

In 1904... one of the craziest Olympic events took place. St Louis Missouri was the site for the newly awakened Olympic Games. ... It was only the **third** time in modern history that the games had been held... after thousands of years. ... Most of the glamour and sophistication that you and I have come to associate with the Olympics – was not there... and it was not much of an international event. ... The 1904 Olympics was primarily a track meet between several of America's track clubs. ... But this does not mean that it was **without** some very colorful competitors.

Felix Carvajal... for example... knew absolutely nothing about the sport of track and field... but he decided that he would represent Cuba in the marathon. ... He raised money by running around a public square in Havana... drawing a crowd... and the asking for money to catch a boat for America. ... Once he arrived in our country... he lost all of his money in a dice game and had to hitch-hike to St Louis... and work odd jobs along the way. ... But somehow... he did make it.

On the starting line... with Carvajal from Cuba... were Sam Mellor... John Lordon... and Michael Spring. ... Each of these athletes had competed in the famed Boston Marathon... and each had won the race at least once. They were the pros... and were seen as the clear favorites to win this Olympic race.

Among the many others in the race... were two Zulu Warriors. They happened to be in town that week because of the 1904 World's Fair. They decided to take the day off from their jobs at the fair... were they had been employed to dazzle the crowds with their savage ways.

The starting gun fired... and everyone took off on the 28.4 mile course. ... Now the city of St. Louis and it's citizens had not properly prepared for the event... as they do for more modern events like this. No one cordoned off streets... no one bothered with crowd control. The streets of St. Louis were bustling with bicycles... horses... and pedestrians. Then... there was the occasional automobile... which had just been invented... and they usually spewed gasoline fumes everywhere. ... The 1904 Olympic Marathon runners were on their own to contend with... and navigate the normally crowded streets.

Carvajal made it an event that he would enjoy. ... he chatted with spectators along the route. ... And once... when he passed by an apple orchard... the temptation got the best of him... so he swung off the roadside and invaded the orchard to devour a few apples.

After a constant struggle of weaving in and out... dodging countless horses and wagons... Lordon gave up... after 10 miles. Mellor threw in the towel after 16. ... Lentauw... (one of the Zulu tribesmen)... lost valuable time when he got off course... because he was chased by two large dogs through a cornfield.

Fred Lortz... led for most of the way. ... But he developed leg cramps. They were so bad that he tottered and crawled to the road side where he sat down... and weakly waved to the other runners... as they ran by. (Later... he climbed into a truck and was driven several miles... until he felt better.)

The assured winner seemed to be Thomas Hicks... if he could only hold himself together long enough to cross the finish line. He knew that the other runners were at least a mile behind him. ... But that was not quite

true. ... Fred Lortz... (thanks to the kind truck driver)... was ahead of him. The truck that Lortz had been riding in broke down. ... But he was feeling fresh now... so he got out... and ran for the finish line.

It had been a grueling race for Hicks as he stumbled and stammered through the last few miles. Ignoring all the pain... as he approached the stadium and the finish line... his adrenaline kicked-in... and he envisioned the awaiting crowd and the laurels of victory. ... However... as he entered the stadium... there standing at the winner's podium... along side of President Teddy Roosevelt's daughter - (Alice)... and accepting the adulation from the fans in the stands... was Fred Lortz. ... He looked as if he had finished no more than a mere jog in the park.

When you work hard... play by the rules... endure much pain... and make many personal sacrifices... you don't expect to be cheated out of your duly earned reward.

Eventually it was all straightened out... and Hicks was declared the real winner.

But let me be blunt for just a moment. ... Today... when we look at our topsy-turvy world that we live in... it sure seems like a lot of people who don't play fair by the rules... are stealing our victory.

In 1st Corinthians 9:24... the Apostle Paul uses an analogy for the Christian life. He compares it to running a race. The he exhorts us as believers... to run in such a way... as to win.

AND... that is all well and good. ... But some of you are trying to run that race... and you find yourself having to dodge one obstacle after another –

that should **never** have been there! ... Dust... exhaust... and a melee of confusion is everywhere. Spiritual fatigue and cramping tempts you to get out of the race. (Or at least to take an indefinite break.) ... Eventually... Satan sends one of his friendly agents along in a truck to offer us a ride... just a little “lift” toward our goal. (Integrity...? What’s that...?)

Isn’t it only right... if anyone pushes through all of that... stays on course... keeps doing the right thing... lives their life in obedience to what God commands... (isn’t it right) for them to expect reward... and not a penalty...?

QUESTION: Have you ever been slapped down for doing something that you knew was right...? ... Have you ever found yourself being punished... or losing a reward to someone else... because you obeyed a strongly held conviction... that you **know** came from God...?

In times like these... when we remain certain of God’s leading... and yet our opponent gets the reward... and we are slapped down... .. are we fools... if we maintain those convictions... and perhaps lose further reward by holding on to them...? ... Why should we...? And How should we...?

This is the scenario we find Peter dealing with in our passage this morning. Today we are going to be learning a few lessons from Peter... and seeking an answer to those two questions.

There can be no doubt... from what we have been studying in Acts chapter 10... that God had been **leading** Peter. ... Peter was totally following the exact leading of God. ... First He gave Peter a vision of a sheet coming down from Heaven with all sorts of unclean animals on it. Then God told Peter to do the unthinkable and take from it and eat these previously forbidden animals. Peter... still thinking they were forbidden... wouldn’t do

it. God spoke to Peter and assured him that He was changing the long-held rules. Then He told Peter that He was sending some men from a Gentile named Cornelius... and that Peter was to go with them. Just then... Peter heard the messengers from Cornelius... who were asking for him downstairs... and he went with them to Caesarea. ... Once there... Peter went into Cornelius' house... and Cornelius told Peter how God spoke to him... and how God told Cornelius to send for Peter to come. Peter started to preach to Cornelius and the friends and family that he had gathered. But the Holy Spirit fell on his Gentile listeners... confirming to Peter... (and the Jewish witnesses that he brought with him)... that - all of this - was indeed God's doing!

Acts 11:1-3

Peter went from elation of a mountaintop experience... (seeing the salvation of several gentiles)... to the valley of harsh criticism from his peers back home. ... He should have entered the stadium to cheers and reward. ... But instead... he got what he didn't deserve. Peter no sooner returned to Jerusalem... when he was met by members of the strong legalistic party in the church of Judea. ("They were of the circumcision")... who rebuked him for fellowshiping with Gentiles and eating with them.

According to Galatians 2:12... this was the pharisaic wing of the church.. and we will see them again... raising their heads in Acts 15:5. ... But this faction was a group of the Jewish believers... which felt that circumcision was necessary for Gentile salvation. *First* you must become a Jewish convert... and *then* you can be a Christian.

They felt so strong about this that they would even confront Peter over the issue. In verse two... it says they criticized him. The word “criticized” in the original language of the New Testament... is not a sweet attitude. The word means “to separate”... “to make difference or divide”... In other words... they intentionally created division in the church. ...

From verse three... we learn that what Peter had to defend himself from... was the charge that: “*You went in to men uncircumcised,*” literally... “*men having uncircumcision*”... The reason I am distinguishing this... is because that exact phrase was a 1st Century... very contemptuous term. I am sure they probably sneered as they said it. ... Then they added... “*and did eat with them*”...

Verse one makes it sound like these sneering men of the Circumcision Party were waiting impatiently for Peter to arrive home... to Jerusalem. News travelled back faster than Peter could. ... Boy! Isn't it true that news that is negative... or controversial by nature... travels fast...? ... Truth-be-told... we all seem to be drawn to it... and the News media knows this. News stories that are positive and filled with wholesome ideas and principles... do not sell or hold our attention nearly as long as the negative and controversial.

Apparently the 1st Century church also gravitated toward negative reports... So... Peter arrives to a storm of protest. And the value of our passage today... is that we are given a shining example of what a Spirit-led believer does in such situations – that we sometimes have to go through. How should we respond... when contention slaps us in the face... even though it should be obvious to all... that we are in the right...?

Every Spirit-led believer **DOES** have to justify themselves from time-to-time to the contentious objections that others pronounce. God's Kingdom workers are always liable... to dispute and controversy. Do not expect that you will be excused. ... So we have an important lesson to learn from Peter's example.

But before we get to those specific lessons... let me point out that the contention that is raised against us... often (if not always)... smatters with enough truth... or consistent-looking logic... that it can make us wonder if our critics are right... and we are wrong.

You should know that Peter's opponents also appear to have the right footing against Peter. ... You say... "Huh...?" ... Well... here are some of the factors that may have helped Peter's opponents build momentous steam... in dividing the church against its Chief Apostle.

Many members of the Jerusalem church... no doubt... personally heard Jesus Himself declare – *"I was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel..."* Matthew records Jesus saying this (not once – but twice)... The first time was in Matthew 10:6... and then again in Matthew 15:24. In Matthew 15... Jesus was talking to a Gentile woman... who had requested Jesus' help. Do you remember what Jesus told the woman...? He said, *"It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."* ... Now... any of the members of the Jerusalem church... who heard Jesus say that... would know what the reference to children meant... and who Jesus referred to as "dogs." "Children" were the Jews... and "dogs" was the common Jewish term for Gentiles. ... So Jesus seemed to endorse the ostracism of Gentiles.

The other reference I gave in Matthew 10... Jesus was sending out the 70 disciples. He gave strict instructions that they were only to go to the cities and villages of Israel. That is when He said, "*I was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel...*"

Wouldn't it appear that **Jesus** viewed the Gospel as a "Jewish-only" thing...? ... How... then could Peter... with any ounce of respectability... do what Jesus had strictly forbidden the 70 disciples to do...? ... Peter's opposition was... no doubt... able to raise some valid-looking points.

But perhaps they had an even stronger reason to scold Peter and hold him in contempt. ... You see the believers in Jerusalem were currently enjoying a time of peace from the persecution that scattered so many of them after the death of Stephen. This occurred during the time that is described in Acts 9:31

Acts 9:31 (ESV)

So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

The church in Jerusalem had been enjoying a temporary (and probably very fragile) peace from the hostilities of their Jewish persecutors. ... But if the very ones who had Jesus killed... and who murdered Stephen... and who scattered the believers around the Roman Empire... if they should happen to catch wind of Peter's unthinkable actions of eating with Gentiles... it would most certainly unleash a new wave outrage and violence against Christ's followers – of whom Peter was their recognized leader.

“Peter! Just what on earth do you think you are doing...? Why rock the boat... and bring down a lot more pain and suffering...? Why would you destroy the fragile peace we have been enjoying with the Jewish leaders...?”

What a dilemma we often have... when our opponents bring their arguments against – what we know to be God’s leading... and their arguments have an air of credibility...! Satan sends an agent in a truck to offer us a ride... doesn’t he...? *“Hop in... I have an easier way...”*

Rather than getting into the truck and taking a ride to the finish line... Peter refused to abandon his conviction of God’s leading.

Acts 11:4

The very word *“began”* emphasizes that he intended to tell the story fully... he expounded the matter to them. The Greek word means *“to set forth”* and it refers to a deliberate and detailed narrative. The Greek word that is translated into the last two words of verse 4 - *“in order”* - means *“chronological order.”* ... Because this was a very sensitive issue... Peter intended to give both a complete account... and also a chronological account... giving them a step-by-step account in the order in which these events occurred.

So Peter exercised a good deal of patience as well as gentleness with the protesters... as he clarified the issue. ... When we have a firm conviction of God’s leading... we do not need to answer back with harshness or retaliation.

To triumph fully, evil needs two victories, not one. The first victory happens when an evil deed is perpetrated; the second victory, when evil is returned. After the first victory, evil would die if the second victory did not infuse it with new life.

—Miroslav Volf, Croatia theologian (1956—)

When we get slapped for taking right action... while doing God's Kingdom work... here are two things we learn from Peter's example...

#1. Remain calm and gentle. Look at the issue from your opponent's view. (But that does not mean you have to abandon your conviction and hitch a ride in a truck.) Sometimes recognizing the logic of the argument against your position... will help you AND them to remain calm.

#2. Give whatever evidence you have of God's work. Do your best to demonstrate how God's hand can be seen. (Peter does this in verse 5-15.)

Acts 11:5-12

Peter points to the providence of God that was present in this situation. Men showing up at his house right after his vision... and the Holy Spirit speaking to him to go with the men were coincidences not to be ignored. The fact and the timing of them represented Divine sanction of the case.

Basically... Peter at this point... has answered their objection. Peter's response was that He was told to do so by God... so how could he do otherwise?

Acts 11:13-15

The purpose of the tongues was to give evidence to Simon Peter that the Holy Spirit had actually "fallen on them." ... This was such a radical change

to Peter's understanding... that God had to leave a deep impression. ... How else would he have known that the Gospel was for Gentiles too... and that they had been baptized by the Holy Spirit...?

In Acts chapter 8... we saw Peter and John lay hands on the Samaritan believers... in order for them to receive the Holy Spirit. ... But here... the Holy Spirit simply fell while Peter preached. ... This DEFINITELY was God taking the initiative.

So... when we get slapped around for taking right action... as we do God's work... we see that there are two things we can learn from Peter's example...

#1. Remain calm and gentle

#2. Give whatever evidence you have of God's work. Do your best to demonstrate how God's hand can be seen.

As we move on... we pick up a third...

Acts 11:16

#3. Demonstrate the consistency of your conviction with God's Word

Now... please be sure to exercise a lot of care that you are not making God's Word say what YOU want it to say – rather than what its original author meant. Make sure that you rightly divide the Word. If your position is not consistent with what the Word of God teaches... then God did not lead you to that position. (You can count on that...)

Acts 11:17-18

The intellectual questions ended... and the theological discussion stopped with the report that God had given the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles. ... This was a 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. ... This continued to be a struggle for some Jewish Christians throughout the first century. ... As as I indicated earlier... we will see the circumcision party again in chapter 15... when they go after Paul.

We have before us this morning a wonderful example of what it looks like when a Spirit-led worker in the church is slapped down for doing what is right.

Keep running... and in those times...

#1. Remain calm and gentle. If you have a strong conviction of God's leading... you don't need to widen the rift... by being harsh in return. Lay aside any pride that wants to lash back.

#2. Give whatever evidence you have of God's work. Do your best to demonstrate how God's hand can be seen.

#3. Demonstrate the consistency of your conviction with God's Word.

What is our alternative...? Well... we can get in the truck that is certain to come along... ... But that will make us ignore our convictions.