

BECAUSE GOD SAYS SO

Acts 11:1-18

Scripture Readings

Revelation 21:1-7

John 13:31-35

Hymns

Worship Supplement 2000 #779:1-3, 377:1-2,5-6, 320, 779:4

Hymns from The Lutheran Hymnal (1941) unless otherwise noted

+ CHRIST IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN, INDEED! +

God grant to each of us this one gift—that at all times and in every situation, we learn to trust our God and his Word. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

I can still rather vividly recall the consternation and frustration of having to deal with parents who clearly knew so much less about life than I did—at age 10. School is over for the summer, for example, and I still had a bedtime that was crimping my style. “*Why?*” I would ask. In my mind it was a perfectly reasonable question (given the fact that at age 10 my parents and I were more or less peers, and peers ought to work together to make decisions about things like bedtimes). My parents were actually depriving themselves of my accumulated insights and wisdom by not including me in the decision-making process. Asking “*Why?*” gave them the opportunity to avail themselves of my perceptions and thereby broaden their horizons.

Here’s how the process was *supposed* to work: I would ask “*Why?*” and they would carefully and patiently explain their reasons, and I would offer solid arguments as to why their thought process was flawed. They would offer more explanation, and I would counter with ever more amazing rationalizations and insights. Finally, in the end (assuming the process was allowed to work) they would acknowledge how right I was, how wrong they were, and yield—with thanks.

Instead, however, my parents routinely cheated themselves of all that wisdom and perception by answering my “*Why?*” with that most unreasonable of all parental responses: “*Because I said so.*” After which they routinely enacted that most depriving of all parliamentary tactics, the call to cease debate.

I resolved never to do that as a parent with my own children. When *my* children asked why, I would seek their wisdom and input into the decision-making process. In fact, I remember the first time one of them asked, “*Why?*” after a command. I responded confidently and without hesitation: “*Because I said so.*” Actually what I think I said was, “*Because your mother said so.*” I am so thankful my children had a good parent.

The basic lesson here is that pleading, reasoning, arguing parents need to take a lesson from previous generations. Children absolutely need to learn, from little on, not only to respect authority, but to obey—no questions asked. There will be plenty of opportunity in their teenage years to learn the why, but that process only really works when they first learn simply to obey.

In our text for this morning, our God condescend to share with us the “why” of why this is so important. That text is God’s Word recorded in the Book of Acts, the 11th Chapter:

Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.” But Peter began and explained it to them in order: “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me. Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. And I heard a voice saying to me, ‘Rise, Peter; kill and eat.’ But I said, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ But the voice answered a second time from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, do not call common.’ This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.’ As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.”

These are God’s words. They are therefore true and right in every conceivable way; perfect, from first to last. In this sin-riddled world, how rare and wonderful it is to have something completely and utterly reliable. That our God would richly bless us through the study of his perfect words this morning, so we pray, **“Sanctify us by the truth, O Lord. Your word is truth!”** Amen.

There are obviously many dangers of various kinds in our day. I’m not sure, however, that any is more dangerous than group-think. Some of you may have seen the petitions that circulated a few years back asking folks to work together to ban dihydrogen monoxide. It is the major component of acid rain, corrosive to many metals, can cause severe burns, is found in virtually every excised cancer tumor, causes electrical failures and brake failures in cars, contributes to the “greenhouse effect,” and it is fatal when aspirated by human beings. Tens of thousands signed various petitions to ban the chemical—which, if you write out the chemical compound in the normal way, is H₂O.

The petition drive was designed to reveal just how gullible we human beings can be. Someone comes up with an ill-conceived idea that has the *sound* or *appearance* of wisdom, and an alarming number of people are instantly on board.

While such things can be dangerous in secular things, how much worse when carried over into the spiritual. Yet it happens all the time. “*I wonder if maybe Jesus only rose symbolically in people’s minds*” suddenly becomes “*It’s a well-known fact that the Bible never says Jesus actually rose bodily from the dead.*” From there it’s a tiny little hop to “*You don’t actually believe that myth about Jesus’ resurrection, do you?*” In fact, that is exactly how time-honored, rock-solid Biblical truths get turned on their ear, twisted, perverted, and discarded.

With this phenomenon in mind, we pick up in our text for this morning at this point: ***So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.”*** Interestingly enough, not only were there one or two individuals back at the home church in Jerusalem that still believed that circumcision was necessary for one to be saved, there was an entire group or “***party***” of them. There was, in other words, spiritual group-think.

You recall the setting of our text. Peter had baptized non-Jews (Gentiles) in Caesarea, and he was summoned by the church in Jerusalem to give an explanation. Our text represents his defense of his actions, given to his Christian brothers in Jerusalem. Clearly the men in Jerusalem were missing the forest for the trees. They were instead obsessed with protocol, procedure, and custom, rather than seeing the bigger picture that God was saving non-Jews.

This is nothing new for the Jews. You remember how they had no problem bribing witnesses to falsely condemn Jesus to death, yet wouldn’t enter Pilate’s courtroom because it would ceremonially defile them, rendering them unfit to celebrate the Passover the following day. (How ironic that they thereby unwittingly killed two Passover Lambs that year.) Murder, yes. Violate ceremonial customs, never. It would be something akin to the Romans priding themselves on how well they cared for their lions—all so that they could be healthy and vigorous when they were called upon to devour entire Christian families in the Coliseum. Group-think makes such things possible. Everyone did it, so it must be okay.

Nor was Peter immune, was he? In fact, when in a vision God told him to do something, Peter didn’t just response with a “*Why?*” but went right to “*No way, Lord.*” Clearly, he would defend his reaction on the basis of our sermon theme for this morning: “*Because God said so.*” In this case, he refused because it was God who had previously told him not to eat ceremonially unclean animals. It’s probably the same reason the “***circumcision party***” would have given in Jerusalem: “*Because God said so.*” Sounds fairly reasonable, except for the fact that Peter was having his conversation with the Lord himself. Peter obviously acknowledged this fact by saying, “***By no means, Lord!***” You can’t really use “*Because God said so*” as your excuse when it is *God himself* who is telling you to do something else.

The point that all failed to grasp—at least for a time—was that the time of transition had come to God’s Church. It was time for them to move from Old Testament to New. Part of that transition was learning that all of the Old Testament ceremonies and sacrifices became obsolete the moment Jesus said “***It is finished!***” on the cross of Calvary. All of those ceremonies and customs pointed ahead to Christ. Once Christ came, their usefulness ended.

Think of it this way. Have you ever received an invitation to some special event, only to forget about that event until you happened to find that invitation tucked away in an organizer or drawer? Does the invitation still apply? Does it hold any real value? Obviously not. All it does is remind you of what you missed out on.

The problem was that these men had come to regard the Old Testament rules, ceremonies, and sacrifices as an end unto themselves, rather than pointing to the event itself. In fact, they were so adamant in this that when the Promised One finally came, they discarded *him* instead of the outdated invitation.

So Peter, finally convinced by God the Holy Spirit that things had indeed changed, made his case to his brothers in Jerusalem. Their reaction was most interesting. Our text says, “***When they heard these things they fell silent...***” Why silent? Because they were temporarily at a loss. They couldn’t condemn what Peter had done on the basis of “*because God said so*,” not when God himself was obviously now indicating that a change had taken place. In fact, Peter’s entire defense of why he did what he did was one big long, “*Because God said so!*”

That works, doesn’t it? It worked for the Church in Jerusalem; it works for us. The end of the matter in Jerusalem was recorded in the last verse of our text: ***And they glorified God, saying, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.”*** The Jews had to be purged of their last bit of prideful self-love, which was their notion that God saved them because they were Jews, and therefore somehow worthy—certainly more worthy or more deserving than non-Jews. God’s conversion of Gentiles in Caesarea—proved irrefutably by God when he gave them the same gift of the Holy Spirit that he had given the disciples at Pentecost—that proof silenced them, and they seemed almost begrudgingly to glorify God for what he had done.

You and I need to learn that same acceptance based on nothing more than “*Because God said so*.” That is, in fact, the basis of our entire hope and confidence. You and I are forgiven sinners. Why? Because God said so. He said so with the empty tomb and the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. He said so in his Word, repeatedly, in passages like Psalm 103:11-12: “***For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.***” And again in Romans 8:1: “***There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in*** (who believe in) ***Christ Jesus.***” You and I are forgiven sinners. God himself said so. We need no further proof or evidence.

Life then becomes relatively simple for God’s washed, cleansed, forgiven children. What are we supposed to do? Whatever God says. Why? Because God says so. This is the rare joy and privilege that is ours—to have a God that we can trust to tell us always and only what is best for us. To have a God that not only loved us in the past so much that he sacrificed his own dear Son to pay for what we owed, but who also loves us so much today that he will not allow Satan to remove us from that good, perfect place to which he has brought us. How do you know that God loves you? Because God said so. How do you know that when you die you will be carried to your Savior’s waiting arms? Because God said so. Amen. —**Pastor Michael Roehl** St. Paul Lutheran Church Bismarck, ND