

No Limits

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[0 : 00] Well, we are back in the Book of Acts as we've been reading in chapter 11. And normally on a Sunday evening as we've been looking at Acts, what Derek has done has put a few questions in the back of the bulletin about the passage, asked you to read the passage in preparation on a Sunday afternoon, and then in the evening he's asked you a few questions about the passage.

So I want to honour Derek by keeping up some of his practices, so we are going to have a few questions, but I've let him down because I didn't give you the questions this morning so that you could go through them in the afternoon.

So because of that, the questions are pretty simple, and the answers should be hopefully quite obvious. The title I gave to the sermon is No Limits, and that's because what we see in the chapter is Jesus really breaking down some of the limits that the church was putting around the Gospel, and saying to them that he was going to do something far more and far greater than they were able to really anticipate or imagine.

So my first question as you look at the chapter is how big is their vision for the Gospel here in Acts chapter 11?

How big is their vision for the Gospel? So have a little look at, just sort of look at the chapter, scan the verses, and if anybody thinks they've got a good answer, I'm willing to hear it.

[1 : 42] So how big is their vision for what God is going to do in for the Gospel?

I'm thinking in geographic terms. Okay, Audra? So Audra thinks fairly small. Anybody want to challenge Audra?

What places are mentioned that the Gospel has been taken to in this chapter? Okay, Antioch, where else? Cyprus.

Anybody else mentioned? And Phoenicia. Okay, so it's not yet a global vision, so it's not a vision for the whole world that the church has yet, but it's an expanding vision, and what we have here really is the church of Jesus Christ becoming an international church.

It's not confined anymore to one geographic country. So I think there's a slide with a map of the places that we've got. So slide one shows us where the Gospel began.

[3 : 05] So that's the city of Jerusalem down, circled there, and that's where Jesus lived, ministered, and where the church was birthed. And then we're reading in this chapter about the spread of the Gospel, and first of all, into what we would call Lebanon, and that area, Baruch.

So here it's called Phoenicia. So think of Lebanon, and the Gospel has now reached Lebanon, and then Cyprus, anybody been to Cyprus? Surely several people have been on holiday, no?

Not that many, but Cyprus is a kind of tourist destination for us. So there we are, the Gospel is now in Cyprus, out in the island, so there's been some travel by sea going on.

And this is all a result of Christians being pushed out of Jerusalem by a process of persecution. And then the last place that's mentioned here is Antioch.

So in the New Testament, it gets a little confusing occasionally, because there are two Antiochs. There's Syrian Antioch, which is circled for us here, just at the sort of the northeast corner of the Mediterranean, and that's Syrian Antioch.

[4 : 23] Also mentioned in the New Testament, I don't know if you can see it there yet, it's up right in the top of the centre, is Cydian Antioch, which would be, I think, in Turkey today.

But this is talking about Syrian Antioch. So there's just a little kind of geographic image for you to understand that the Gospel is beginning to become an international movement, and it's beginning to spread out across into different nations.

So the Jerusalem Church gets involved in this process, sends Barnabas to Antioch to see the birth of the church there, to see how it's doing, and after a while he leaves, goes up to Tarsus, finds the

Apostle Paul, and brings him back to Antioch as well.

So there's a lot of movement, travel, and different people working together from different cities to see the Gospel spreading. And that's really how we want to think of mission ourselves.

It's an idea that we want to take the Gospel on a kind of outward movement, an outward trajectory, and that we want to cooperate with different Christians from different places in that process.

[5 : 42] So we've heard a little bit about that this evening. We heard about the City of Peace, and we heard about Dumazani and Gospel work there in South Africa.

And all our city groups are involved with different missionaries, and they cover a pretty widespread of the globe.

And so what we pick up, first of all here then in Acts 11, is a sense that there are no limits geographically, that we should be involved in Gospel work in lots of different kinds of situations geographically, and we need to have a global vision.

And the other thing we find here that I really kind of want to emphasize just for a moment, is that we find different churches in different cities cooperating together.

So it's not just people cooperating, it's churches cooperating. And I think that's important because sometimes we support people, and people like Duncan Peters or Russell Phillips and Alksana, but we don't really take that much of an interest in their churches.

[7 : 08] So we feel a bond with the people we're praying for and supporting the individual missionaries, but we don't really know much about the churches that they're serving and what those churches are like.

And what we find in the New Testament is that mission isn't just about supporting individuals in the work they do, but that it really is a partnership of churches across the world.

And so when you think as a city group about which missionaries you're supporting and praying for and getting news back from, don't just engage with the missionary, try and engage with the churches that they're involved in, and try and get to know not just the missionary but the church as well.

So we want to send people to visit the Phillips so that they can see the church the Phillips are working with, meet the people in the congregation, and build a real fellowship between this congregation and that congregation on the other side of the world.

So we need to have a passion and a drive to be partnering with gospel churches in different places around the world. And I think that's really an important thing, that we as a church feel passionately involved in what other churches are doing in other parts of the world.

[8 : 27] Because one of the things that's happened in the history of the world mission's movement is that the work of mission has been taken away from the local church and put into the hands of specialist agencies and mission boards and para-church organisations.

And the result of that, that's had lots of benefits, but one of the downsides perhaps is that we don't really think about mission that much ourselves.

We leave it to the experts, the people on the mission board or in the mission agency. And I want to say that that's not a New Testament pattern, that the New Testament pattern is local churches partnering with other local churches across the globe, sending people, sending money, sending support and encouragement in different ways as we see here in the Book of Acts.

So really I do want to commend that to you, think not just about the missionaries you're supporting, but about the churches that they're involved in. Where does this kind of, so this is another kind of sub-question, where does this vision for the global church come from?

So these Christians are beginning to get a sense that the church is something not just local but international and where does that vision come from do you think?

[10 : 01] There's a pretty obvious answer. The Spirit God, another obvious answer to go along with those correct, obvious answers so.

Spirit God, how does God speak to us? In the Bible, okay, so right from the beginning of Scripture from the Book of Genesis onwards, when God spoke to Abraham for instance in Genesis chapter 12, he said, I'm going to bless not just you Abraham, but through you I'm going to bless all the nations of the world.

So right from the beginning of God's gracious dealings with his people, God's intention has been that through his people, his glory will be declared to the world and throughout the world.

And that's very much the picture we find in the New Testament. We know that in the Book of Acts, the beginning in chapter 1, Derek 2, because there that Jesus says, you will be my witnesses and Judea, Samaria to the ends of the earth.

In the Book of Ephesians, the apostle Paul tells us that through the church God will demonstrate his glory to all the powers and the people of the universe.

[11 : 25] So through the church, God wants to make his glory known absolutely everywhere. And that means that as churches we have to live in a way that really does honour and bring glory to God.

Our lives need to be godly and holy. Our relationships need to be humble and loving and compassionate. And we need to learn to really serve each other with kindness and generosity. And we not only need to do that as a church here, but we need to help and encourage other churches to do that in other places. And that as communities of the people of God, they will really bring glory to the Lord.

We're going to move on a little bit then from there to think about the first half of the chapter.

So in chapters really in two segments, you've got verses 1 to 18 and 1 to 18 are a continuation of chapter 10 and really chapter 9, the latter part of chapter 9 as well.

[12 : 36] So in that chapter 9 and 10, we have the story of Cornelius and Peter and how they met and were brought together by the Lord.

Derek preached in that last Sunday night. And in chapter 11 verses 1 to 18, we really have a recap. So it's part of the same section of the Book of Acts.

And then in verse 19, we're picking up on a previous theme, which is the persecution and the scattering of the church. So you've got a chapter in two segments. So we're now back looking at the first segment of the chapter.

And what I want to ask is, how accepting was the Jewish church of people who were different from them ethnically and culturally?

How accepting were they of people who were different from them ethnically and culturally? Okay, yeah.

[13 : 44] So thanks Ian. So Ian's drawing our attention to chapter 11 verses 2 and 3. Peter has met with Cornelius and his family and he's gone back to Jerusalem after they've been baptized.

And when he gets to Jerusalem, the church in Jerusalem kind of hauls them up with a sense of outrage and says, you went into the house of uncircumcised men and eight with them.

Now that's a descriptive phrase, isn't it? It just says what happened. But for them, it's an accusation as well. You did something, Peter, that is forbidden. You did something that is not right and you need to stand in front of the church and explain what you've done because it's outrageous.

So for Jewish believers, the idea of Peter mixing and eating with uncircumcised non-Jewish people was really scandalous.

It's pretty hard for you to have a real grasp of the sense of shock they would have felt. One of the apostles, a leading light in the church compromising himself in a way like this.

[15 : 05] And that's why here they're criticising him pretty forcefully. So what I want to say next is that there ought not to be limits culturally on the church.

There aren't limits geographically. The church is to be truly international. We've to have a global vision, not just heads down in our own locality. But as well as that, there needs to be an openness culturally.

We're not to put cultural boundaries around our church that allow some people in and keep some people out. And I want to say to you that is a really difficult process because every church has its own culture, its own way of doing things, its own in-house story, its own in-house jargon, its preferred style of music, its preferred style of talking, the language that's used, the way people dress.

So different churches have different cultures. And that can mean that it's very difficult for people of other cultures to come into our churches.

And yet we don't want to set up those kind of barriers. We don't want to use cultural differences to keep people out of the church.

[16 : 30] And that's what these Jewish believers had to learn. Until that point, the church was culturally Jewish.

All the first believers were Jewish. And although they loved Jesus Christ, were baptized into Jesus Christ, were born again in the power of the Holy Spirit, they maintained the practices of their Jewish upbringing.

So they kept the laws of circumcision, they kept the laws of hygiene and cleanliness and ritual. And so culturally, if you went into the first churches, they felt extremely Jewish. And that's why it's such a shock now to hear that Peter has broken that mold.

He's stepped outside the cultural norms and he's gone and done something completely different. He's sat down and he's eaten with uncircumcised people and shared fellowship with them.

[17 : 40] So Peter then has to justify what he did and explain that this really was a work of God. He was led by a vision from God. The Cornelius was led by a vision from God.

And the whole thing was confirmed by the baptism of the Holy Spirit in a really visible way on these Gentile believers.

And so at the end of the story, the Jewish church in Jerusalem at verse 18 are amazed. They're astonished, but they're not unhappy. And they say, so then, so then, wow, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.

It's something they couldn't really have envisaged, but God has granted people even the Gentiles so different from them, repentance unto life.

And I just want to say we often put limits around the gospel in exactly the same way that we don't expect certain kinds of people to become Christians. And we don't expect certain kinds of people to turn up in our churches.

[18 : 51] And so we simply allow our churches to form a culture that suits us, but that isn't really geared or orientated towards people who are outside the church.

And so we talk in ways, as I've said, that are for the insider, but not for the outsider. And we do things in the way that suits us and that we prefer.

So I want us to think then just carefully about this fact. First of all, in our own hearts is there cultural or other kinds of prejudice.

The Jews carried their own prejudices. And one of the things that sin does is it creates prejudice in the human heart of different kinds.

It might be ethnic, racial, cultural, gender, whatever. And the gospel has got no place for those kind of prejudices.

[20 : 07] And if those prejudices kind of continue on in our hearts, we really, really do want to repent of them. I was brought up in Glasgow hating Catholics.

Not my family didn't encourage this in me, I hasten to add, but my school friends did, the culture I lived in did.

And it was a really just normal way of life to me that I had to learn was ungodly, unacceptable, and I had to repent of it.

And often we show our prejudices in just subtle ways. But a cast aside comment, a little joke or quip, and it reveals a little bit about what's going on in our hearts.

And in our hearts we want the Lord Jesus to bring all kinds of people into this church, from all kinds of backgrounds, and all kinds of brokenness, and all kinds of cultures.

[21 : 17] And so our own hearts need to be really open to different kinds of people, and loving towards different kinds of people. And as the church, we don't want to put up barriers that are going to keep people away.

Different churches will look different according to where they are located, that's obvious to us. The church in Antioch was going to look very different from the church in Jerusalem, because it was in a different cultural context, a different country.

So the church in Africa today looks very different from our church. There's more dancing for a start in African churches, and the sermons go on sometimes for three or four hours.

So those are cultural differences. In Korea they like to get up very early in the morning to pray. I don't. And I don't feel guilty about that, because culturally that's not the way that we organise our lives.

So we know that church needs to be different for different kinds of people in different countries. And so what we have to work out then is how should the church be in our own situation?

[22 : 35] We want to reach the people who live in Edinburgh who are culturally distant from the church, and personally disinterested in church. So we want to reach these people. How are we

going to reach them?

How do we need to change if we're going to reach them? Now I'm not going to give you answers to those questions, but I do think that what we need to be aware of is that the gospel tells us, let's be flexible about how we do things in the church according to the situation that we're in, so that we can be open and welcoming to lots of different kinds of people, and so that when they come to our church, if they come to our church, they feel welcomed, they feel like they can understand what's happened, that they haven't walked into the Mooneys or a kowl, they feel like they're some really strange little group of people, but that they are able to see that our worship of God is intelligible and understandable for them.

That's a really important New Testament principle. What the New Testament teaches us is this, that there are some things that we are never flexible on. We hold them with a closed hand, and those are gospel issues.

It's the authority of Scripture, it's the centrality of the cross and the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ. The preaching of the Word of God, the singing of His praise and prayer, the observance of sacraments, those are all things that we think are an essential part of church life, and we hold them with a closed hand, but then we can be open-handed about lots of other things, so the kind of tunes we sing, the kind of clothes we wear, when we stand up, when we sit down, the furniture in our church, the architecture, all these different kinds of things can be flexible.

What I want to say is you don't expect the church to organize itself to suit you, but let's try and organize ourselves so that we are more suitable to those who are outside the church.

[24 : 55] Sometimes when change comes and the church is flexible, that's hard for us, because we like the way things have always been done.

And yet God says, no, don't trap the gospel into your own little cultural subgroup, but liberate the gospel.

Be flexible so that lots of different kinds of people can interact with it. I'm going to perhaps just give you one more question, and here it is.

What way do we see these Christians demonstrating the goodness of the gospel and their love for each other? So in the chapter we see the Christians demonstrating the goodness of the gospel and their love for each other.

How do they do it?

[26 : 08] Is that the end of the chapter? I think I've had an answer from you. I didn't even hear what you said, Audra. I think I am going slightly deaf.

Annie is saying that they gave according to their ability. In other words, they demonstrate the goodness of the gospel and their love for others through generosity.

And through generous giving as they were able to people who were in need. So three things I'm saying that there shouldn't be a limit to. There shouldn't be a limit to our geography.

We should be interested in the work of the gospel everywhere. We should have an international view of the church. Secondly, there shouldn't be a limit culturally that some people are in and some people are kept out.

And thirdly, there shouldn't be a limit to our generosity. In other words, we want to be open-handed with what God has given us so that we can bless others with it. Now that's something that we see in the life of the New Testament church right the way through Acts.

[27 : 21] So in Jerusalem in chapter 2, we know that some believers were selling their possessions and sharing the money that they got for that with others in the church.

So there was a generosity of spirit. I was at a conference in Berlin two weeks ago. And there was a joke made from the front of the stage.

There was about 500 people here in Berlin from all over Europe and around the world. And there was a joke made from the front of the stage about the conference that the Americans just thought the conference was amazing and fantastic.

So they're just so enthusiastic about everything and yeah, what a great conference. And then the Dutch said, the conference is okay. Yeah, yeah, it's okay.

And then lastly, the Scots said, the conference is too expensive. So you see, here we are with our great Presbyterian Christian tradition known for our grippiness and our lack of generosity.

[28 : 29] But when the Gospel touches a woman's heart, when the Gospel touches a man's heart, it makes them generous.

Because we've been blessed, changed and transformed ourselves by the generosity of God. So if you're grippy with your money, you've got to ask, why am I so unlike my Father in heaven? Who delights to give good gifts? Who loves to pour out His blessings? So here you've got this church and a prophet has come, Agawiss, he's saying, listen, there's a famine coming. We think that the church in Judea was already struggling financially because of persecution. People were being excluded economically because of their faith in Jesus Christ. And so their concern for the church in Jerusalem and they began to gather a collection, each giving as much as they were able to give.

[29 : 37] And that collection is then taken back by Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem. And it's an amazing thing that gift because it said something incredible.

It said that in the Gospel there is a new unity in the human race. The greatest ethnic cultural divide in the world at that time was between Jew and Gentile.

And now that profound division and hatred is being bridged and overcome by the Gospel. It's an amazing gift from the Gentile church to the Jewish church.

It's a heart-stopping moment in history and it's all a result of generous hearts.

So if we're God's people, we need to be generous. We need to be generous to each other in this congregation and look after each other. We need to be generous to the work of the church.

[30 : 39] We need to be generous to the churches that we're supporting in different places. And we need to be generous to the non-Christians around us. We need to have giving hearts.

And to see the ways in which God has blessed us and then to say, how can I take the blessings I've got and bless other people with these things? What am I willing to deny myself to sacrifice, to give up so that I can be more generous than I am already?

So this is a radical thing in our culture. If we want to show how Christians are different in our culture, this is a really good way of doing it. Be generous and give your money away because that's so counter-intuitive in a materialistic culture.

They're always thinking about getting more for themselves. And we're saying, no, we're going to give what we've got away as much as we can. So we need to be ready to deny ourselves and deprive ourselves for the sake of others.

Don't just give God and other people a little bit of what you've got left over at the end of the month or the end of the week. But be ready to be generous and to sacrifice a lot.

[31 : 57] This church and other churches depend on your generosity. So I've got some suggestions. One less meal out a month.

A couple of less coffees in a week. Suddenly you've got an extra 20 or 30 quid to give to others. It's a really simple thing to do, just to cut back a little bit on your own lifestyle.

And suddenly you're freeing up. 10 coffees is a five or if you do that, so if you have 10 coffees a week, that's 20 quid. So you just cut back a little. One less meal out a month.

Drop your Sky package by a few pounds. Get a cheaper, not a more expensive mobile phone package. We're incredibly wealthy compared to most of the world.

Incredibly wealthy. All of us. And we're so blessed and we take it so much for granted.

[32 : 56] And we take the treasures that God has given us and we fritter them away. Me as well. And what kind of stewardship is that?

To fritter away the blessings of God. And so God said, I didn't give you these blessings to waste them. I gave them to you so that you could bless others and show the generous loving heart of God. And so let's not try and put limits on our generosity. Let's try and really have loving and giving hearts.

In that kind of church with those kind of people, what was happening? A great number of people were being brought to the Lord. Because the Gospel was real to these people and it was changing their hearts and the way they lived.

The Gospel isn't just an idea to believe. The Gospel is something to be lived. And so let the Gospel change you.

[34 : 07] Let Jesus change you. And live a new life for Christ. Short word of prayer, final Psalm and then we're finished.

Lord God, we do pray that you will take away our hard hearts. We have to say we are selfish so much of the time. We can be so selfish.

We don't care about other Christians and other places. We don't care about other people and other cultures even in our own city. We don't care about those who are in material need.

We look after our own comforts within the church and within our homes and in our bank balances. And we just pray Lord that you will melt our hearts.

When we see how much Jesus sacrificed for us and how generous you've been to us. That that would change the way we look at the world, at ourselves and at the blessings that you've given to us.

[35 : 12] And that we would be radically changed by the great truths of the Gospel. As they are lived out in our lives together. Amen.