



Summary

This powerful exploration of Acts chapter 11 confronts us with one of the most challenging lessons in early church history: the danger of creating doctrine based on tradition rather than God's Word. We witness the Jerusalem church struggling with an earth-shattering revelation that Gentiles could be saved without first becoming Jewish. Despite clear Old Testament prophecies promising salvation to all nations, centuries of persecution and prejudice had built walls that even divine intervention struggled to dismantle. Peter's account of his vision and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Cornelius's house serves as undeniable proof that God's grace extends beyond human boundaries. What makes this passage particularly relevant today is how it mirrors our own tendency to limit God's work based on our comfort zones and traditions. We see even Peter, who witnessed the miracle firsthand, later withdrawing from Gentile fellowship when other Jewish believers arrived. This teaches us that knowing truth intellectually and living it consistently are two different battles. The establishment of the church at Antioch, where believers were first called Christians, shows us what happens when we embrace God's actual doctrine over imaginary ones. The three foundational principles presented—that church policy must align with what Jesus taught, what the apostles practiced, and what Scripture confirms—provide us with a reliable framework for evaluating truth in an age filled with competing voices and traditions.





Points

Title: Breaking Down Barriers: God's Salvation for All Nations

- **Sermon Summary:**

This sermon explores the pivotal moment in early church history when God revealed that salvation through Jesus Christ was freely available to Gentiles without requiring them to first become Jews. Through the account of Peter's visit to Cornelius and the subsequent church at Antioch, the message emphasizes how God had to overcome deeply entrenched prejudices and man-made doctrines that contradicted His plan for universal salvation. The sermon challenges believers to examine church policies and practices against the sole authority of Scripture—what Jesus taught in the Gospels, what the apostles practiced in Acts, and what they wrote in the epistles. It warns against the danger of "imaginary doctrines" based on tradition rather than biblical truth, and affirms that salvation is by grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ, available to anyone regardless of background or heritage.

Key Points:

- - The early Jewish believers wrongly assumed Gentiles must become Jews before accepting Christ, despite Old Testament prophecies indicating God's plan to save all nations
- - God had to intervene dramatically through visions and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit to demonstrate His doctrine of salvation by grace alone
- - Peter's vision of unclean animals and his subsequent visit to Cornelius' household opened the door for Gentile salvation
- - The Jerusalem church initially opposed Peter's actions but eventually acknowledged God's work among the Gentiles
- - The church at Antioch became a major center where Gentiles came to faith in large numbers, and where believers were first called "Christians"
- - Barnabas recognized Saul (Paul) as the perfect person to minister at Antioch, leading to Paul's public ministry beginning 13 years after his conversion
- - Even Peter later struggled with the weight of tradition, withdrawing from Gentile believers when Jewish Christians arrived
- - All church policy must be founded on three principles: Jesus taught it, the apostles practiced it, and the New Testament writers confirmed it
- - Many "imaginary doctrines" exist in the church today that have no biblical foundation but persist through tradition
- - Salvation is freely offered to anyone who comes to Jesus in faith, without works or religious prerequisites



Scripture Reference:

- - Acts 11:1-30 (primary passage)
- - Acts 10:1-48 (Peter and Cornelius)
- - Acts 2:42 (the church's foundation)
- - Matthew 15:21-28 (the Canaanite woman)
- - Luke 7:1-10 (the centurion's servant)
- - John 3:16 (God's love for the world)
- - John 10:14-16 (other sheep not of this fold)
- - Isaiah 49:6, 56:3-8, 60:1-3 (Old Testament prophecies of Gentile salvation)
- - Jeremiah 16:19-21 (Gentiles coming to the Lord)
- - Zechariah 2:10-11 (many nations joined to the Lord)
- - Galatians 2:1-14 (Paul's account of his ministry and Peter's hypocrisy)

Stories:

- - Peter's vision of the sheet with unclean animals and God's command to "rise, kill and eat" (Acts 10)
- - Peter's visit to Cornelius' household and the Holy Spirit falling upon the Gentiles
- - Peter's defense before the Jerusalem church, bringing six Jewish witnesses to vouch for what happened
- - The scattering of believers after Stephen's persecution, leading to the gospel spreading to Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch
- - Barnabas being sent to Antioch and then traveling to Tarsus to find Saul and bring him to minister
- - The church at Antioch sending financial relief to Jerusalem through Barnabas and Saul during the predicted famine
- - Peter's later hypocrisy at Antioch when he withdrew from eating with Gentiles upon the arrival of Jewish believers from Jerusalem
- - The historical persecution of Jews by Gentile nations (Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, Romans) providing context for Jewish prejudice
- - Jonah being sent to preach to the Gentile Ninevites as an Old Testament example of God's heart for all nations





Scripture

Explicitly Mentioned References

New Testament

- Luke 7:1-10 - Healing of the centurion's servant
- Luke 7:9-10 - Jesus marvels at the centurion's faith
- Matthew 15:21-28 - The Canaanite woman's faith
- John 3:16 - God's love for the world
- John 10:14-16 - Jesus as the Good Shepherd with other sheep
- Acts 2:42 - The early church's practices
- Acts 4-5 - Introduction of Barnabas (Joses)
- Acts 7 - Stephen's persecution
- Acts 9 - Saul's conversion on the Damascus Road
- Acts 9:15-16 - Jesus's call of Saul to minister to Gentiles
- Acts 10 - Peter and Cornelius
- Acts 10:28 - Peter's statement about entering a Gentile's house
- Acts 11:1-18 - Peter's report to Jerusalem (main sermon text)
- Acts 11:19-30 - The church at Antioch
- Galatians 2:1-14 - Paul's confrontation with Peter

Old Testament

- Isaiah 49:6 - Messiah as a light to the Gentiles
- Isaiah 56:3-8 - Foreigners and eunuchs welcomed in God's house
- Isaiah 60:1-3 - Gentiles coming to God's light
- Jeremiah 16:19-21 - Gentiles coming from the ends of the earth
- Zechariah 2:10-11 - Many nations joining the Lord
- Book of Jonah (general reference) - God's mission to the Ninevites

Alluded to or Thematically Referenced

- 2 Timothy 4:3 - People heaping up teachers for itching ears (paraphrased)
- Matthew 11:28-30 - Jesus's invitation to the weary (paraphrased: "Come to me, all you who are weary")
- John 6:37 - Jesus will not cast out those who come to Him (paraphrased)
- Ephesians 2:8-9 - Salvation by grace through faith, not works (thematically referenced)



Historical References

- 722 BC - Northern Kingdom of Israel exiled to Assyria
- 586 BC - Southern Kingdom of Judah exiled to Babylon
- Antiochus Epiphanes - Greek ruler who persecuted the Jews
- Claudius Caesar - Roman emperor during the famine mentioned in Acts 11:28

This sermon primarily focuses on Acts 11 while drawing extensively from Old Testament prophecies about the inclusion of Gentiles in God's salvation plan.



Quotes

Imagine trying to enforce church policy without having firmly established biblical doctrine to go by.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

This dramatically demonstrates how potentially damaging it is to invent doctrine when none exists.

If therefore God gave them the same gift as he gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?

All church policy or practice must be founded upon three principles. One, Jesus taught it in the Gospels. Two, the apostles practiced it in the book of Acts. And three, Paul, Peter, James, and John and Jude all wrote about it.

To adhere strictly to the Word of God as if it is the Word of God because it is the Word of God is actually a relatively rare thing in these last days.

It is not up to us, it never is up to us to determine who is worthy of salvation based on what we see with our eyes or what we know of a certain people group or whoever it may be.

The work has already been finished. That's why Jesus on the cross, one of the last things he said, it is finished. What he meant was the work of salvation is finished.





Discussion Questions

How does Peter's struggle to accept God's call to minister to Cornelius reflect our own difficulty in letting go of long-held prejudices or traditions, even when God clearly shows us a different path?

What does the 13-year gap between Saul's conversion on the Damascus Road and the beginning of his public ministry teach us about God's timing and preparation in our own lives?

In what ways do we, like the early Jewish believers, create our own 'entry requirements' for who is worthy of God's grace, and how can we guard against this tendency?

How does the example of Barnabas as the 'son of encouragement' challenge us to use our spiritual gifts to build bridges between different groups within the body of Christ?

What imaginary doctrines or traditions in the modern church might parallel the Judaizers' insistence that Gentiles become Jews before accepting Christ?

Why do you think even Peter, who witnessed the Holy Spirit falling on Cornelius's household, later withdrew from eating with Gentiles when the Judaizers arrived, and what does this reveal about the power of peer pressure in spiritual matters?

How does the principle that church policy must be founded on what Jesus taught, what the apostles practiced, and what the New Testament writers confirmed help us evaluate contemporary church practices?

What can we learn from the fact that God used a vision repeated three times to convince Peter to go to Cornelius, and what does this say about God's patience with our spiritual growth?

How does the Gentile church at Antioch sending financial relief to the Jewish believers in Judea demonstrate the power of the gospel to break down centuries-old barriers and create genuine unity?

In what ways might we be like the Judaizers, holding onto our preferences or comfort zones rather than fully embracing what God's Word actually teaches about salvation and grace?





Small Group Guide: "Breaking Down Barriers: The Gospel for All People"

Based on Acts 11:1-30

Opening Prayer

Begin by asking God to open hearts and minds to His truth, just as He opened Peter's understanding about salvation for the Gentiles.

Ice Breaker Question

What's a tradition or practice you once held firmly to, but later changed your mind about? What caused you to change?

Key Scripture Passages

- Acts 11:1-18 (Peter's defense)
 - Acts 11:19-26 (The church at Antioch)
 - John 3:16
 - Isaiah 49:6
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Discussion Questions

Understanding the Context

1. **Why were the Jewish believers initially upset with Peter for going to Cornelius's house?** What historical and cultural factors contributed to their prejudice against Gentiles?
2. **How did Peter defend his actions?** What was his strongest argument? (See verses 4-17)
3. **What does verse 18 reveal about the Jerusalem believers' response?** Was it enthusiastic or reluctant? What evidence supports your answer?



Applying Biblical Doctrine

4. **The pastor emphasized three principles for church policy:**
 - Jesus taught it in the Gospels
 - The apostles practiced it in Acts
 - The apostles wrote about it in the epistles
5. **Why are all three components important?** What happens when we rely on tradition instead of Scripture?
6. **What "imaginary doctrines" (teachings not supported by Scripture) were mentioned in the sermon?**
Can you think of others that exist in the church today?
7. **Read Galatians 2:11-14.** Even Peter struggled with peer pressure from the Judaizers. What does this teach us about the ongoing battle between God's truth and human tradition?

Personal Reflection

7. **Are there people or groups you've unconsciously considered "unworthy" of salvation or less deserving of God's grace?** How does this passage challenge that thinking?
8. **The sermon mentioned that the Judaizers wanted church policy to match their preferences rather than God's Word.** In what ways might we be guilty of the same thing today?
9. **Barnabas was called the "son of encouragement."** Who in your life needs encouragement to continue with the Lord (verse 23)? How can you be a Barnabas to them this week?

The Gospel Message

10. **The pastor said, "It's too good to be true. It's too good not to be true."** How does the simplicity of salvation by grace alone challenge our human tendency to complicate things or add requirements?
11. **For God so loved the WORLD (John 3:16).** How should this truth shape our evangelism and our view of people different from us?

Key Takeaways

- ✓ **Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone** – no additional requirements, traditions, or qualifications needed
- ✓ **God's plan has always included all people** – the Old Testament prophesied Gentile salvation; this wasn't a surprise to God



✓ **Tradition and prejudice can blind us to God's truth** – even sincere believers can hold "imaginary doctrines" unsupported by Scripture

✓ **The Holy Spirit confirms God's doctrine** – what happened at Cornelius's house was undeniable evidence of God's will

✓ **Church policy must be based on biblical doctrine, not human preference** – our feelings, traditions, or comfort levels don't determine truth

Practical Applications

This Week's Challenge (Choose One or More):

1. Examine Your Heart

- Spend time in prayer asking God to reveal any prejudices or biases you hold against certain people or groups
- Confess these to God and ask Him to give you His heart for all people

2. Study the Foundations

- Review your church's core beliefs and practices
- Compare them to the three-fold test: Did Jesus teach it? Did the apostles practice it? Did the apostles write about it?
- Discuss any questions with your small group leader or pastor

3. Be a Barnabas

- Identify someone who needs encouragement to "continue with the Lord" (Acts 11:23)
- Reach out to them this week with a call, text, visit, or note of encouragement
- Share a specific way you've seen God working in their life

4. Share the Simple Gospel

- Write out in your own words how someone becomes saved (keep it simple and biblical)
- Pray for an opportunity this week to share the gospel with someone
- Remember: it's "too simple" because Jesus already finished the work

5. Bridge-Building Exercise

- Like the Gentile church sending relief to the Jewish church, look for a way to build bridges with believers who are different from you (different denomination, culture, background, etc.)
 - This could be through service, giving, or simply building a relationship
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Memory Verse

"If therefore God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?" - Acts 11:17 (NKJV)

Closing Reflection

Read together Acts 2:42: *"And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers."*

Discuss: How well does this describe our small group? Our church? Our individual lives? What needs to change?

Closing Prayer

Pray for:

- Sensitivity to the Holy Spirit's leading, even when it challenges our preferences
 - Boldness to stand on Scripture alone, not tradition
 - Hearts that see all people as loved by God and worthy of hearing the gospel
 - Protection from "imaginary doctrines" in our own lives and church
 - The lost in our community who need to hear the simple message of salvation
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For Next Week

Read Acts 12 in preparation for next week's discussion.

Consider: How does God demonstrate His sovereignty over human authorities and circumstances in this chapter?



Daily Devotional

5-Day Devotional: Breaking Down Barriers to God's Grace

Day 1: When God Challenges Our Prejudices

Reading: Acts 10:9-16, 28

Devotional:

Peter's vision of unclean animals challenged everything he believed about who was worthy of God's grace. Like Peter, we often create invisible boundaries around God's love—certain people we think are too far gone, too different, or too sinful for salvation. Yet God declared, "What God has cleansed you must not call common."

Today, ask yourself: Who have I decided is unworthy of God's grace? What prejudices, however subtle, do I carry in my heart? God's love transcends every human boundary we construct. His grace is scandalously inclusive, reaching the religious outsider, the moral failure, and the cultural enemy alike. When we withhold the gospel from anyone, we're not protecting God's holiness—we're limiting His love. Let God challenge your assumptions about who belongs in His kingdom.

Day 2: Doctrine Over Tradition

Reading: Galatians 2:11-16

Devotional:

The early church faced a critical choice: follow centuries of Jewish tradition or embrace God's new revelation that Gentiles could be saved without first becoming Jews. Even Peter, who witnessed the Holy Spirit fall on Cornelius's household, temporarily succumbed to the pressure of tradition over truth.

How often do we elevate "the way we've always done it" above what Scripture actually teaches? Religious tradition becomes dangerous when it contradicts God's Word or adds requirements to the simple gospel. Salvation is by grace through faith—nothing more, nothing less.

Examine your spiritual life today. Are there traditions you've elevated to the level of doctrine? Are you adding conditions to God's free gift of salvation? Remember: Jesus taught it, the apostles practiced it, and the New Testament writers confirmed it. That's our foundation. Everything else, no matter how long-standing, must be measured against Scripture alone.



Day 3: God's Patience in Our Growth

Reading: Acts 11:1-18

Devotional:

Peter didn't immediately embrace God's plan to save the Gentiles. He needed a vision repeated three times, a direct command from the Holy Spirit, six witnesses, and undeniable evidence of God's work before he fully understood. Yet God patiently worked with Peter, meeting him where he was and gradually expanding his understanding.

This should encourage us tremendously. God doesn't expect instant perfection in our theology or practice. He knows we carry cultural baggage, inherited prejudices, and limited understanding. Like He did with Peter, God works patiently to reshape our thinking through His Word, His Spirit, and undeniable evidence of His activity.

Where is God challenging your understanding today? What long-held belief is He asking you to reconsider in light of Scripture? Don't resist His gentle correction. Trust that He's expanding your vision to align with His heart—a heart that beats for all people, everywhere.

Day 4: The Simplicity of Salvation

Reading: John 3:14-17; Romans 10:9-13

Devotional:

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." This verse demolishes every human attempt to complicate salvation. Not "whoever keeps the law," not "whoever joins the right group," not "whoever performs the right rituals"—but "whoever believes."

The Judaizers wanted to add requirements: circumcision, dietary laws, Jewish customs. Today, different groups add baptism, church membership, good works, or religious performance. But God's plan remains beautifully simple: believe in Jesus, confess Him as Lord, and receive the free gift of eternal life.

If you're weary from trying to earn God's favor, hear Jesus' invitation: "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Salvation isn't the finish line of a religious marathon—it's the starting point of a relationship with the God who loves you unconditionally.

Day 5: Continuing Steadfastly

Reading: Acts 2:42-47; 2 Timothy 3:14-17

Devotional:

After the dramatic events at Pentecost and Cornelius's house, the church settled into a pattern: "They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers." Notice the word "continued"—this wasn't a one-time experience but an ongoing commitment.



Spiritual growth happens not through dramatic experiences alone but through faithful, consistent devotion to God's Word, Christian community, communion, and prayer. Paul and Barnabas taught at Antioch for an entire year, earning the church's trust through faithful Bible teaching. There are no shortcuts to spiritual maturity.

What does "continuing steadfastly" look like in your life? Are you regularly feeding on Scripture? Are you committed to genuine Christian fellowship? Do you practice prayer and remember Christ's sacrifice? The Christian life isn't a sprint fueled by emotional highs—it's a marathon sustained by daily disciplines. Today, commit to continuing steadfastly in the foundational practices that build authentic faith and transform lives from the inside out.

