

Don't Spit! Acts 10:1-33

Gratefully adopted/adapted from "Don't Spit Yet," contributed by Clark Tanner @ SermonCentral.Com

Mom handed her six-year-old son two candy balls, and told him to share with his four year old brother. She said, "*He may spit it out, because they're kind of sour tasting. But if he keeps sucking on it, there's bubble gum in the middle*". So, the older boy runs outside to find his little brother. As the mother watched out the kitchen window, the four-year-old put his piece of candy in his mouth. His big brother watched in obvious suspense while the four-year-old's face began to screw up with the sour taste. As he slowly began to drool out the corner of his mouth and raise his hand to his face, palm up, his older brother yelled, "Don't spit!"

In Acts chapter 10, God gives Peter a lesson in preparation for ministering to a group of people that Peter has always considered, well, unpalatable.

On the surface we read this passage as God eliminating the division between Jew and Gentile believers, and we rejoice that through Christ the dividing wall has been torn down. But there is much more to this scripture account, and some of that much more involves a sometimes sour lesson for us.



Up to this point in the history of the young church, the gospel had been carried to Jews and then to Samaritans, who as Jewish half-breeds also worshiped Jehovah. Then there was the singular conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, but he also was from another group of people who already worshipped the God of the Hebrews.

But in all these first ten years, there had not been an attempt to witness to any Gentiles; those people who made up the majority of the world's population outside Judaism. Carrying the gospel to Cornelius represented a new step in the mission of the church. Having up to this point kept to themselves (i.e., Jews witnessing only to Jews). Now the young Church would branch out into the forbidden realm of Gentiles. This was not just a little hurdle for these Jewish Christians. This was leaping across a chasm that no Jew was willing to cross.

It all commences with the gentile named Cornelius.

God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane [unacceptable] or unclean (vs. 28).

As we read through this story, we see Peter finally coming to an understanding of the animal vision that had earlier confused him. Upon meeting Cornelius, Peter admits, *"You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean"* (vs. 28).

Good for Peter, but let's back up a bit to follow him through his learning process, asking why didn't he come to this revelation earlier, and perhaps we'll find a lesson for ourselves as we go along.

Both Matthew and Mark's Gospels record an episode where Jesus had discussed with his disciples what makes food kosher and people clean or unclean. The Pharisees had criticized Jesus for allowing His disciples to eat without performing the ritualistic hand washing ceremony that their traditions called for. So Jesus responds to them with a lecture on the emptiness of Jewish "traditions" and how some of their current traditions actually cause a person to violate the laws God had earlier given them. Later on in private the disciples ask Jesus to explain to them what he had said about kosher food.

I'll read from Mark 7: 14 -23

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile."

When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. He said to them, "Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?" **(Thus he declared all foods clean.)** And he said, "It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

Note that Jesus explaining this parable to His disciples, including Peter. In fact Matthew's account records that it was Peter who had asked the question. Here, what

Jesus was telling them things was apparently a clear lesson that all foods are clean and ok to eat. We know this because Mark's Gospel – which was basically Peter's memoir – includes this parenthetical statement: **"Thus Jesus declared all foods clean."** So later in life, reflecting back on his earlier experiences with Jesus, Peter eventually came to the realization that he should learned the kosher food and clean people lesson much earlier.

Yet here in Acts 10, we find a post-crucifixion and resurrection Peter, now filled with the Holy Spirit, having to learn the lesson anew. So let's begin by discussing this tendency we all seem to have, for talking back to the Lord.

In one of C.H. Spurgeon's sermons, he talked about what contrary creatures we are. In our speech, he says, "...*faith mixed with unbelief, love defaced with a want (lack of) submission, gratitude combined with mistrust, humility flavored with self-conceit, courage undermined with cowardice, fervor mingled with indifference.*"

And here Acts 10:10, we see this contrarian spirit in Peter. When he says **"No! Lord."**

If we're going to say 'no' to God's commands, then why call Him 'Lord'? If we are humble enough to know and to accept that He is our Lord, then 'no' should never be considered an acceptable response to His God!

This was certainly a habit with Peter.

- When Jesus spoke of His upcoming sufferings in Jerusalem, Peter's unthinking response was, "God forbid it, Lord!" "NO!"
- When Jesus dressed Himself as a servant and knelt to wash his disciple's feet, Peter protested, "Never shall you wash my feet!" "NO!"
- And here he again says 'NO'. But at least his intent is good and his desire to remain honorable to his Lord. But his was a misguided intent, not in line with the Lord's mission and purpose for this Church that he had ordered out into all the world with the Gospel.

How often do we say 'no' to God because we are adhering to some tradition, some prejudice, or some standard imposed on us by cultural Christianity? Thinking that we are saying 'no' in obedience to the Lord, when in fact our adherence to an extra-biblical standard may be thwarting His mission through us and His purpose in us? **Let's not be so quick to say, "No Lord!" "May it never be!" "God forbid it!" to God's Spirit.**

Although it's not recorded in the Bible, Church history tells us that late in his life Peter was ministering in Rome when he learned that Nero, wanting to put him to death, had

ordered his arrest. His friends pleaded with Peter to escape the city to safety, and so finally, for their sakes, he prepared to leave. But as he approached the city gate he saw Jesus walking toward him, coming into the city. Peter asked, "*Where are you going, Lord?*" to which Jesus replied, "*To be crucified again, in your place*".

Once more, and finally for all the right reasons, Peter said 'no' to his Lord "*May it never be.*" Peter turned around and went back into the city where he was arrested and later at his request crucified upside down, because he declared himself unworthy to be crucified in the same manner as his Lord.

So, we should always be prepared to stand back and question our own motives and standards, and hold them up to the light of scripture, and ask ourselves;

- Is this the attitude scripture exhorts me to have?
- Is this a Biblical standard? Or is it self-imposed, or culturally imposed standard?
- Am I judging someone else according my prejudices or an empty tradition?"

Because, you see, it is often only prejudice that forms the blinders we wear which hinder our usefulness in the Kingdom of God.

The next lesson we get out of this account, is that God knows what's going on, even if we don't. This should be obvious to us, shouldn't it? So why do we so often act as though God is as much in the dark about things as we are?

Let's first look at this episode from Peter's point of view: Having come to Joppa at the Disciples request to heal the disciple Tabitha, Peter is staying with his friend Simon, who ironically as a tanner – handling dead animals and skins – was considered about as unclean as a Jew could get. So Peter has no problem associating with unclean Jews; it is just unclean Gentiles who are below his standard.

Being a devout Jew, Peter's habit was probably to pray several times a day. So Peter has gone up to the roof at noon for prayer. While up there he begins to feel hungry, so he calls down asking for a meal to be prepared, and while he's waiting he falls into this Spirit-induced trance.

I wonder what he had been praying. "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done"?

Kind of humorous, in a way, that hungry Peter has called DOWN for food, when food suddenly comes to him from ABOVE. A sheet full of animals is lowered down to him and he is invited to dine.

It is worth noting that verse 12 indicates there was a mixture in that sheet, of both clean and unclean animals according to Hebrew Law. So why did Peter declare them all profane and unclean?

Interestingly the "unclean" designation comes from the listing of clean and unclean animals found in Leviticus 11. But what our Bible translates as "profane," should better have been rendered as "common," or "un-kosher" in other words, according to tradition, not appropriate for a good Jew touch. **The fact that clean animals were mixed in with unclean, in Peter's Jewish mind made them all unclean.** In the same way to him the idea of Jews and Gentiles mixing together was unacceptable. Never mind that this was now being declared acceptable by the Giver of the Law! This is very similar thinking on Peter's part to the not-yet-dead prejudice in our own country against whites and blacks intermarrying.

But all that Peter understands at this point is that he has seen a food related vision while hearing a very familiar voice telling him to kill and eat, and for his refusal receives a gentle rebuke from the Lord: *what God has made clean you must not call unacceptable.* Why he received this vision three times, no one knows; perhaps Peter was just that stubborn and slow to learn. Anyway still confused as to the meaning of the vision, Peter next hears from the Holy Spirit that he has visitors and he is told to go with them.

As the story progresses, somewhere along the way to Cornelius' home, Peter realizes that his food vision was actually about the people God wanted him to associate with. Like Peter, sadly our spiritual insight is more hind sight. It is usually only after the fact that we look back and see how God's hand was working in our lives through a given situation. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we were so in tune with Him, that we could see God working in our lives as he worked? Working with God and moving with Him as He moves?

Now let's look at this event from God's point of view, which we only see because the whole story is written out for us, beginning to end.

Calvary's work is done. In Christ, there is no difference between Jew and Gentile, circumcised and uncircumcised, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all and in all. (Col 3:11). **Peter hasn't quite yet learned this lesson.**

So God sends an angel to speak first to a God-fearing Gentile, telling him to send some servants to Peter, and even tells him exactly where to find the Apostle.

Peter is not ready! The Gentile is ready!

Peter has the Holy Spirit; the Gentile does not.

Peter has been with Christ. Cornelius has not.

Peter has heard Jesus say many times that the nations would come from East and West to sit at His Father's table. But he has not yet accepted this in his heart. So this - as yet unsaved- Gentile has a heart that is more submissive and ready to receive God's truth, than that of the Apostle Peter.

You see, we need to be very careful about our attitude toward the unbeliever (or unchurched). God is Spirit and deals with us on a spiritual level. When we have become so focused on the day to day of religious practice, traditions, that they become our goal and our purpose instead seeking of the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, then the seeking repentant may be closer to God and more receptive of His Spirit than we are.

When being a 'good Christian', to us, means only doing some things and not doing other things, then the next step is to begin looking down on all those who don't or do, according to our standards.

How often does the church in our culture shut out a particular portion of our society, because we see them as undesirable, and think we're staying 'holy' or 'separated unto the Lord' by keeping our distance from them, when going to them with the gospel is precisely what we should be doing?

I have been told that in the 60's the town of Bedford was rather apathetic towards the Civil Rights Movement. But our Church must have been fairly progressive even back then. Upon hearing reports of demonstrations, "kneel ins," in other parts of the country, our Session proactively passed a resolution that "*that any Negroes seeking admittance to a service of the church would be seated,*" the motion carried unanimously. Hooray for us! But how much further would you be willing to go for the sake of sharing the Gospel?

I wouldn't advise an alcoholic to do this, and I don't think the Lord would specifically call an alcoholic to do so; but what if you had an opportunity to go into a bar to sit at a corner table with a group of acquaintances and tell them about Jesus?

'Oh, no! I'd never go into a bar. That would be a poor witness!'

But what if you had the invite, to go into such a place or any other place where typically 'Christians just don't go'? If you would have an opportunity to freely give the gospel, would you go? Or would you demand that they come out to you?

You see, we have this tendency, whether in word or in attitude, to say to the world; "You come out from among them and be separate, and then I'll give you what I have." "Clean up your life so that you are more deserving of Jesus, then I will share him with you."

Let me remind you, Christians, that our Lord was criticized for sitting and eating and drinking with sinners. The worst that particular society had to offer: Prostitutes and tax collectors, the trailer park people of his day.

"No, Lord" we say "...I would never associate with those people, or put myself in the way of criticism by mingling with them. I'm a Christian now, and I have to live the life. I have to keep myself clean. I'll put up a poster in the Laundromat or send them a card and invite them to church. Then if they come, I'll direct them to the right Sunday School class, or introduce them to the pastor, but I won't dirty my Christian image by going down into the mud to be with them where they live."

Jesus said, "*It's the SICK who need a physician*" and that he "*came to seek out and save the LOST*," So who do we have a right to shut out? How bad does someone have to be before they are not worthy of hearing our message? How sinful must they be before we can justly say, "Salvation is not for them"?

Folks, we even do this to each other within the church! What about those individuals in the church that we'd like very much for them to be gone, because they're a trouble-maker,...a strife-causer...a dissenter... or they just don't fit. But maybe they are here according to God's will, to be used in this particular body to accomplish His purpose. Remember, that prior to choosing the twelve apostles, Jesus spent the entire night in prayer, seeking the Father's will; and in the morning one of the ones He chose was Judas. Was it the Father's will that He choose Judas; even knowing what he would do? Yes it was.

So we need to be careful who we shut out, or ask to go away, or try to pray away. Because we are not seeing things or people as God sees them. While Peter is arguing with his Lord over kosher food, Gentiles who need to hear the gospel are literally walking up to his door! God sees the whole picture! God's sees the outcome and knows exactly where He's going and where He's leading!

Finally, let's talk about the 'sweet gum in the middle of the candy'.

Peter is still scratching his head about this food vision, when the Spirit speaks to him again saying, "Three men are looking for you. Get up, go with them. Relax your guard a little Peter; I sent them." So Peter goes down and receives his visitors, hears their

request, gives them lodging for the night, and the next day, goes with them to the house of Cornelius.

Now in all fairness to Peter, realize that this was a very big step for any Jew. Extending an invitation to Gentiles to spend the night in his home was unheard of. And for a Jew even to step foot inside the home of a Gentile was to invite censure and persecution. So there's more going on here than just a change in Peter's understanding of biblical doctrine. It's an upheaval of all the traditions he has been taught and has held dear since boyhood.

But the outcome of his obedience is also much more far-reaching than just the salvation of Cornelius and his household. To get this whole picture we have to read a couple portions from the next chapter as well.

So Peter, declaring that God has shown him that he should not call any man unholy or unclean (Vs 28), goes on to preach an evangelistic sermon to Cornelius and his family, But it is abruptly cut short ...

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days. (Acts 10:47-48)

Then at the beginning of chapter eleven, it says, *Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, **the circumcised believers criticized him**, saying, 'Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?' (11:1-3)*

Peter wasn't the only one who needed a lesson in grace, was he? It is interesting that the 'apostles' were among those who heard and that "*the circumcised believers*", meaning Jewish believers, were criticizing him for eating with Gentiles. It doesn't specifically say the apostles criticized Peter, but that seems to be the implication.

Friends, this is a good example of the blindness, close-mindedness of **legalism**. It criticizes any violation of tradition or commonly accepted standard with little or no thought given toward other's spiritual need or what God might be doing in the situation.

- They criticized Peter for eating with Gentiles; did anyone ask why he was there?
- Did anyone ask what the purpose of his visit might have been?

If indeed the apostles in Jerusalem were also among those taking issue with Peter's actions, did even those who knew him best stop to think? "*Hey. This is Peter we're talking about here. If Peter went to the home of a Gentile, there must have been some godly purpose in it...let's ask*". NO! They took issue with his violation of Jewish tradition without bothering to ask why!

Christians in the church often take issue with the actions of other believers; even believers in other churches or other denominations, never asking,

- Has God led them to do this?
- What is He accomplishing through their ministry?
- Are they reaching someone that could otherwise not be reached?

So, don't spit just yet. If you are getting a bad taste in your mouth, having private doubts or questions about the actions or methods of a brother or sister in Christ, pray for them. If you really need to, ask them.

Is there something about either their present or their past that 'tastes sour' to all that you have understood as proper Christian behavior, or the image you hold of a 'valuable, usable vessel'? Don't spit them out. God sees the whole picture, and your brothers and sisters are accountable to Him; not to you.

Don't hinder them. Don't criticize them publicly. Don't use your position or your influence to bring ridicule on them or stop their efforts. God' may be using them in ways that you don't understand, to accomplish goals of an eternal value that far outweigh your human standards and traditions.

What was the sweet outcome of Peter's obedience?

- First, the salvation of the household and friends of Cornelius.
- But it didn't stop there. Peter gently and in an orderly fashion, explains to his comrades the events which led him to Cornelius and then he rightfully concluded.

If God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?"
Acts 11:17

When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, 'Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life (11:18)

See the divinely orchestrated outcome of this whole story?

- God has saved an entire family; a family in a position of influence so that probably many were saved as a result of their later witness.
- He has taught Peter, and then through Peter, the other apostles and Jewish believers in Jerusalem a fundamental lesson about the all-encompassing nature of the gospel message and God's extended grace to all who believe; and by so doing He has made them all more fit for His service, and He has brought glory to His name.

Here then is our "take home" lesson for today.

Christians. Let go of your extra-biblical traditions. Ask God to show you the distinctions between essentials and non-essentials. As Saint Augustine long ago declared, *in Major things have unity, in minor things have liberty, but in all things have love.*

Stand firmly for declared biblical truths and the doctrines of your faith, but show liberty and grace toward those things that are not specifically addressed; and understand that God sees the whole picture. Of course you have to know the scriptures to know what is major and what is minor ... something we will get into this Fall.

But, if you are sensitive to His leading and willing to learn, and to be changed; yes, you may have to swallow something sour that would normally go against your pre-conceived notions, but you will finally come to the sweet 'gum' that will bind your heart more firmly to His, and to the hearts of your brothers and sisters in Christ, as you see Him accomplish His purpose in and through you.

Then, you and those around you and many who come after, will glorify God and rejoice in His wisdom and His goodness. And Christ will be proclaimed. After all isn't that is our reason for being here?