

The Gentiles Believe

Acts 10:34-48

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One of the favorite pastimes of many sibling groups is to play the game: who is the favorite? Generally speaking, siblings argue about which child is their parents' favorite, as evidenced by the way they are treated. Usually, the emphasis is on how one child seemed to get more favorable treatment than the others. You may have played this game with your siblings or had your children play this game while talking about you!

Of course, any parent will tell you that they don't have favorites. Each child is different, and parents are different as they get older and raise each child. They may have different relationships with each child, may relate differently to each child, and may push each child in different ways, but they don't play favorites.

Peter begins our passage today with a similar revelation about God. He recognized that God does not show favoritism. This was quite a revelation, since God had chosen the people of Israel as His special people for thousands of years, but Peter recognized that God was now making the blessing that had previously been available only to the Jews available to all. And whether he understood it fully at this point or not, he also would come to recognize that Israel's special relationship with God was never because God was playing favorites, but because of His sovereign grace in choosing to save them. Today, we will see that same grace be extended to the Gentiles, marking another new phase of the early church.

Peter's Message

If you recall, last week Peter was summoned to the home of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, after an angel appeared to Cornelius and instructed him to send men to Joppa to get Peter. As the men were traveling to Joppa, Peter had a vision in which God told him that he should not declare unclean what God had declared clean and then told him to go with these Gentile men to the home of a Roman soldier and preach the gospel to them. Peter began to understand that God was doing something new.

When Peter arrived, Cornelius recounted his experience and then asked Peter to share the message God had given him to share. We see Peter's message in verses 34-43,

³⁴ Then Peter replied, "I see very clearly that God shows no favoritism. ³⁵ In every nation he accepts those who fear him and do what is right. ³⁶ This is the message of Good News for the people of Israel—that there is peace with God through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. ³⁷ You know what happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee, after John began preaching his message of baptism. ³⁸ And you know that God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. Then Jesus went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.

³⁹ “And we apostles are witnesses of all he did throughout Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a cross, ⁴⁰ but God raised him to life on the third day. Then God allowed him to appear, ⁴¹ not to the general public, but to us whom God had chosen in advance to be his witnesses. We were those who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² And he ordered us to preach everywhere and to testify that Jesus is the one appointed by God to be the judge of all—the living and the dead. ⁴³ He is the one all the prophets testified about, saying that everyone who believes in him will have their sins forgiven through his name.” (Acts 10:34-43, NLT)

We can safely assume that Luke was summarizing Peter’s message here, as it is fairly brief. Peter didn’t get a chance to finish his message, but Luke does record the essential elements of Peter’s sermon. As we look at what Peter chose to emphasize in his message, it should help us prioritize what to emphasize when we share the gospel with others. I notice a few things about Peter’s sermon.

First, Peter pointed to what Jesus does. Peter began by telling them the essence of the gospel, which is that there is peace with God through Jesus Christ. This is the absolute core of the gospel: we are sinners who cannot save ourselves. Our only hope is for a Savior to pay the penalty we have incurred. Jesus has done exactly that, and in so doing, He provides a way for us to have right standing with God once more.

Any time we are sharing the message of the gospel with someone, we must start with the fact that we are sinful and need a savior. Sometimes this is something people are painfully aware of, but often people labor under the delusion that they are basically good people, and that God would be pleased with them. Step one of the gospel is to understand our own sinfulness, and to understand that left to our own devices, we stand condemned before a holy God. Until a person understands this bad news, the existence of a savior isn’t good news, because they don’t think they need one.

Any time we see the apostles preach the gospel, this need for our sin to be dealt with is front and center in their message. The same ought to be true for us as well.

Second, he pointed to the evidence for Jesus. Peter seemed to assume that his audience was familiar with many of the stories about Jesus. While these people were Gentiles, they were living in Israel, so it is not difficult to believe that they would have heard about Jesus. Peter’s emphasis was to show how Jesus was the Messiah who had been promised. He emphasized several points.

He emphasized Jesus’ baptism. This seems like a strange place to start, but the gospels all start here! Why? It was at Jesus’ baptism that the Lord spoke and gave witness to who Jesus was and the Holy Spirit descended on Him like a dove. It was a powerful event that gave clear witness to who Jesus was.

He emphasized Jesus' miracles. Jesus' miracles were well-known in Israel. Everyone had heard stories about the things He had done. These miracles were signs that pointed to the fact that Jesus was indeed the Son of God.

He emphasized the resurrection. We have often said that the resurrection is the linchpin of our faith. If Jesus stayed dead after being crucified, then our faith is in vain. But if Jesus literally came back to life, then He stands unique among all men, and it demonstrates that He is worthy of our worship. Peter points to his own eyewitness experience to say that Jesus definitively rose from the dead.

Understand what Peter meant when he said Jesus rose again though. Jesus did not merely rise figuratively, like a ghost. He did not merely "live on in the hearts of His disciples." They touched Him, they ate and drank with Him, they spoke with Him. Jesus really, literally, physically rose again!

He emphasized that the apostles' testimony matched prophecy. If Cornelius and his family and friends were God-fearers, they likely had some familiarity with the prophecies about the Messiah. Jesus fulfilled these prophecies perfectly (often in ways no one could have possibly anticipated). Peter was pointing them to the fact that Jesus was the One who was promised. And not only was Jesus the promised Messiah, He was God in the flesh, who came to die for mankind, in order that we might be forgiven.

Third, he didn't mention Jesus' moral teachings...yet. Most of the time, when people think of Jesus, they think of the things He taught. After all, a significant portion of the gospel accounts record Jesus' teachings. And the things Jesus taught were counter cultural. They fly in the face of what our world tells us about how to live. But Peter didn't mention a thing about Jesus' teachings. Why? Because before people are Christians, they need to know Jesus. Jesus' teachings are for those who follow Him, not for those who don't.

Let me explain what I mean. Many people teach a moralistic gospel. They tell people that they need to do better, they need to try to live up to Jesus' teachings. And there is a sense in which that is true—every one of us is called to follow what God has said. But the danger is that we communicate to people that if they can just be good enough, then they'll be acceptable to God. But that's a distortion of the truth! No one can be good enough! Our only hope is to recognize that we are in dire need of a savior and are saved only by God's grace toward us.

Sometimes we focus on trying to fix people's behavior before we focus on the real problem—a heart that is running from God. We do not have to fix people's behavior: God will do that. For those who follow Jesus, there will be a desire to pattern their lives according to what He has said. That is the time when we can focus on all Jesus instructed us to do. But for the person who has not yet submitted to Christ, their greatest need is to see that they need Him. We cannot allow ourselves to get distracted from this ultimate goal.

The Gentile Response

It appears that Peter didn't really get a chance to finish his sermon, because Luke tells us that while he was still speaking, God began to move among the Gentiles.

⁴⁴ Even as Peter was saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening to the message. ⁴⁵ The Jewish believers who came with Peter were amazed that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles, too.

⁴⁶ For they heard them speaking in other tongues and praising God.

Then Peter asked, ⁴⁷ "Can anyone object to their being baptized, now that they have received the Holy Spirit just as we did?" ⁴⁸ So he gave orders for them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Afterward Cornelius asked him to stay with them for several days. (Acts 10:44-48, NLT)

An amazing thing happened. While Peter was explaining the gospel to these Gentiles, the Holy Spirit descended upon them! How could they have been certain this happened? God made it abundantly clear—they began speaking in other languages and praising God! In short, the experience of these Gentiles was exactly the same as the experience of the apostles on the day of Pentecost!

Think about what this experience was like for Peter and his companions. Peter had surely told them about his vision on the rooftop. They had all likely been contemplating what exactly this could mean. It was clear that God planned to do something among the Gentiles, but I suspect they didn't really know what that would be. They may have believed there would be many Gentiles who would become Jews and ultimately come to follow Jesus.

Whatever the case, they did not seem to expect that while Peter was preaching, the Holy Spirit would come upon them. Think about why this was so significant.

- These people had not been circumcised
- They had not committed to following the Jewish ceremonial laws
- They likely did not have the foundational knowledge every Jew had
- They had not been baptized or even made an outward profession of faith

God simply began to move among the Gentiles. I believe He chose to act in this way because it made His point clear: people are saved by trusting in Christ, not by adherence to the Jewish faith. The fact that God had placed His mark of approval on these men and women without them having gone through any of the other motions of religious devotion served to emphasize that point.

To Peter's credit, he got the message. He understood that if God had accepted these people as His own, then there was no reason he should not do the same. He had them all baptized, recognizing them as equal members of the community of faith, and not as second-class citizens.

There are a couple of theological things we should note in this account. The first one is that they received the Holy Spirit before they were baptized. It is always dangerous to

build a theology on a single experience (or even a couple individual experiences in the book of Acts), because it may not be valid to say that since God worked one way in a particular situation, He must always work the same way in every situation. That may not be valid. But for those who argue that a person does not receive the Holy Spirit until they undergo baptism, this passage poses great difficulty.

In the same vein, some argue that unless a person speaks in tongues, they do not have the Holy Spirit within them. While these Gentiles do speak in tongues, and we saw the same thing on the day of Pentecost, I don't believe these passages teach us that is what must happen to every believer. I would argue that its purpose was to clearly demonstrate to a group who may have been skeptical that the Holy Spirit had indeed come, and that He had come upon the Gentiles in the same way He had come upon them. So I believe it is incorrect to insist that unless a person has spoken in tongues, they are not a genuine believer. I believe all it does is cause people who do not have that gift to doubt their salvation or to manufacture an experience to fit in.

The last element we should note is that Cornelius asked Peter to stay, and Peter stayed for several days. This, I think, is a good example of what should happen with all new believers. Cornelius had come to believe the gospel message, but now he needed adequate instruction in what was next. He needed to learn how to think and act differently. Peter surely helped to fill in many of those gaps for him in the next few days.

This is a reminder of the importance of discipleship with new or younger believers. I mentioned earlier that our focus in evangelism should not be on the moral teachings of Jesus, because that is premature. A person who is focused on trying to earn salvation by being good enough will be frustrated and will still stand condemned before God! But once a person has committed to following Christ, it is imperative to teach them about the commands Jesus has given about how we should live. The emphasis is not on how to be saved, but on living out our faith. If we say we trust God, then our lives should reflect it by doing what He says. A person cannot obey commands they do not know. We have a responsibility to guide younger believers to a fuller and deeper knowledge of what the Bible says.

We also need to be teaching them how to read their bibles for themselves and how to pray. We need to get them connected to a good, Bible-believing and teaching church, and get them connected with a Bible study, Sunday School class, or small group that can continue to help them grow in the faith. If we don't do this, (or if you, as a new believer do not do this), we are setting them up for loads of frustration. To Peter's credit, he stayed with Cornelius for several days to help him get off on the right foot.

Conclusion

This passage is fascinating because it marks a new stage in the church. From this point on, we see a shift in the church as they begin to carry out the final stage of Jesus' commission to them—carrying the gospel to the ends of the earth. That process continues today. So let's draw some lessons from what we've studied today.

First, Jesus is the judge of all. There seem to be a million different views of Jesus today. People like to think of Jesus as meek and mild; they imagine that He would be accepting of whatever choices you decide to make in life. They believe Jesus really wants us each to be happy and fulfilled (whatever that means). But that is not what the bible tells us. Peter's message to Cornelius was very clear—Jesus was not only our perfect sacrifice, He is also the righteous Judge! Those who are banking on the fact that “Jesus understands” and therefore approves of our sinful behaviors are dead wrong. Jesus is gracious and loving, but He is also just. He will not hesitate to punish our sin. If we do not have a right view of Jesus, we will be wrong about everything else.

Second, we shouldn't overcomplicate the gospel. The gospel message is pretty straightforward: we are sinful people, and we stand condemned before a holy God. Trying to do good things cannot undo the bad things we have done. What we need is a savior, someone who will pay the penalty we cannot. Jesus is the savior God has provided, and everyone who trusts in Him alone will be forgiven and have eternal life. It's not a complicated message. It's not difficult to understand. There are elements of the Christian faith that are complicated and difficult to understand, but when we are talking to people who are not yet Christians, the gospel must be our focus. While we can be creative in how we try to communicate the message, the essential core of that message must always remain the same.

It can be fun to debate theological issues, to talk about the practical applications of faith in the modern political landscape, or to talk about how we should live for Christ, but those conversations do not move a person any further from hell. The only hope is for people to know Christ as their savior. That must be our focus. Once a person trusts in Christ, there will be plenty of opportunity for the other stuff.

Finally, we need one another to grow in our faith. God has made us to need each other. Other Christians can challenge us, encourage us, instruct us, and push us. When we absent ourselves from the body of Christ we are missing out, and we are robbing others of what we have to offer. Cornelius understood that he needed Peter's help to grow in faith. We must recognize that we need others as well and that others need us. If you are a mature believer, you should look for opportunities to encourage and strengthen younger believers. If you are a new believer, seek out those who can help you grow. The notion that we can figure it all out on our own is literally a lie from the pit of hell. God has designed us to be stronger together, so we should seize the opportunities He puts before us!

This passage reminds us that Jesus should be central to all we do. If we keep Him at the center, we will avoid many of the errors that plague our world today. It will also give us a proper perspective in the way we view those around us. Like Peter, we should remember that God does not show favoritism. That's a double-edged sword. It means that we will all be judged according to our actions, regardless of who we are. But it also means there is salvation available to any who will come to Him. I pray you choose to take Him up on His offer and encourage others to do the same.

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