

God Does Not Show Favoritism

Acts 10

In two locations, two-day's journey apart along the seacoast of Israel, God is working to accomplish one beautiful purpose: to move the Gospel forward across one of the deepest racial divides that has ever existed. In the provincial capital of Caesarea, Herod's architectural tribute to Rome's emperor, a Roman army commander bows in prayer to the Jewish God, a God whom as a Gentile, he will never be allowed to fully worship, when a most incredible thing happens. An angel appears. What does God have in mind?

In 1950s Greenville, SC, a young, white boy grows up among the pillared white houses, with their expansive, manicured lawns and beautiful garden vistas. Of course, all of this is tended by black servants who are paid just enough to be polite but know their place. This young boy attends a church where black people can't worship, and listens to a Christian radio station run by a Christian college where blacks can't attend.

Two days after the Roman centurion saw the angel, in the seaside village of Joppa, the apostle Peter goes up on the roof to pray, and he sees the most startling vision. A giant sheet filled with clean animals, those that any faithful Jew would readily eat, and they were all mixed together with unclean animals, those filthy creatures that only vile Gentiles would dare let cross their lips. God's voice tells him, "*Rise, Peter; kill and eat.*" What he sees is so repulsive to Him, he refuses, and God has to show him the same vision three times, before Peter begins to get a clue. At that very moment, two servants and a Roman soldier sent from the Army commander begin knocking on the front door. And with this, God begins to kick down a wall of racial division and hatred that had stood for more than a thousand years.

On the other side of Greenville, SC, a young black boy grows up among the dingy warren of flimsy, ramshackle houses. Here there are no manicured lawns, but only grassless, rutted, patches. The only gardens are rusty old coffee cans lined on the uneven porch yielding a few geraniums. The boy's mother listens to the same Christian radio station as the white mother across town, and she loves the same Lord. But she knows she cannot send her son to the same school, nor worship in the same church.

But somewhere along the way the power of Jesus' love begins to work on the heart of the white boy who grew up in white Greenville. He slowly whittles away decades of inherited racism. Today, he pastors a large congregation in the inner-city. He has opened his own heart and home to black children he has adopted as his own children. And, brick by brick, God is dismantling a wall racial division and hatred that has existed since this country was founded.

One of the great themes that ties the whole book of Acts together is racial reconciliation. The Gospel aims to reunite what has been divided. Jesus died for the sins of all people, and longs to bring everyone into his spiritual family.

In the first part of Acts, we see these racial barriers come down in three dramatic acts. It all begins with the church in Jerusalem being persecuted and scattered. Think about that. The way God got the church to cross their first racial divides was to kick them out of their comfort zone, and force them into someone else's bubble. Philip goes to nearby Samaria, where centuries of hatred and mistrust have kept Jew and Samaritan apart.

In says in Acts 8:12, *"When they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women."* But something weird happens. They don't receive the Holy Spirit even though they've been baptized in the name of Jesus just like we talked about last week. It's not until Peter and John arrive from Jerusalem and pray for them and lay hands on them that they receive the Holy Spirit. Why the delay? Why did God make them wait? Could it be, and this is just an educated guess, that God wanted to impress on Peter and John that God accepts these people too? It was as if God was saying, "I accept them just like I accept you."

Later on in Acts 8, God sends Philip on a mission. Go talk to this Ethiopian official riding in a chariot. Now the Gospel is crossing from the Middle East to Africa. Jew to black. Again, he is baptized into Christ. Again, it is God who set this cross-cultural encounter in motion. God was saying, "I accept this race too." Today, there are Christians in Ethiopia that trace their roots to this one divine encounter.

These first two racial divides come crashing down because one person was willing to be obedient to God. One person doing what God has called them to do can make all the difference in the world.

In Acts 10, we come to the third and largest of the racial barriers shattered by the good news of Jesus. This passage, which goes all the way to verse 18 of chapter 11, is the longest single storyline in the whole book of Acts. I mention that, because it shows us just how important this issue is to the heart of God. This could have been glossed over in a few verses, but instead the Holy Spirit inspires Luke to cover this in the greatest detail in his history of the early church.

God wanted to impress upon us the importance of what Peter says in vs. 34 & 35. As Peter sits down to eat dinner with an entire Gentile household, he offers this explanation. And I'm using this as our Core Verse this week. I made a change from Mark Moore in his book. It's the same topic, the same idea, and the same book. *"34 So Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, 35 but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."*

God doesn't play favorites. God doesn't have a favorite race, a favorite country, a favorite skin color. I want you to understand just how astounding and revolutionary it was for Peter to make that statement.

I. Racial Prejudices Run Deep

One of the things we see from this text is that racial prejudices run deep. God announced at the very beginning in Genesis when He made His covenant with Abraham that His intention all along was to bless all nations. However, Abraham's decedents took this covenant as a sign that they were better than all other nations. They used it as an excuse to look down upon, and even hate other races. By Peter's day, the Jews prejudice against Gentiles was a finely honed contempt. Nothing was more repulsive to a Jew than to sit down and eat a meal with a Gentile. For the Jew, it wasn't the just the food that Gentiles ate that was unclean, it was the people themselves.

Peter found the whole idea unthinkable. God shows him this vision of Kosher animals mixed with unclean and tells him to rise and eat. He refused, *"By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean."*

Let's say you had a divine vision, a vision in which God speaks to you. How many times would God have to speak, before you accepted the message? Be careful how you answer. God had to tell Peter three times. That's just how deep his racial prejudice ran.

To understand just how deep these racial divisions cut, we need to get a proper picture of the span of time that has past. It has been around 10 years since the birthday of the church at Pentecost. This isn't just a few weeks later. It has taken a decade for God to move all the right people into place, to move the church forward in baby steps like with the conversion of the Samaritans and the Ethiopian Eunuch, for the people of God to truly take the good news beyond Jerusalem and Judea as Jesus had called them to do in Acts 1.

But once the church got the message, she took it to heart, and we all lived happily ever after, right? Not exactly. This wasn't even the end of the battle for Peter. The ugly monster of racism reared its ugly head later when Peter was hanging out with Gentile Christians in Antioch. Peter was having a great time eating baby back ribs and ham salad sandwiches, but then some Jewish believers from Jerusalem showed up, and suddenly Peter acted like he didn't know the Gentiles. The apostle Paul writes in the book of Galatians how this led to a public confrontation between he and Peter, *"I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong."* This was a difficult lesson for Peter to learn, and it has been hard for us as well. The trench of racial prejudice is dug deep within our hearts.

In 1963 Martin Luther King, Jr. observed, “it is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o’clock on Sunday morning.” Little has changed in the 49 years since he made that statement. The Multiracial Congregations Project has found that only 8% of all Christian congregations in the US are racially mixed to a significant degree.

So how come 2000 years later, we are still fighting the same issues? How can we, as the people of God, look down upon, and even hate, those whom God has loved, and for whom Jesus has died? How can we exclude those God has included. How can we ignore those to whom God has sent us?

II. **Somewhere in Our Spiritual Journey, God Will Confront Our Prejudices**

Yes, racial prejudices run deep, but another reality we see from our text is that somewhere on our spiritual journey, God will confront our racial prejudices. He is not content to leave us steeped in our skin-deep judgments. If you are truly striving to follow Christ and grow in Christian maturity, somewhere in your spiritual journey, God will confront your prejudices. God will move in your life, just as He was moving in this story.

God was moving in two different places to accomplish one purpose. Before Peter ever had his vision, God was already working. He was working in an unlikely place, answering the prayers of a Gentile. God was working in the heart of a Jew and a Gentile. This tells me that racial prejudice is a two-way street. One of the lies of our day and our culture is that racism flows only one direction. One of the reasons it feels like racial relations are worsening is this lie that only one side can be racist. But as I look around, this is a white audience, and I’m white, so I’m talking about our side of the problem.

Cornelius wasn’t just any Gentile, but a commander of the hated occupying Roman army. A Roman legion at full strength had 6,000 men. The legion was divided into ten regiments or cohorts of 600 men. These cohorts were divided into groups of 100 men, and a centurion commanded one of these groups of 100. Centurions were the backbone of the Roman army. They were the equivalent of the staff sergeant or gunnery sergeant in our armed forces.

He was also a Centurion of the Italian regiment. The Italian regiment was composed of those who were not only Roman citizens, but had been born in Rome. Cornelius was a true Roman, not just a Roman subject conscripted into service. No, he was a proud Roman who signed up.

Our text also says that he was devout and God-fearing. This meant he was a sympathizer with the Jews and their faith. He took their faith seriously. He would attend synagogue and participate in some Jewish customs. He gave to those in need, and he was even a man of prayer. However, as a Gentile, he would never be allowed full inclusion or participation. He was a Gentile who was earnestly seeking the truth, and God answered him.

God sends an angel to Cornelius, and tells him to send men to Joppa to find Peter. God does this, not just to help Cornelius find the truth, but to confront the racism in Peter's heart. When God knocks on the door of your heart, keep in mind that He is already moving. He's been working behind the scenes. He's been doing things in places you have no idea about. Too often, we don't give God enough credit. We say, "There's no way I could do that." "There's no way that could ever happen, Lord." We need to trust that He's already moving. He's already been planning and preparing for what he has called us to do.

Throughout this whole account, we see God moving to confront deeply held prejudices. We have the appearance of angels, divine visions, and the miraculous outpouring of the Spirit. These all show God taking the initiative to knock down racial barriers and move the good news of Jesus Christ into the hearts of everyone.

God is the one who is moving in this passage, but I want you to notice that neither Cornelius nor Peter were idle bystanders. Where was Cornelius at when he received his vision of the angel? In verse 30, as Cornelius is telling his story he explains that he was praying when the angel appeared. God came to Cornelius in prayer. Where was Peter when he received his vision? Look at verse, 9. He's up on the roof praying.

What do you think would be a good idea for us to be doing, if we want to see God moving in our lives? We need to be in prayer. So often, it is in prayer where we will see God moving and working. It is through prayer that God opens doors and gives us opportunities. It is in prayer that God will lay bare attitudes and behaviors in our lives that need to be addressed.

It was in prayer, that God guided Cornelius to the truth he so needed to hear. It was in prayer that God confronted the racism that filled Peter's heart.

If you have sinful attitudes and prejudices in your own heart, the closer you draw to God, there will come a time when God will knock at your door. He will bring someone into your life. He will move you out of your comfort zone and put you in a situation where He can challenge those attitudes, and you will have to decide to let God's Spirit transform them, or push God away. As we grow in our love for Him, we must also grow in our love for His people.

III. God Accepts All People on the Same Basis as He Accepts You

The bottom line of this whole passage is that God accepts all people on the same basis as he accepts you. Why does God accept you? Is it because you're so wonderful? You're so great, that God wanted to hang out with you. Is it because of who your parents are? Is it because of where you were

born? Is it because of the color of your skin? We know better than that. It's because of His love. It's because of the cross of Christ where he paid the price for my sins, for your sins, for the sins of everyone.

We are all created in the image of God, and Jesus died on the cross for the sins of everyone; for the apartheid survivor from South Africa and the white supremacist from Michigan. For the old man in Tibet and the new born baby girl on the reservation in Arizona. For the aboriginal teen from the outback in Australia to the old Inuit lady who lives in the tundra of Canada. All are created in His image and Jesus died for all.

Vs. 34 & 35 contain one of the greatest proclamations in all of the NT, *"God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."* The word for partiality literally means *"acceptor of faces."* God does not accept one face more than another. He doesn't care about the color of your skin, or the slant of your eyes. He doesn't favor one's face. What He favors is a heart that is right, and a life that is pure.

Paul would later write to the church in Colossae,

Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all." –Colossians 3:11

In vs. 44 God is the one who responds to the Peter's sermon. He pours out the Holy Spirit on Cornelius' household before they even have a chance to respond to the invitation. This isn't just the gift of the Holy Spirit. Just like we saw in Acts 2, they're speaking in other languages. It's a miraculous outpouring. In verse 47, Peter declares that they received the Holy Spirit just as they had. In the next chapter as he recounts these things to the Jerusalem church he explains, *"the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning."*

Now look at the response of the Jewish believers in vs. 47, *"Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"* In other words, since God has accepted these people, so should we. We must accept and receive those whom God has accepted and received. This is our mandate for racial harmony and integration in the church.

I see what's going on in our world. We all see the division and the strife. We see the fingers pointed, each side at the other. We hear the blame and the accusations. "You said this!" "You did that!" We hear the competing slogans. All lives matter! Black lives matter! We read about the recriminations, the pressure, the shaming. What I am saying is that we as the church need to transcend all of that.

Let us live like a people who serve a God that does not play favorites. Let us treat every person like we serve a Savior for whom each and every life matters enough to die on the cross to save them, to love them, to know them.

The book of Revelation gives us a glorious albeit mysterious glimpse into the throne room of heaven. In Revelation 5, we see Jesus upon his throne surrounded by four living creatures that are almost beyond John's ability to describe, and there the creatures offered ongoing praise before the throne. Part of their words, you likely already know. They've been written into many of our songs of praise and worship. *"Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise."*

Listen to what else they sang, *"You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation."*

In Revelation 7, we see Jesus upon his throne, and He is surrounded by a great multitude beyond number. These are the servants of God, who have been sealed in Christ. This is the church, the kingdom, the Israel of God, and John describes them as being from every nation, tribe, people and language. There are no racial barriers in heaven. There are no racial divides among the people of God. They are one family. There they stand before the throne and they worship with one voice. That is how it will be in heaven. People of all races, nations and ethnic groups worshipping in perfect unity.

There aren't different districts in the Kingdom of God. There won't be black neighborhoods and white neighborhoods. Whom your earthly mother and father happened to be won't matter, because our heavenly father accepts all. We are all his children through the blood of Jesus. Jesus died on the cross for Asian sins, white sins, Hispanic sins, Native American sins, Black sins. His love and grace flows freely to all people.

That's how it is in heaven, but here on earth. We're not there yet. If events this summer are any indication, we have a long way to go. The good news of Jesus Christ still has some barriers break though. Some of those barriers might be in my heart and your heart. But our God is a powerful God, and He has a lot of experience in smashing down barriers. If He could knock down the wall in Peter's heart, if He could tear down the great wall of racism between Jew and Gentile, He can tear down any walls here this morning. He can tear down the walls that keep you from Him, He can tear down the walls that keep us from each other, and He can tear down the walls that keep us from others. Will you let Him?