

The Defense of Grace February 19, 2012



Key Verse(s): “Therefore if God gave to them the same gift as He gave to us after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” Acts 11:17 NASB

One Church Connection: The church is called to acknowledge that God’s grace, His forgiveness, and His gift of eternal life are available to all who believe.

Focal Passage(s): Acts 11:1-26

Listen Attentively to the Lesson

Listen for details

Listen for accuracy

Listen for recall

Listening allows the Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth.

1. Tell the story of Acts 11:1-26 in your own words.

Context: Following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Caesarea at the home of Cornelius, word of this incredible moment in the life of the church spread quickly to the apostles and brethren in Jerusalem. Rather than responding in joy, many church leaders of Jewish descent criticized Simon Peter for going into a Gentile home and questioned the legitimacy of a Gentile conversion. The strict legalism of Judaism seemed to have followed these believers to their newfound faith in Christ. They had yet to discover that such legalism would threaten the grace and freedom found in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Today, there are many people who continue in this mindset, believing that salvation is earned based on family, works, or worldly success—anything but grace. While believing that their salvation is deserved, they have a difficult time accepting the salvation of others as a legitimate work of the Holy Spirit. When those of this mindset interact with new believers, the result can cause questions and confusion in the hearts of new believers, making their discipleship journey extremely difficult at best and all but impossible at worst.

Believers must stand ready to give a defense of grace, whether attacked by the religious community or by those with no real knowledge of God. In this passage, Simon Peter made a successful defense of grace before the church leaders in Jerusalem, setting the stage for the conversion of great numbers of Jews and Gentiles. The grace of God continued to spread even as far as Antioch, the city where disciples of the Lord Jesus were first called Christians.

2. Ask the LifeGroup members to reconstruct Acts 11:1-26.

3. Read the passage aloud together from Scripture, confirming the facts.

WHO...Investigate the Characters

WHERE...Investigate the location

WHEN...Investigate the time

I nvestigate the Facts of the Lesson

Investigating the facts of Scripture confirms the truth in our hearts.

1. Simon Peter, who had received a vision from God in Joppa and seen the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the Gentiles at Cornelius' home in Caesarea, was confronted by the apostles and brethren upon his return to Jerusalem. These men had been followers of Judaism prior to being called to follow Christ. Certain aspects of Jewish culture, including the rite of circumcision, continued to affect their understanding of the Christian faith.

a. What was at the heart of this controversy?

“The Gentiles also had received the word of God” (Acts 11:1)

b. What was the accusation against Simon Peter?

“You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them” (Acts 11:3)

c. Have you ever witnessed a disagreement in the church where scriptural misunderstandings became personal?

For Peter's accusers, the controversy may have been strictly theological, or the accusation may have also been personal. Peter didn't allow the controversy to become personal, offering a patient and sound response to their concerns.

2. According to Simon Peter, what makes the work of the Holy Spirit so unique (vv.15-17)? **Baptism is performed by the hands of men. Only God can pour out His Holy Spirit in a gracious act of regeneration. It is God's gift to us by grace, the same gift received by all who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.**

3. Contrast the boldness of Simon Peter and the silence of his Jerusalem critics (v.18). What made Peter's witness so convincing?

Peter's story was personal. Whether testifying about our own salvation experience or our personal knowledge of an incredible work of the Holy Spirit in others, the personal stories of a believer can be an effective, convincing witness.

4. Consider Acts 11:22-24. Why did Barnabas rejoice? Are all believers equipped to encourage new believers “with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord?”

The message of the gospel continued to go forth on the lips of persecuted believers. Some from Cyprus and Cyrene preached to the Hellenists who believed and turned to the Lord. When word reached Jerusalem, Barnabas was sent to Antioch to confirm the work of the Holy Spirit. Barnabas rejoiced because he was seeing the grace of God changing people's lives. Discuss with your LifeGroup how they can encourage others as Barnabas did.

WHY...Find the intent

WHAT...Find the meaning

WHEREAS...Find the Significance

F ind the purpose of the lesson

God always works with a purpose.

1. In Acts 11:1, word reached Jerusalem that “the Gentiles had also received the word of God.”

a. What was this word from God that the Gentiles had received?

The gospel. In its simplest form, the gospel is the story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and it is the essential truth of the church. Celebrating and sharing the gospel is the primary responsibility of the church; ask LifeGroup members to share how this truth and responsibility are a part of the faith and practice at Second Baptist. Do any members of your LifeGroup believe that God would have them do more to share and celebrate the gospel?

b. The Apostle Paul would later write Romans 10:12-16. Read these verses aloud and discuss the responsibility of the church to share the Word.

Encourage your LifeGroup to see the urgency to share described in Romans 10:12-16.

2. What creates boldness in the lives of believers? How do you gather confidence in sharing Christ with others? According to Acts 4:31, how does the church receive boldness?

Boldness came in response to prayer in Acts 4:31. Peter also testified that the Holy Spirit aided him in his testimony: “‘And as I began to speak the Holy Spirit fell’” (Acts 11:15).

Encourage your LifeGroup to pray for one another and to ask for boldness as they witness.

3. Why was the acceptance of Peter’s defense of grace so important to the future of the church?

Take a moment to discuss the value of unity of belief in a local body of believers and within a larger body like the Southern Baptist Convention. Read Acts 11:20-21 to see the fruit of unity.

4. Remember Barnabas’ role in discipling Saul as a new believer (Acts 9:27). What had Barnabas learned about the purpose of God for Saul’s life? Why would Barnabas seek out Saul to bring him to Antioch during this time when many were being saved (vv.25-26)?

As a result of those who “believed and turned to the Lord” in Antioch, the church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to encourage and disciple these new believers. As the church continued to grow, Barnabas searched for Saul to bring him to Antioch, knowing that Christ had called Saul to proclaim the name of Christ before Jews and Gentiles.

God uniquely gifts and calls each of us to accomplish His purposes. Remind LifeGroup members to reflect often on the plans God has for their lives.

5. Barnabas and Saul spent an entire year in Antioch, meeting with the church and teaching large numbers of new believers (v.26). How does God bring value to your life through your LifeGroup? How did the “Thin Red Line” in 2011 impact your understanding of God’s plan of redemption? How can this year’s emphasis on ONE Church impact this church?

Be prepared to share your own responses.

Experience the knowledge

Experience the change

Experience the joy

Experience the Truth of the Lesson

Experiencing the truth of God’s Word equips church members to be the church.

1. Reflect on God’s work of grace in your life, remembering that we are no longer bound by the Law (Rom. 6:14; Gal. 2:21). How would you defend your spiritual freedom in Christ from those who seek to deny the gift of grace through a religion of legalism and condemnation?

Defending grace is important for believers because our salvation experience is one of experiencing grace. Had God not chosen to extend His grace or favor, a life of faith would be impossible. The story of Acts 11:1-26 confirms the work of grace among the Gentiles. Paul’s words in Ephesians 2:8-9 further express this truth for all of us.

2. In Acts 11:26 we read, “And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.” In today’s culture, to be labeled a Christian is offensive to some, and certainly out of the mainstream of “political correctness.” Reflect on what it means to be called a Christian. Do family members, fellow workers, and neighbors recognize these qualities in your life? Do people who have known you for many years acknowledge that in Christ you have become “a new creature; the old things have passed away; behold new things have come” (2 Cor. 5:17)?

Encourage everyone to share. List some of the “new things” that appear in the life of a Christian.

Truth Points

Those who were circumcised (v. 2)—This phrase may refer to a group of believing Gentiles who had converted to Judaism and undergone the procedure of circumcision. Other scholars think it is a reference to all those who had embraced the Jewish faith prior to becoming followers of Jesus Christ, including the apostles.

**Encourage your LifeGroup to invest time in reflecting, praying, and going,
always remembering that going is important to God.**