

This morning we are continuing through the book of Acts, the story of the early church. Remember that the resurrected Jesus has told the disciples that they will be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. They have been given the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, and the church in Jerusalem grew like crazy. But after experiencing severe persecution, the church has been scattered around the region. Last week, Saul, one of the biggest persecutors of the church, was converted, and would become known as Paul. In the rest of chapter 9, we read about Peter and his ministry preaching the gospel and healing people. By the end of chapter 9, he is staying in Joppa with a man named Simon, and another milestone in the history of God's work in this world is about to happen, as the first Gentiles, or non-Jewish people, come to faith in Jesus.

*Acts 10:1 At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment.*

Centurion means that he was over 100 men in the army.

*<sup>2</sup> He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. <sup>3</sup> One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!" <sup>4</sup> Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked. The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. <sup>5</sup> Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. <sup>6</sup> He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea." <sup>7</sup> When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. <sup>8</sup> He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa. <sup>9</sup> About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. <sup>10</sup> He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. <sup>11</sup> He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. <sup>12</sup> It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. <sup>13</sup> Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." <sup>14</sup> "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." <sup>15</sup> The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." <sup>16</sup> This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.*

This is a huge moment, and so God is making it very clear what He is up to so that there will be no mistaking His intent. Jews and Gentiles have been enemies. But

now God is about to make it very clear to Peter that He is bringing both Jews and Gentiles together into one family of God.

<sup>17</sup> While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate. <sup>18</sup> They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there. <sup>19</sup> While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are **looking for you**. <sup>20</sup> So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them." <sup>21</sup> Peter went down and said to the men, "I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?" <sup>22</sup> The men replied, "We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to have you come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say." <sup>23</sup> Then Peter invited the men into the house **to be his guests**. The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa went along. <sup>24</sup> The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. <sup>25</sup> As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. <sup>26</sup> But Peter made him get up. "Stand up," he said, "I am only a man myself." <sup>27</sup> Talking with him, Peter went inside and found a **large gathering of people**. <sup>28</sup> He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. <sup>29</sup> So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?" <sup>30</sup> Cornelius answered: "Four days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me <sup>31</sup> and said, 'Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your **gifts to the poor**. <sup>32</sup> Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.' <sup>33</sup> So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us." <sup>34</sup> Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism <sup>35</sup> but accepts men from every nation who fear him and **do what is right**. <sup>36</sup> You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. <sup>37</sup> You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached-- <sup>38</sup> how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because **God was with him**. <sup>39</sup> "We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, <sup>40</sup> but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. <sup>41</sup> He was not seen by all the people, but by

witnesses whom God had already chosen-- by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. <sup>42</sup> He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the **living and the dead**. <sup>43</sup> All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." <sup>44</sup> While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. <sup>45</sup> The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. <sup>46</sup> For they heard them speaking in **tongues and praising God**. Then Peter said, <sup>47</sup> "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." <sup>48</sup> So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

In Acts 10, the first Gentile comes to faith in Jesus. God certifies it by giving them the Holy Spirit in Peter's presence. Two main things to learn from this passage:

**1) Racism, nationalism, or any other kind of superiority is anti-gospel**

<sup>15</sup> *The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."*

<sup>28</sup> *He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean."*

The Jews had a great hatred and disdain towards Gentiles. As Peter confesses, the custom of the Jews was not to associate with a Gentile or visit one, lest they become unclean. This was not God's law, but their custom. On the contrary, from the beginning, God's intent was to bless and redeem the whole earth through the Jewish people:

**Genesis 12:1-3** - *The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. <sup>2</sup> "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."*

God gave the Jews the covenant and the law so that they might be a city on a hill, a light to the nations, so that people might see their faith, see their God, and come to know and worship Him. So God chose the Jews and blessed them, not because

were somehow better than the other nations, but just because He loved them, to make them His instrument to bring the world back to God.

***Deuteronomy 7:6-8** - For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. <sup>7</sup> The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more **numerous** than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. <sup>8</sup> But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt.*

So God had chosen Israel because of His love and grace, to be His instrument in restoring the world to Himself. But Israel had twisted God's election of them into a feeling of superiority, becoming filled with pride and disdain, despising Gentiles as dogs. As Peter said, they would not associate with Gentiles for fear of becoming unclean. In Jesus' day, it was not even lawful to help a Gentile mother in labor, for that would simply be to bring another Gentile into the world. And if a Jewish boy married a Gentile girl, the funeral of that Jewish boy was carried out. Instead of pointing the way to God, they received God's favor, took pride in that, and then looked down upon the Gentiles, creating hostility between them.

But now, with Cornelius, Peter learns that this attitude is wrong, anti-gospel, that in Christ, all are welcome into God's family.

<sup>34</sup> *Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism <sup>35</sup> but accepts men from every nation who fear him and **do what is right.***

In no uncertain terms, God lets Peter know that He accepts people from every nation who fear Him and do what is right, that He is making one large, multi-ethnic, multi-national family in which there is absolutely no place for racism, nationalism, or any other kind of superiority. Any kind of racism or nationalism that forgets the grace of God and takes pride in itself and looks down on others is anti-gospel. The gospel breaks down all racial, ethnic, and national barriers to make one family, as Paul makes clear:

***Ephesians 2:11-22** - Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men)—(do you hear the disdain in that statement?) <sup>12</sup> remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without*

hope and without God in the world. <sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through **the blood of Christ**. <sup>14</sup> For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, <sup>15</sup> by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations.

Verse 14 refers to the **dividing wall of hostility**. There was an actual wall in the temple dividing Jews from Gentiles. The Gentiles were divided by a wall from worshiping God and stayed in the outer court. The stone wall had a partition with an inscription that forbade any foreigner to enter under pain of death.

*His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, <sup>16</sup> and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. <sup>17</sup> He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to **those who were near**. <sup>18</sup> For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, <sup>20</sup> built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. <sup>21</sup> In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. <sup>22</sup> And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*

There once was division, hatred, feelings of superiority, but now, by Jesus' death, He has destroyed the barriers and brought them together in one family under Christ.

As Peter preaches the gospel to Cornelius and his household, he sees the Holy Spirit come on them as he had come on them at Pentecost. This is God's seal of approval. And he can not deny that God has accepted them into His family. As Paul would write:

**Colossians 3:11** - *Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.*

Racism or nationalism or any other kind of superiority is anti-gospel. It forgets that salvation is only by grace, and forgets that by His death, He has made a way for all people to come together into one family.

2) Even "good" people need the gospel

Cornelius was a good person.

<sup>2</sup> *He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.* <sup>3</sup> *One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!"* <sup>4</sup> *Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked. The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God.* <sup>5</sup> *Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter.*

God responds to Cornelius' prayers and seeking. But God did not show up to say "great job, keep it up" but to answer his seeking heart by bringing him someone who could share the gospel of Jesus Christ to him. Same as the Ethiopian eunuch. God responds to His search for Him, which is what He promises to do:

**Matthew 7:7-8** - "Ask **and it will** be given to **you**; **seek and you will** find; knock **and the door will** be opened to **you**. <sup>8</sup> *For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.*

**Jeremiah 29:13** - **You will seek** me **and** find me when **you seek** me with all your heart.

And so Peter shares the gospel with Cornelius:

<sup>36</sup> *You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.* <sup>37</sup> *You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached--* <sup>38</sup> *how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.* <sup>39</sup> *"We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the **Jews and in Jerusalem**. They killed him by hanging him on a tree,* <sup>40</sup> *but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen.* <sup>41</sup> *He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen-- by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.* <sup>42</sup> *He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.* <sup>43</sup> *All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."*

Peter tells them about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and the forgiveness that is offered in Jesus. Cornelius and his household believe in Jesus and receive the

Holy Spirit. Once again, God makes it clear to Peter that He has received the Gentiles into the family. God could have just answered him, but he sent Peter for a reason. He wanted Peter to see that the family of God must include Gentiles, that the old walls of division had to come down.

It is very important to recognize that Cornelius is not saved by his good works. When Peter says that God accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right, he does not mean that they are saved by their good works. No – they still need to respond to the gospel. In the end, Cornelius is saved by grace, not works:

**Romans 3:20-24** - *Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. <sup>21</sup> But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. <sup>22</sup> This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*

**Ephesians 2:8-9** - *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- <sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no one can boast.*

No one is saved by good works. We are all in the same boat, all in need of God's grace to be right with Him. Therefore there is no favoritism; all are welcome:

**Romans 2:28-29** - *A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. <sup>29</sup> No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God.*

In other words, "God's people" are not those who are of the right ethnicity or tribe or who have gone through certain rituals. God looks past the outward appearance and rituals to the heart, to those who have had their hard hearts replaced by God's Spirit.

And so, as Ephesians 2:9 says, there is no boasting. There is no place for superiority. This is a gift given to us despite our sinfulness. How can we boast? How can we look down upon anyone else? We were saved in spite of ourselves, not because of anything we did. The gospel destroys our pride, humbling us, and helps us realize that everything is an undeserved gift.

The amazing thing is that even Peter struggled with this. Later on, he began to pull away from Gentiles, and Paul had to confront him:

**Galatians 2:11-16** - When **Peter** came to Antioch, I **opposed** him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. <sup>12</sup> Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. <sup>13</sup> The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. <sup>14</sup> When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter **in front of them all**, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?" <sup>15</sup> "We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' <sup>16</sup> know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.

**Jesus created a new humanity**, and this identity overshadows every other identity. We are in Christ. Sinners saved by grace. Adopted children of God. Redeemed.

**Galatians 3:28-29** - There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. <sup>29</sup> If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

We are Christian first, and then American. Christian first, and then of a certain class, or profession, or culture, or political party, or anything else. And so we can call them our brothers and sisters. We all belong. There is no place for hostility, for racism, for pride, for superiority in God's family. We are all saved by grace.

Revelation 7:9-10 tells us clearly what heaven will be like:

**Revelation 7:9-10** - After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from **every nation, tribe**, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. <sup>10</sup> And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

That is what we have to look forward to. A reconciled, diverse community where God dwells in our midst. And this is the witness our church is supposed to give to the world. A reconciled, diverse community where God dwells in our midst.



Where do you need to lay down your pride and superiority and humbly show grace as God has shown grace to you?

How can you take steps towards building unity with believers from different backgrounds?