the solution? Apparently so! For an entire year, Paul and Barnabas gathered with and taught a great many people; the same

phrase used in vs24 to describe those who were added to the Lord. This seems to indicate that all those who were brought to the Lord are now being taught about the Lord by Paul and Barnabas. God saved many and these two were teaching many. They did this as a team – which is how it should be. The results of their efforts here lasted for centuries. The church in Antioch eventually became a center for great Biblical teaching and preaching. Some of the greatest Christian preachers of the 2nd, 3rd and 4th centuries came out of Antioch.

It's not by accident that here in Antioch, in a church of many races lead by the dual ministry of Paul and Barnabas, that the term Christian became associated with the followers of Jesus Christ. The Latin suffix –ian means: belonging to the party of = Jesus people or Christ ones. The term has lost a lot of its significance over the centuries. Many people consider themselves to be Christians just because they're not pagans. They may belong to a church, attend services; even occasionally give. But it takes more than that for a sinner to become a child of God. It takes repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ. Now, for those of us who are saved, we must be willing to take on the idea of the title of Jesus people – which also means we must live in a manner that is worthy of that title.

27-30 – This shows us how the Christians in Antioch functioned. Agabus prophesied that a famine was coming. How did they respond? Because these Gentile believers were being filled with the Spirit of Jesus, they immediately asked what Jesus would do in such a situation. They figured He would help so they determined to send some relief to the believers in Jerusalem. Now, much could be said about the prophecy and the collection but time doesn't allow for it.

What we can say is that, as far as we know, this is the first charitable act of this kind in all of recorded history – one race of people collecting money to help another. No wonder they were first called Christians in Antioch.

Antioch was the first place they were given this name but it is also true, in another sense, that these Gentiles believers were Christians first of all, before anything else. They could've been Gentiles first and Christians second, meaning they could've said, "We're Gentiles. Why should we send money to the Jews?" They could've been pagans first and Christians second, meaning they could've said, "Why worry about anyone but

ourselves?" But, they were neither of these. They were Christians first. And because they were Christians first, they felt a bond with all other believers and were determined to help them when the need arose.

Are you a Christian first? Is that the most important thing about you? Are you happiest to be a follower of Jesus? If so, then the Gospel will go forward. God will bless it, and others will be brought to Jesus through your witness. 😊