

Moving Peter Out of His Comfort Zone

Acts 10:9-23

A family had gone to the movies, and on the way in the oldest boy stopped by the refreshment stand to pick up some popcorn. By the time he got into the theatre, the lights had been dimmed and he couldn't see. The lady who tells the story said that he scanned up and down the isles and obviously couldn't find his family. As the lights went even dimmer, he stopped and asked, "Does anyone recognize me?" I thought that is so like the church – not the dim lights part, or even the dim wits, but just the fact that people feel left out. Just think of what it feels like to be in a theatre and not knowing where you are supposed to sit. That's the way many visitors can feel when they come into American churches. And I pray that it would not be the way that they would feel at our church.

A man did a survey of 18 churches in his city on 18 successive Sundays because he was curious what the churches were like. Being a bean counter, he had a scoring system worked out. He gave 10 points for each smile that was given to him, 10 points for a greeting given to him by someone sitting nearby, 100 points for an exchange of names, 200 for an invitation to coffee in the foyer, 200 for an invitation to return to the church, 1000 for an introduction to another worshipper and 2000 for an invitation to meet the pastor. He wrote up his experiment and said this, "I sat near the front. After the service, I walked slowly to the rear, then returned to the front and went back to the foyer using another aisle. I smiled and was neatly dressed. I asked one person to direct me to a specific place: a fellowship hall, pastor's study, etc. I remained for coffee if served. I used a scale to rate the reception I received." There was the potential for any given church to have over 4000 points. And the fact that he went out of his way to stick around and be friendly made the results rather interesting. After awarding points to each church, he said, "On this scale, eleven of the eighteen churches earned fewer than 100 points. Five actually received less than 20." (Hewett, pp. 94-95) I wonder how he would have rated our church. There have been times where I have seen first time visitors standing all-alone for quite some time. I think this is the norm for churches, but it should not be the norm for our church. And it takes deliberate planning and action to break out of that into being a very friendly church.

So far we have seen that the church in Jerusalem did not exactly throw out the welcome mat to Gentiles. If it hadn't been for Philip, the Ethiopian eunuch would have gone home without ever having been invited into a Christian home or ever having heard the Gospel. Last week we looked at

Cornelius, and while our focus was on the heart of the Gospel, we pointed out that he was a seeker. But all through the beginning of this book, Gentile seekers don't get a good reception. So God has to do something unusual to bust Peter out of His comfort zone. It takes until chapter 11 before the rest of the church is willing to accept them. And we still have issues of Gentiles not feeling welcome in the church in chapter 15. It was tough for Gentiles to break into the circles of fellowship.

And it seems as if nothing is new under the sun. And the primary issue is that people have a difficult time with change. It's not that they are bad people. It's not even that they are unfriendly. Sometimes it's just an issue of focus – they don't think about it, so they do what comes naturally, and that is to converse with those whom it is fun to converse with. And we will see the same thing with Peter.

I. Peter had a heart that was right (v. 9)

We see in verse 9 that Peter's heart was right. It's not as if he was deliberately running from God like Jonah did. Verse 9 says, **The next day, as they went on their journey and drew near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour.** The sixth hour of the day was noon, and while Peter is waiting for his dinner to be cooked, he is praying. He loves the Lord. He has fellowship with Him and he wants the Lord's will in his life. But there are all kinds of distractions that keep Peter from hearing God's will. And I definitely can identify with Peter. This sermon is as much to me as it is to you as a congregation.

II. What made Peter difficult to move (vv. 10-16)

A. Distractions of the body (v. 10 – “very hungry and wanted to eat”)

First of all, he had the distractions of his body. Verse 10 says, **Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat...** Yes he wanted to pray, but his body was pulling him in a different direction. Peter is no different than you or I. He found his body to be a distraction. Our undisciplined bodies are almost like a little kid who keeps tapping on our leg to get our attention. And we have a hard time focusing on prayer. One author who was commenting on prayer said, “It is a constant battle to keep the mind on prayer. The body and its clamorous demands intrudes itself on even so glorious and thrilling a privilege as communing directly with the Lord of glory.” (Phillips, p. 196). And so Peter's first distraction is a pretty ordinary thing: it is hunger. And rather than ignoring this distraction, God uses it to teach Peter a lesson. But he is going to have to put him into a deep trance in order to do so.

B. Distractions of upbringing (vv. 11-12)

So verse 10 says, **...but while they made ready, he fell into a trance and saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth. In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air...** God gets Peter's attention, and interestingly He does so at the point of his hunger. But what is *shocking* to Peter is that God gives Peter food that no Jew has ever been permitted to eat. Peter can't deny that it is a gift from God. After all, it comes out of heaven and God tells him to eat. But Peter also knows that the ceremonial law forbids any Jew from eating, touching or having anything to do with unclean animals. He has had a whole lifetime of learning to find such food revolting. He's been brought up to do things only one way. He's been brought up to be inflexible.

Now I have learned to eat just about everything, but I think some of you can relate to Peter. From the time that you were a kid you have developed habits of eating that are hard to break. And some people would rather offend a host than to eat what is distasteful. Right? So you probably wouldn't make great candidates for going to China because we can't have you gagging in front of the hosts. Peter has distractions of upbringing. And if you think of not just eating, but of all of the things that you have been brought up to do, you will find a host of things that will be distractions from change. We don't like to change. We like to do what we have always done. We don't like to get out of our comfort zone.

C. Distractions of inertia (v. 13)

Third, he has distractions of inertia. Inertia with physical objects is defined this way: "the property of a body by which it remains at rest or continues moving in a straight line unless acted upon by a directional force." Let me illustrate. Inertia makes it difficult to get a truck moving, but once it is moving along it is just as difficult to quickly get it to stop moving. And so, a secondary meaning for inertia is the inability or the unwillingness to act or to change one's actions.

Verse 13: **And a voice came to him, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat."** Peter's in a trance and will have a hard time doing anything. But that command to rise and act implies inaction on Peter's part. He is soon to learn exactly what kind of inaction God is talking about. But this too is a common distraction to man – inertia. It's easier to continue doing the things that we are doing than to start something brand new. It's just a fact of life. It's easier to converse with friends after church than get out of your comfort zone and talk to a stranger. It's easier to go through the daily routine than to obey the Lord's promptings to witness to someone. It's easier to sit down on the sofa after work and channel surf than it is to minister to the needs of the family.

We must recognize the kinds of inertia that are distractions from God's will in our lives or we will not be able to change them. Before you can change you need to recognize the need to change and the distractions from change.

D. Distractions of emotional reactions (v. 14 – “not so Lord”)

Fourth, there are emotional reactions that we are prone to. Some people are more prone to them than others. Peter was often very driven by his emotions, wasn't he? When Christ wants to wash the disciples' feet, Peter says, **“You shall never wash my feet!”** That doesn't sound very submissive, does it? It's an emotional outburst. When Jesus says, **“If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me,”** Peter is devastated and comes out with another emotional reaction and says, **“Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!”** And Jesus has to disagree with that as well. Peter is the one with the quick reaction to cut off Malcus' ear. He's the one to jump out of the boat and walk on the water to Jesus. There are times when his emotions served the Lord and there were other times when they just flat out got in the way. And that's what is happening here. Peter says, **Not so Lord!** In one way it is kind of shocking to hear him contradicting God. And yet I am afraid that this is another malady that is common to man. It was flat out rebellion. And it makes me so grateful that God is patient and kind with us. But our emotions are servants that need to be taught to mind; and they can be trained to be obedient. But they are a weak point; they are distractions from serving God.

Think of the logic of this statement, “Not so Lord!” There was a young believer who was called by God to be a missionary and did not want to go. He sought to rationalize it. And his best argument may have been that he was an incredibly successful businessman. He could support two or three missionaries if he stayed, but there would be only one missionary if he went. So he tried to talk himself into thinking that God needed him here in America – and that his call to missions could be carried out by giving. But one day, troubled in conscience, he consulted a veteran missionary about his struggles. The missionary opened his bible to this passage and read Peter's “Not so Lord!” The missionary said, “You cannot say that. It is either ‘Not so’ or it is ‘Lord.’ The two words put together are a contradiction in terms. Now then, take my Bible and take this pencil. Sit down here and pray about it. Then cross out one of the expressions. Cross out the words ‘not so’ and leave the word ‘Lord,’ or cross out the word ‘Lord’ and leave the words ‘not so.’ You cannot have it both ways.”

That is logical, isn't it? But Peter is not thinking logically at this point. He has been thinking with his emotions, and our emotions are often irrational. If you are given to emotional outbursts, you need to lay this down

at the cross of Christ and determine to crucify it. It is yet another distraction from being moved towards God's will.

E. Distractions of habit (v. 14 – “I have never”)

The last distraction was habit. Verse 14 continues, “For I have never...” “Not so Lord! For I have *never* eaten anything common or unclean.” “I have never.” Have you ever heard that? Have you ever said that? “I have never done it that way before.” Now you may think that we Presbyterians are the most prone to this problem, but I talked to a friend who was an Assemblies of God pastor, and he said that their whole denomination has deeply entrenched traditions too. This is common to all people. We are creatures of habit. Habits can be good, but any habit can on occasion make us blind to doing God's will, and keep us from moving forward.

III. How God breaks through

A. A vision (v. 10)

Well, let's look next at how God breaks through these distractions and gets Peter on the move and enthusiastic about his new venture. We've already seen that God gives him a vision in verse 10. This is like knocking Peter over the head. You shouldn't *have* to have a vision. But there are people that God has to move by this means. I believe this may be one of the reasons why there are so many dreams and visions that Muslims are having in many countries that has sometimes been leading entire villages to Christ as they are prepared for the Gospel to come. But there is hardly any other religion that has such a powerful grip on its people than Islam. It takes something remarkable to break them out of their unbelief.

B. Insisting on His right to call the shots (vv. 11-12).

The second thing God does is to insist on his right to call the shots. In this case God insists on the right to change the food laws. And the question is, “Are we willing to acknowledge God as Lord.” A lord calls the shots. Now God has never changed the *moral* laws because they are a reflection of His character and He has declared them to be forever. But any other rules that He gives, He can arbitrarily change if he wants – because He is Lord. That's why God had the right to condemn Adam and Eve to death for eating from the forbidden tree. People think that was ungenerous and unkind of God. Why give an arbitrary command like that? They forget that God gave Adam and Eve more foods in that garden than they would be able to sample in a year. Just think of all the variety of vegetables and fruits in the world and you will realize that God was incredibly generous. They could eat from every tree except for one. And if God says, “No,” it is forbidden, and if He says, “You must eat” then it must be eaten.

And by the way, any good parent will imitate God in God's parenting techniques. God didn't put many no-no's into the garden. He only put one. But he put it there to establish His authority. And in the same way, there isn't the need for a parent to put many no-no's into the house when a child is just learning to crawl. The parents only need one or two, because that child will be attracted to that no-no like a magnet as soon as he finds out that it is a no-no. He might have ignored it before, but as soon as he finds out it is a no-no, he is going to test your authority by trying to touch it. It is just guaranteed. And that becomes the training tool to teach a child to submit to authority. There are too many children who never learned that lesson early and they have grown up to be self-centered adults who are constantly bucking any authority that God places over them. You need to teach your children this lesson early. It doesn't matter how small the directive may be, children will try to push the limits to see if they can get away with it. And there are some adults who do the same thing. But that's a side note.

Here God insists on His rights to call the shots. He had already changed the food laws before. He changed the food laws under Noah, again under Moses and then now again under Christ. And submission to the changes made in the New Testament is a test of our willingness to let God call the shots. And you might think about that. Is there any command in the New Testament that raises your hackles and makes you want to touch the no-no. O sure, you might rationalize in your mind that the command is really arbitrary and doesn't make any sense in our culture. Just realize that God sometimes gives commands just to assert His authority as Lord and to see if you will obey whether you can see the rationale for the command or not.

C. Rebuke (v. 15)

The third thing that God does to move Peter to obedience is to give Peter a rebuke. Verse 15 says, **And a voice spoke to him again the second time, "What God has cleansed you must not call common.** No one likes to be rebuked, do they? But God persists in giving the command and giving the rebuke three times.

D. Making emotive connections (v. 16)

1. Peter had denied Christ three times (John 18:17,25-27)

The fourth thing that God does is to connect with Peter's emotions. Now I find this very interesting. After all, it is Peter's emotions that are getting him into trouble. And we would be wise by imitating God and not neglecting the emotions. Let's read verse 16 and I will explain why this would have been a powerful appeal to Peter's emotions. Verse 16 says, **This was done three times. And the object was taken up into heaven again.** Do you remember the story of Peter's denial? Christ told Peter ahead of time

that Peter would deny His lord three times that night. Peter denies it saying that even if everyone else denied Jesus, he would not. But the story goes on to say that Peter does indeed deny Christ three times. And when Christ looked at him, he suddenly remembered what Jesus had said and went out and wept bitterly. How many times do we determine that *we will never sin against the Lord again*? And what happens? Before we know it, we have denied the Lord again without realizing it.

God knows our human nature, and He answers with His grace after the resurrection. In John 21 Jesus questioned Peter three times if Peter really loved Him. This was to reinforce to Peter that Jesus knew his nature better than Peter did, and he still loved Peter, despite Peter's weakness of love. Anyway, Peter affirms that he does indeed love the Lord, but each time he used a Greek word that describes a lower level of love (phileo). Jesus asks, "Peter, do you agape love me?" Peter says, "You know that I phileo love you." The third time Jesus questions if Peter even has that lower level of love. And it says, **Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?** [and this time Jesus asks if Peter has phileo love. Peter is grieved that even that phileo love is questioned. And Peter responds] **"Lord, you know all things; You know that I love You. Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep."**

2. Christ questions Peter's love three times (John 21:15-19)
3. Christ reinstated Peter three times, each time telling him to "feed My sheep" (John 21:15-19)

But what is such a blessing is that Jesus is in effect saying, "You may have denied Me three times, and though I have three times questioned whether you really love Me, I want you to know that I love you and am offering you your job of apostle back again." When Jesus says each of the three times, "feed My lambs... tend my sheep... and feed My sheep," Jesus was reinstating Peter to office three times. It was a time of humiliation *and* of exaltation; a time of shame and joy. It was a time when Peter recognized that he was not worthy of the least of Christ's mercies, and yet Christ was not only showing mercy but ushering Peter into a position of prominent leadership. You could not go through those three denials, three questionings of love and three commands to feed and tend Christ's sheep without it having a big impact upon Peter. These Gentile believers are God's sheep. Sheep do not belong to Peter; they belong to the Lord. And it is Peter's duty to feed the sheep whether they are young or old; pretty or ugly; easy to get along with or hard to get along with; rich or poor; Jew or Gentile. Christ is in effect saying, "Feed My sheep."

4. Against Peter's resistance, God gives the same vision three

times (v. 16)

That number three comes up again in verse 16. In effect Peter is denying the Lord three times again when God gives him an arbitrary command to rise, kill and eat. How embarrassing! He probably thought after the pain that he endured at the first denial that he would never deny His Lord again. Yet three times Peter says, “**Not so, Lord!**” And yet, is that not just like us? God calls us to do things that are uncomfortable, socially unacceptable, culturally unacceptable or simply hard on our flesh, and we say, “Not so Lord!” We are denying the Lord just as Peter did. And God uses various means to move us out of our comfort zone and into obedience. We must not ignore what God is doing. We must be sensitive to His Word, and sensitive to the reproves that come from the pulpit, the convictions that come in our devotions. We must overcome our inertia and do what God wants us to do.

E. Perfect timing (v. 17-18)

But I love how this passage goes on. Peter doesn't get it yet. Look at verses 17-18. **Now while Peter wondered within himself what this vision which he had seen meant...** Let's stop there for a minute. It says that he wondered. Aren't you glad that you aren't the only one who is slow to see the need to move? Peter didn't get it. He was still wondering. And this just shows to me the richness of God's grace and of His patience. Now don't get me wrong - God doesn't ignore our disobedience. No, He is going to move us to sanctification. But He is patient with us in our slowness. You see, Peter was saved and secure. He wasn't going to lose God as His father, even though Peter had denied Christ once again, and He had denied Christ *three times in a row* once again. But God lovingly, kindly and graciously keeps prodding and keeps moving.

And what perfect timing there is in God's providence. Notice it was immediately after the vision and while Peter is wondering, that these men come to the door. Verses 17-18 say, **Now while Peter wondered within himself what this vision which he had seen meant, behold, the men who had been sent from Cornelius had made inquiry for Simon's house, and stood before the gate. And they called and asked whether Simon, whose surname was Peter, was lodging there.**

F. There are three visitors (v. 7)

And of course, God providentially makes sure that there are exactly three of His sheep that come to the door and that need feeding. Three Gentiles stand there. It's hard to miss the connection to the vision as well as to Christ's commission to Peter. But God knows our human nature. We

many times miss the most obvious things. This is why I am patient with you when I preach, teach, disciple and do shepherding visits, and you ignore the instructions that I give from God's Word. I can be patient with you because I know that God will have His way with you. I am simply one of many tools that God is using to move you out of your comfort zone and into His will. And yes, I grieve when I see that you don't get it because I want your joy. But I am committed to continue to patiently prod you and exhort you to move you forward as God does Peter. And one day, God will open the eyes of your understanding. When I look at Peter I know that God knows how to do it. I can trust Him as your shepherd.

G. Reinforcing guidance (vv. 19-20)

Anyway, because Peter is a bit dense, God gives Peter one final bit of guidance in verses 19-20. And this makes everything come together for Peter and it dawns on him what God is doing. Verses 19-20. **While Peter thought about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are seeking you. Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing: for I have sent them.** And I am so glad that God sent them and sent Peter, because this meant salvation for the Gentiles; this meant the worldwide spread of the Gospel. This meant the expansion of the kingdom. It meant that you and I could be in the kingdom.

Yes it was an uncomfortable thing for Peter, but years later Peter could look back on this event and realize that this discomfort was nothing compared to the glories that God was ushering His kingdom into. But again, is this not so like our own human nature? We are blind to the treasures that God has in store for us and all we can see is the present discomfort. Instead of realizing that every command of God, no matter how trivial, how uncomfortable or how humiliating is a command that will bring us into blessing and joy, we stop looking at the future and we start looking at the immediate pain or discomfort. Right? Any time you make a change it is hard. But change is possible and God has made us for change. And I want to encourage you to stop evaluating God's commands based on what others will think, or upon your pride, or sacrifice or any other uncomfortable thing. Change is always uncomfortable. Get used to it. Instead, I would urge you to believe by faith that every one of God's commands – even the New Testament no-no's that seem as inconsequential as God's no-no to Adam and Eve – are all intended for your supreme joy and blessing. You won't have the blessing and joy immediately any more than a child who is learning not to touch a no-no is going to feel blessing and joy immediately. And you certainly won't get to the joy and blessing quickly if you keep bucking

God's authority and insisting on touching that no-no. But I can guarantee you that God's grace and God's laws are intended to bless you.

So when God calls you to submit and your pride says, "Not so, Lord" you need to cross out either the words "Not so" or "Lord." Those don't go together. And the sooner you start singing "Yes, Lord, Yes Lord, Yes, Yes, Yes" the sooner you will enter into the joyous dancing that the song calls for. When God calls you to wear something, tear down something, to come or to go, and your flesh says, "Not so, Lord, for I have never done anything weird; I have never done anything humiliating; I have never done anything hard," you need to crucify your flesh and exalt your loving Savior. You'll never regret that you did.

H. Obedience of Peter brings confirmation in the lives of others
(vv. 21-23)

Peter certainly had no regrets in following God's orders. In verses 21-23 we see his full-hearted obedience. Nothing is held back. And it was in the obeying that God gives even further confirmation and keeps opening up the future in a marvelous way. **Then Peter went down to the men who had been sent to him from Cornelius, and said, "Yes, I am he whom you seek. For what reason have you come?" And they said, "Cornelius the centurion, a just man, one who fears God and has a good reputation among all the nation of the Jews, was divinely instructed by a holy angel to summon you to his house, and to hear words from you.**

Now I have been applying this passage in wide ranging ways, but the most obvious application is that we need to go beyond our comfort zones in making strangers feel welcome at the table of the Lord. Christ is delighted when we do so. And I once ran across a four point application of verses 9-23 that I would like to end with. This preacher called this section that I have been preaching on, "God's Table Manners." And you can think of these as the New Covenant Table Manners of the Household of Faith.

IV. Final Applications: Peter learns New Covenant table manners¹ (vv. 9-23)

A. Eat what's on your plate

The first table manner is that you must eat what's on your plate. Now I'm sorry if your mama never taught you that rule, but at least in the spiritual realm, this is God's desire. Some of you pick and choose which commandments you are going to obey. I don't need to mention them to you because the Spirit of God has been bringing them to your mind as I have

¹ I forget where I got these four table manners, but they are not original with me.

been preaching. If I had brought them to your mind you might have been able to successfully argue with me. But keep in mind that I did not bring those convictions to your mind. The Spirit of God did. Your argument is with Him, and I have found that God knows how to win His arguments. And if you want joy and blessing, then don't say, "Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything like that before." Don't say that. Eat everything on your plate. And receive it as a loving gift from the cook.

B. Don't be rude to guests

Second table manner: don't be rude to guests. There may be guests who come into this building who aren't used to eating what you eat. Don't be rude to them. And you might say, "Hey, that's not fair. If they don't have to eat it, how come I do?" Because your mama loves you. Their children may not be used to sitting as long as your children are. They may be Arminian. They may be Democrats and you don't like Democrats, or they may be Republican and you don't like Republicans. Don't be rude to guests. Love them, be gracious to them, and receive them. And if they come to the Lord's Table enough times, they may come to love the food that the Lord lays out for them. The table manners are primarily for the household of faith.

C. Don't hog all the food for yourself

The third table manner is, "Don't hog all the food for yourself." I once knew a person who was so selfish when the food was passed around that if you put him first at the table, there would be nothing left for the last two people. Why? Because he would take three steaks instead of one.

What are some ways that we can hog all the food? If you are a student of the Word, but you never minister it to your family, to your friends or to others, then you are hogging those delights to yourself. Be free in sharing the Word in your conversations.

Another way that we can hog all the food is by never inviting anyone to church.

Another way that we can hog all the food to ourselves is being a social clique that excludes anyone but the friends that you enjoy talking to. Social interaction is a kind of food as well. And some people feel on the outside. Sure your children may not like JoeShmoe quite as much as you like Betsy, Kristy and Anne (all fake names by the way), but Christianity isn't just about our likes and dislikes. There are manners that make us be a gracious church of men, women and children. So don't hog all the food.

D. Scoot over and make more room at the table

The last table manner that I found in that outline that I saved was, "Scoot over and make more room at the table." There should always be room for more. Our church must never become ingrown. Instead, it should

be a welcoming church. Now that doesn't mean that we ignore the issues in people's lives any more than Peter ignored the issues in the Gentile's lives. His letters were straight shooting letters. But surely we don't receive people because they have it all put together. Instead, we receive them and love them so that over a lifetime we can all experience God's joy as He moves us uncomfortably from change to change and from joy to joy.

I want to end with a true story: Two men visited a church for several Sundays. Neither one knew that the other was a visitor. They just knew that they felt lonely there. Sunday after Sunday nobody talked to them. They liked the preaching. They just felt like nobody was making room at the table. Finally one of the visitors decided that if nobody greeted them the next Sunday he would never come back. The other man was a bit more outgoing, and he decided that he would try to introduce himself to someone. The next Sunday the usher happened to seat both of these men, one in front of the other. The first man got up after the service to stalk out and leave the church forever. The other man turned around in his pew, put out his hand and said, "Good morning, sir. I'm glad to see you. Fine sermon, wasn't it?" Both were pleased to have found a friend and continued to stay, only much later finding out the irony of that meeting: that they were both visitors. (Paul Lee Tan, 1674).

Let's not leave such things to accident. Let's move out of our comfort zones in every area of life to pursue God's will. Amen.

Children of God, I charge you to stop resisting God's designs to move you out of your comfort zones and into His will. And specifically, I charge you to

1. To eat what's on your spiritual plate
 2. To not be rude to the guests.
 3. To not hog all the food for yourself.
 4. To scoot over and make more room at the dinner table.
- God has designed this for your joy and His glory. Amen.