

## St. Barnabas Church Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> May 2022.

Bible readings: Acts 11:1-18; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35; Psalm 148.

### Sermon Acts 11:1-18 Law and Gospel

Summer is nearly upon us but before you go on vacation you might wish to be aware of these laws:

- Milan in Italy states that it is a legal requirement to smile at all times except at funerals or hospitals. Exemptions included funeral goers, hospital workers or those at the bedside of an ill family member. For everybody else there is no excuse for being glum, the alternative being a fine.
- The law in the French town of Sarpourenx specifies that one needs to buy a burial plot before dying. The mayor issued an edict forbidding people from dying within the city limits unless they had previously purchased a plot in a local cemetery. People who die anyway will be severely punished.
- In New York, the penalty for jumping off the Empire State Building is death. Failure on the first attempt offers another opportunity.

These are all secular laws that have been developed throughout the years to address specific situations that were perceived to be of grievous—or not so grievous—concern to most people. The problem arises when laws become archaic and are not removed from the statute books but what about those laws which are Biblical in nature?

The first thing to understand and appreciate is that the Law of God is designed to keep us from harm (Exodus 15:26) *“If you will diligently listen to the voice of the Lord your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord, your healer.”*

Usually when we think about Biblical laws, we turn naturally to the Ten Commandments. These Mosaic Laws are perhaps the most perfect laws ever developed. They cover everything from respect for God and parents to respect for neighbours. They are so perfect that these laws are called Commandments and if everyone lived by them and by their spirit, we would be living in a utopian society. However, it is said that if having ten laws is good then having a hundred laws is probably better. So the Jews started to add more and more to the extent they became open to circumvent e.g. a Jew was only permitted to walk a certain distance from his possessions on the Sabbath. So, the day before, he walked that distance where he left a possession and walked the same

distance again where he deposited a further possession. There was no limit to the distance he could travel and he did not break the law by so doing.

The Jewish scriptures, referred to as the Old Testament, delineate far more than those laws first inscribed on the stone tablets by God. In fact, if one really works at it and carefully analyzes the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) one will find that the laws of Judaism number in excess of 600. In fact, in the third century A.D. the Rabbi Simlai determined that there were 613 laws divided into two parts; 248 of them being positive commandments - things that we need to do - and 365 of them being negative commandments - things that we should not do. It makes me wonder why we changed the simple rules from what is right and what is wrong, and who is male and who is female! It concerns me that parents are no longer permitted to smack their children to teach them discipline and respect in preparation for future life.

One specific aspect of Jewish law relating to dietary restrictions stated that a Jew could only eat meats from animals (beef, sheep, goats, and deer) that had been ritually slaughtered under direction of a specially trained Rabbi. However, meat could not be eaten if came contact with any dairy product. MacDonalds would go bankrupt as they couldn't sell cheeseburgers and milkshakes as they would be on the forbidden list. This morning, we read in Acts 11 that Peter, in a dream, saw a banquet on a sheet being lowered from heaven, and he was told to eat but all the food on the sheet came from animals that were on the forbidden list. So Peter refused because it was all unclean. Then he heard a voice, "*What God has made clean, you must not profane.*" We might be tempted to think this was all about doing away with dietary laws and that God was granting permission to eat any foods because they all part of His creation. As such, they are clean and proper for us. However, we have to read on in the chapter to get the full understanding of the dream and how it is applicable for us today in 2022.

Verse 1. A Gentile was anyone who was not a Jew. Most Jewish believers thought God offered salvation only to the Jews because God had given His law to them (Ex. 19:20). One group in Jerusalem believed that Gentiles could be saved, but only if they followed all the Jewish laws and traditions – in essence, if they became Jews. Both groups were mistaken. God chose the Jews and taught them His laws so they could bring the message of salvation to all people (Gen. 12:3; Ps. 22:27; Is. 42:4, 49:6, 56:3, 60:1-3; Jer. 16:19-21; Zech. 2:11; Malachi 1:11; Rom. 15:9-12).

**Application:** In life we don't find it easy to get along with some people but will we be happy to spend eternity with them if they become

Christians before they die? One such person was a senior executive with whom I worked who constantly found fault with members of staff and suppliers. He also took delight in humiliating them in meetings. I have to be honest and say I am looking forward to spending eternity without encountering that sort of attitude. Revelation 21 states that in heaven God will make everything new – no tears, no death, no sorrow, nor crying, nor pain. What a prospect! However, whilst we live in this world we are reminded in John's gospel (13:34) "*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.*" No discrimination – we are to love everyone even those whose attitude we find despicable. This will prove to the world that we are His disciples and yet, with certain individuals that is not easy!

A further thought on this subject is about family. God has blessed me with a wonderful family whom I love dearly and want to meet with them in heaven. Unfortunately, that will not be possible unless they have repented of their sin and accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour before they die. Salvation prayers for them rank highest on my prayer list? Would you be the same?

Verses 2-18. When Peter brought the news of Cornelius' conversion back to Jerusalem, the believers were shocked that he had eaten with Gentiles. However, after they heard the whole story they began praising God (v.18). Before getting a full understanding of the behaviour of individuals it is important to hear them out. The Holy Spirit may have something important to teach us through them.

**Application:** When I worked at Capernwray Bible College, an American boy wore a tee shirt which said on the front: Christian girls are HOT! The principal found it offensive as did I, and instructed me to tell him to remove it. When I spoke to the young man, I said that the wording degraded Christian girls and it would be appreciated if he didn't wear the tee shirt in college. His response shocked me. He said he had purchased the shirt at an American Christian event and the wording was meant to imply that Christian girls were to be honoured for the way in which they lived. Compared with other girls, they were HOT. He then rebuked me saying that I had not taken the time to find out facts before pronouncing judgement. He was right! Big foot shouldn't have rushed in with all guns blazing before finding the true facts. I still didn't like the message on the tee shirt but there are always two, if not more, sides to a story.

Verse 8. God promised throughout Scripture that He would reach the Gentiles. This began with His promise to Abraham (Gen.12:3; 18:18) and

became very specific in Malachi's statement that God's name will be honoured by the Gentiles from morning till night. (Mal.1:11). But this was an extremely difficult truth for the Jews, even Jewish believers, to accept. The Jewish believers understood how certain prophecies were fulfilled in Christ, but they overlooked other Old Testament teachings. Too often we are inclined to accept only the parts of God's Word that appeal to us, ignoring the teachings we don't like. We must accept all of God's Word as absolute truth.

**Application:** The Word of God never changes but my understanding develops as I grow in faith. As a young follower of Jesus my knowledge of the Bible together with its various doctrines were dictated by church teaching. Over time, my views have changed through my maturity as a Christian and better appreciation of the Word. This happened when I allowed the Holy Spirit to lead me into all truth. I am not as black or white as I used to be. Furthermore, it is too easy to hold specific views on topics of which we have had no practical experience. What do you say to your brother who has just lost his twenty year old daughter to carbon monoxide poisoning? The mere quoting of Scripture such as Romans 8:28 "*All things work together for good*" or Psalm 34:18 "*The LORD is close to the brokenhearted*" is totally inappropriate at such a time especially when your brother blames God for her death! Experiences in life, both good and bad, are excellent teachers from which we can learn and apply. In all things we have to be conscious of God's leading and sensitive in the words we use. Furthermore, when someone suffers bereavement the best thing we can do is to draw alongside them and love them – words are not needed.

Verse 12. Peter's defence for eating with the Gentiles was a simple restatement of what happened. He brought six witnesses with him to back him up, and then he quoted Jesus' promise about the coming of the Holy Spirit (11:16). These Gentiles' lives had been changed, and that was all the evidence Peter and the other believers needed. Confirmation was provided by the witnesses. Changed lives are equally powerful evidence today.

**Application:** Our testimony is the manner in which we conduct our lives especially within the family circle. Others should see Jesus in us, reflected in how we react to all situations especially with our children. We cannot and should not "talk the talk" if we are not "walking the walk".

Verse 18. Once others had seen the manner in which Peter had conducted himself under the leading and direction of the Holy Spirit with the Gentiles, the intellectual questions ended and the theological discussion ceased. This was the turning point for the early church.

They had to accept those whom God had chosen, even if they were Gentiles. But joy over the conversion of Gentiles was not unanimous and throughout the first century this continued to be a struggle for some Jewish Christians.

**Application:** There are Christians in every denomination and we have to learn to respect the differences held regarding views of Scripture, though not necessarily accept them. We have to exercise caution and not promote our own doctrines which conflict with those held sincerely by other believers. We do not have a claim on every aspect of the truth. We can learn from each other and so enrich our lives accordingly. In the process we will receive blessing and encouragement and enlightenment and joy and peace.

We are to love one another remembering that love is not a feeling, it is an act of the will and is an attitude that reveals itself in action. Therefore, how can we love others as Christ loves us?

- By helping when it is not convenient.
- By giving when it hurts.
- By devoting energy to others welfare rather than our own.
- By absorbing hurts from others without complaining or fighting back.

This kind of loving is hard to do. This is why people will notice when we do it and will know that we are empowered by a supernatural source. This becomes more evident when we are going through tough times because the world watches us and judges our reactions. We are the open Bible that others read.

We are not people of the Law.

We are under Grace.

We are people of the Gospel.

We are taught that we are to love one another just as Jesus first loved us. That says we are to welcome all others who have been blessed by the Spirit, to love and serve God in whatever way we have been called to do so.

Let us pray.

May the peace of Christ which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in the joy of our resurrected Lord and Saviour who died for our sins and lives so that we might live. Amen.