**GOD ACCEPTS PEOPLE FROM EVERY NATION**

July 24, 2016

Acts 10:1-48

Key Verse 10:34,35 “Then Peter began to speak: ‘I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.’”

In Acts 9 we learned how Jesus Christ changed Saul into Paul; from a proud man who breathed murderous threats against Jesus’ people into a humble man who would not be silent in teaching that Jesus is the Son of God. In today’s passage we learn how the Holy Spirit used Apostle Peter to begin fulfilling Jesus’ world mission command to preach the gospel to all peoples on earth. Today most Christians are Gentiles. In the beginning of Christianity, only Jews were Christians. Jewish laws of what to eat and what not to eat along with their law not to associate with the Gentiles closed their minds to share the gospel with the Gentiles. It was very difficult to overcome for Peter who grew up with the idea that the Gentiles were only good for the fuel for the fire in hell. God prepared Peter’s heart by giving him the vision of unclean animals and said, “Kill and eat!” Even today barriers such as language, culture, education, personal prejudices and race can all hinder sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. I pray that God may destroy such barriers in our lives so we can freely and boldly share the good news of peace to anyone the Holy Spirit leads us to.

**First**, God gave Cornelius a vision (1-8). Acts chapter 10 begins by giving us a brief life description of Cornelius the first Gentile the Holy Spirit chose to hear the Gospel. Cornelius was a Roman centurion stationed by Rome in the Mediterranean seaside city of Caesarea. Mostly Roman soldiers were drafted from men of countries Rome had conquered. Cornelius was a genuine Italian centurion with one hundred soldiers under his command. Centurions like Cornelius were the backbone of the Roman army. Cornelius must have been a well-disciplined Roman officer with the spirit and loyalty of a Roman soldier. The world was a Roman world, and Cornelius was a Roman centurion. Humanly speaking, he was a lucky person. It seemed that he did not need anyone’s help, and that he did not have to seek God. He could claim to be his own man. But to our surprise, Cornelius sought God earnestly until he learned of God Almighty from the Jews. His favorable human condition could not satisfy his soul. His soul was thirsty for the holiness of God. His soul was hungry for the truth and grace of God. He was a pompous Roman soldier, but he longed for his heavenly Father because he too was made in the image of God.

Commonly, soldiers are very wild and enjoy the fleeting pleasures of life in order to forget about present realities. But Cornelius was different. He was a very pious man. He was a good influence to his family members. Because of his good influence, his family members were also devout and God-fearing. He was a blessing to the people around him. Cornelius also gave generously to those in need. His love for God compelled him to love others. And he was a man of prayer. Obviously, he learned how to pray regularly from the Jews. In brief, he was a Roman centurion, but he had the fear of God in his heart. He was a man of integrity; he was not far from the kingdom of God. Still, he needed to hear the good news about Jesus Christ, because good life is not enough to save oneself.

Once during regular afternoon prayer time, Cornelius prayed earnestly. Then God visited him in a vision. Look at verses 3-5. “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!’ 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. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter.’” Cornelius prayed and saw a vision of God. There were many things to seek such as becoming a captain, but he sought God. God saw this man Cornelius and told him in a vision to welcome Peter and hear the message of salvation. God seeks those who seek him. Here we also learned that God does not use angels to deliver the message of salvation. God uses believers to bring the message. In this case God chose to use Peter to give the message to Cornelius. How wonderful it is that God works with us as his partners in his work! How wonderful privilege it is to be used as God’s instrument to bring the message of salvation!

**Second**, God gave Peter a vision (9-23a). About noon the following day as Cornelius’s servants were approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. As usual, he was hungry and wanted something to eat. While the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. Then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.” In this short phrase, “Kill and eat,” God’s passion for world salvation is dramatically revealed to Peter.

How did Peter respond to the voice? Look at verse 14. “‘Surely not, Lord!’ Peter replied. ‘I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.’” We understand why Peter protested. He was brought up in a society where food laws were strictly kept. According to Leviticus 11, the Jews could eat only kosher food. For example any animal that has a split hoof and chew the cud would be clean. This of course would make sheep and cattle clean. On the other hand animals that walk on their paws like dogs or do not chew with their cud such as pigs are unclean. Also sea creatures such as shrimp are unclean. Creatures like these the Jews were not only not to eat, they were not even to touch their carcasses. God gave these laws to help them discern between clean and unclean and to live as a holy people in an ungodly world. God wanted to separate them from the idolatrous neighbors because eating meals together is a most common way to mingle. Keeping these food laws was part of their identity as Jews. However, because of these food laws, the Jews despised the Gentiles who ate all kinds of things without any distinction. They looked at the Gentiles as unclean animals. As long as this prejudice remained in their hearts, they could never accept Gentiles as human beings. In order to proclaim the gospel of Jesus to the ends of the earth, Peter had to unlearn some old habits and traditions of the Jews. According to the voice, Peter had to kill and eat. But his stomach was too weak to digest all kinds of animals and reptiles wiggling on the sheet.

Even today we find accepting the food of other people is one of the best ways to open a door to preach the gospel to them. When we go to France, we may have to eat frog legs and snails to make friends with them. Many Canadians are horrified that many Asians eat dogs. They think that those who eat dogs are barbarians. If they have those kinds of attitude, they cannot preach the gospel. When Missionary Sarah Barry went to Korea, she did not take her American diet with her. She ate kimchi along with her Korean students even though she did not like it at all. Because of this she quickly won their affection.

What did God do with this man who had such a weak stomach? Look at verses 15,16. “The voice spoke to him a second time, ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’ This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.” In these verses, all kinds of animals represent all kinds of people on earth. “Kill and eat,” meant, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.” (Mk 16:15) Peter needed to change his outlook on the Gentiles. He needed to see the Gentiles with the heart of God who loved them and wanted to save them. He needed to root out the prejudice that was like a concrete wall in his heart toward the Gentiles. Peter needed to rise above his own culture and traditions and learn that God accepts people from every nation.

While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found Simon’s house. While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit told him to go downstairs to meet them and go with them without hesitation. In this way, Peter and the men from Cornelius met together at the house of Simon. Peter was not really ready to invite them into the house as guests. But the Holy Spirit helped him to do so. Although Peter only thought about delicious food, God showed him a great vision of his world salvation plan.

**Third**, Peter’s message to Cornelius (23b-48). The next day Peter arrived in Caesarea. As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. But Peter made him get up. “Stand up,” he said, “I am only a man myself.” There was a large gathering of people inside the house. Peter 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.” Peter overcame his prejudice and obeyed God and entered Cornelius’ house. We should learn from Peter his obedience. We might not use the words impure or unclean as a reason to separate ourselves from people. Instead it could be our own prejudices or cultural differences that keep us separated from people.

Look at verse 33b. “Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.” Cornelius’ hunger for the word of God is remarkable. This pure motive to just want to hear what the Lord would say should be our motive for attending Bible study, Sunday worship or any Bible related event. When we come to church or bible study, we must acknowledge that we are in the presence of God. Our attitude should be humble reverence. Listening to what the Lord has to say to us should be our one and only motivation. Peter was amazed at Cornelius’ sincerity. Let us read verse 34-35 together: “Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.” Before meeting Cornelius, Peter thought it wasn’t entirely true that God didn’t show favoritism. Especially he thought that God favored Jews over Gentiles. Now he could see that God is completely blind to race, culture, nationality or whatever our human origin came from. There are only two things that God is not blind to; fearing God and doing what is right. It was obvious that Cornelius feared God and was seeking to do what was right. God therefore was not deaf to his prayer or blind to his actions, and blessed him with the gospel of Jesus Christ. In Matthew 16:19 Jesus said to Peter, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Peter used the key on the Day of Pentecost for 3,000 Jews. Now in this chapter, he used the key for Cornelius to open the door of the kingdom of God.

This is a turning point in God’s salvation history. Now the door of the kingdom of God is wide open to the Gentiles. As we said before, the Gentiles were considered aliens, dogs, uncircumcised, and outsiders. They could not worship God at the temple. They could not even get into the temple. The term “uncircumcised” was an ethnic slur, similar to the names that people use today for despised nationalities. The Jews, on the other hand, spoke of themselves as the circumcision. This was a name of which they were proud. It identifies them as God’s chosen people, set apart from all the other nations of the earth. This kind of attitude creeped into the Christian community. They were called the Circumcision Party; and they had come to the conclusion that the only way into Christianity was through Judaism. You couldn’t get into Christianity unless you came through Judaism; and they made circumcision the standard. Unless you had the physical rite of circumcision, you could not enter into Judaism, and you could not become a Christian. St. Paul battled with this group the most. If this group had won, Christianity would have remained as a sect of Judaism, and would not have spread to the whole world. By giving the Holy Spirit to Cornelius, God demonstrated that he accepts the Gentiles as they are. St. Paul calls it a mystery. Ephesians 3:6 says, “This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.” Jesus destroyed the barrier between Jews and Gentiles, and created a new community of people through his church. Through this new community we all became fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household. Believers of Jewish ancestry have no advantage over them. All Christians are first-class citizens of heaven (Phil 3:20-21).

In this passage we learn that God accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. God opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. To do this he first had to help Peter the head of the first Christian church overcome his many prejudices he had towards the Gentiles. I pray that just as God helped Peter overcome his prejudices, he may help us overcome our own prejudices or demolish any other barrier that keeps us from sharing the good news of peace.