

“TO THE GENTILES ALSO”

Acts 11:1–18

Key Verse: 11:18

“When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, ‘Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.’”

How do you relate to people? Do you try to stay with your own kind? Or are you adventurous? Are you willing to get close with people totally different from you? In the previous lesson, God led Peter to do something that in his time was radical: he shared the good news of Jesus with a Roman centurion. For that to happen, insurmountable barriers of religion and race had to be crossed. Peter could cross these barriers only with God’s help. Now, he faces criticism for what he did. It’s the next challenge in spreading the gospel: how should Christians relate to those who newly accept the gospel when we can be from such opposite backgrounds? These verses show us that God can actually change minds and hearts. We want to think more about what the good news of Jesus really is, the good news we all should be accepting and sharing with anyone. And we want to find the basis on which God wants us to welcome people as equal brothers and sisters in Christ. May God speak to us through his word.

Since chapter 8, we’ve seen how the good news of Jesus has been newly reaching Samaritans, an Ethiopian eunuch, and a most self-righteous opponent of the gospel. In chapter 10, the good news of Jesus reaches even a Gentile household. Look at verse 1. News of this has spread among the scattered Jewish Christians. The author Luke states “that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.” Throughout the Book of Acts, this phrase “the word of God”¹ or “the word of the Lord”² is repeated often. It’s also called “the word of his grace” (20:32). With our common sense, “the word” seems to refer to Bible teaching generally. But in Acts, “the word of God” specifically focuses on the good news of Jesus.³ Over and over again, Acts shows that it’s all about Jesus: his suffering, rejection, death and resurrection, his ascension into heaven, and his coming

¹ 4:31; 6:2,7; 8:14; 12:24; 13:5,7,46; 17:13; 18:11.

² 8:25; 13:44,48–49; 15:35–36; 16:32; 19:10,20.

³ 8:25,35; 9:20,22; 11:20.

again.⁴ It's also the word about repentance.⁵ It's the word about faith in Jesus, about believing in him.⁶ It's the word about receiving the Holy Spirit.⁷ It's the word about forgiveness of sins through Jesus.⁸ It's the word of new life and peace and joy and hope in Jesus.⁹ In brief, "the word of God" is shorthand for the key gospel teachings that point us all to Jesus. We all need to "receive" or "accept" this "word of God" (8:14; 11:1), and when we do, we are "saved."¹⁰ Also, when we "speak" this word "boldly," "give our attention" to it, "teach" it, "preach" it, and "proclaim" it, this "word of God" "spreads," "flourishes," and "grows in power."¹¹ Lives are transformed and people are blessed, not because we're so great but because God himself works through the word of God about Jesus. When Peter shared this "word of God" with Gentiles, they, too, were changed; they experienced the forgiveness of sins and were filled with the Holy Spirit.

But here, some believers in Jerusalem are not happy. Look at verses 2–3. When Peter goes up to Jerusalem, he encounters them. They're called "the circumcision party." In Peter's absence, it seems this group has gained influence in the Christian community. They're insisting that Jewish Christians should keep Jewish traditions. They're unhappy, not so much because Peter shared the gospel with Gentiles but because he went into their house and had a meal with them. To the traditional Jewish mindset, it's unthinkable. To them, Jews should never go into the house of a Gentile, and definitely not eat with them, because in doing that they would lose their holiness. Actually, there's no specific verse in the Old Testament that teaches that. Over the years of Jewish history, it's become just another "human tradition." During his earthly ministry, even Jesus had to deal with this way of thinking in people.¹² It's based on the assumption that Gentiles are "unclean" because they don't belong to God and don't follow his laws. In every culture and generation, legalism is not the gospel of Jesus. Legalism is a human way of trying to be spiritual or to overcome sin through strict rules. In our legalism we write people off and never imagine getting close to them.

⁴ 2:23–24,32–33,38–39; 3:13–16,18–21; 4:10–12; 5:30–32,42; 10:39–43; 13:28–31,38–39.

⁵ 2:38; 3:19; 5:31; 11:18; 17:30; 20:21; 26:20.

⁶ 3:16; 5:14; 8:12; 9:42; 10:43; 11:17,21; 15:11; 16:31; 18:8; 19:4; 20:21; 24:24; 26:18.

⁷ 1:5,8; 2:4,33,38; 5:32; 8:15–17; 9:17; 10:44–45,47; 11:15–16; 19:2,6.

⁸ 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18.

⁹ "Life": 2:28; 5:20; 11:18; 13:48; "peace": 10:36; "joy": 2:28; 8:8; 13:52; 16:34; "hope": 2:26; 23:6b; 24:15; 26:6–7; 28:20.

¹⁰ 2:21,47; 4:12; 11:14; 13:26,47; 15:11; 16:30–31.

¹¹ 4:29,31; 6:4,7; 8:4,25; 12:24; 13:5,46,49; 14:25; 15:35–36; 16:6,32; 17:13; 18:11; 19:20.

¹² Cf. Matt.15:1–9; Mark 7:1–9.

These people think Peter has compromised the faith and set a bad example. How does he respond? He repeats the story of his vision from God (4–10). Peter’s orderly details of what happened show that all this was from God. Through the vision, God was telling him that the animals he’d always thought were unclean were actually fine, because God had made them clean. Peter had a strong aversion to those animals. But a voice from heaven said a second time, “What God has made clean, do not call common” (9). It was a heavenly voice, a prophetic voice, God’s voice, telling Peter that God can make anything or anyone clean. God makes sinners clean not through our efforts or abilities, our strict adherence to rules, or even our sincerity. God makes us clean, from deep within, only by the shed blood of our Lord Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit.¹³ When someone has been made clean by God in this way, we need to get over our fixed ideas or negative thoughts, and accept him or her as clean in Jesus.

Next, Peter explains how the men from Cornelius showed up at that very moment, and how the Holy Spirit told Peter to go with them and make no distinction (11–12). Going into a Gentile’s house was definitely not Peter’s idea; it was God’s idea, and Peter obeyed. When he went in, he heard from the man that he too had seen a vision. An angel had given him Peter’s name and where he was staying. Look at verse 14. The angel told the man that Peter “will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and your household.” God was sending Peter to these Gentiles to tell them that God’s salvation is in Jesus.

For Luke, this is such an important truth. When Jesus was an infant, being presented to God in the temple, an elderly man named Simeon, filled with the Spirit, said, “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel” (Luke 2:29–32). Jesus is God’s salvation. He came into the world as a light for revelation to the Gentiles. For many generations God had been preparing to bring this salvation, in the person of Jesus, to all the peoples of the world. Now, he has come! God is beginning to get this message of salvation out to those who’ve never heard it. God has just helped Peter to overcome himself and declare this message to a Gentile and his household. But in the name of holiness, some are trying to exclude these precious new believers.

¹³ 1 Cor.6:11; Heb.9:13–14; 1 Pet.1:2; 1 John 1:7.

Peter continues with one more key fact. Look at verse 15. “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning.” Peter had been slow and reluctant, but God was so eager, he sent the Spirit before Peter could finish speaking. Still, Peter found it hard to understand. How could these Gentiles suddenly receive the Holy Spirit? Look at verse 16. “And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’” Peter realized that when these Gentiles believed in Jesus and received the Holy Spirit, Jesus’ word was fulfilled. They received the Holy Spirit because our living Lord Jesus could see their repentant and believing hearts, and he made them clean through the Holy Spirit. Jesus our Lord is still the one who baptizes new believers with the Holy Spirit, even today. His baptizing these Gentiles with the Holy Spirit is the evidence that he had cleansed them. So there’s absolutely no need for Peter to keep any distance from them. We all are cleansed not by rituals or activities but by the Holy Spirit within us. Titus 3:5 says, “...he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit...” If the Holy Spirit’s work in a person is evident, we need to humble ourselves, deny our own ideas, and acknowledge that person as a brother or sister in Christ, no matter how different we may be humanly.

This story may seem unrelated to us, but actually, it’s so relevant. God has brought us together into a very diverse community. But we don’t all need to be exactly the same as each other. We don’t all need to become like people from the United States, from Slavic nations, Europe, Latin America, Africa, Muslim nations, India, China, or Korea. We just need to open our eyes to see ourselves and each other from God’s point of view. The early Christians would continue to face this challenge of how to live together as ethnically diverse people. Apostle Paul wrote: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility...” (Eph.2:13–14). He also wrote: “Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Rom.15:7). When we accept the work of God’s grace in one another, we can have real spiritual unity. Paul gave even more words about this: “...with all humility and gentleness, with patience, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one

Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph.4:2–6). In light of this passage, if we have a history of despising people in our community, for whatever reason, and driving them away, God is calling us to deeply repent.

To Peter, the evidence that they had received the Holy Spirit was clear: these Gentiles had been speaking in foreign languages and praising God, just as had happened to the first followers of Jesus (10:46; cf. 2:1–4). Read verse 47. “If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” Their new languages suggest that God wants to use these Gentiles as well in reaching the world. Peter is sharing here how this evidence has affected him personally. He realizes that his own inner legalism of staying away from Gentiles is getting in the way of what God wants to do. So he decides, by faith in Jesus, to embrace what God is doing and to embrace these new believers. This is genuine humility. It’s easy to be set in our ways, and stubborn. But a truly great person is open to the facts of what God is doing, listens, and lets these facts change him. It can happen.

How do the Christians in Jerusalem respond to what Peter said? Read verse 18. “When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, ‘Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.’” They acknowledge that God himself has been at work in and through Peter. Instead of criticizing, they become silent. It’s really like the saying, “Silence is golden.” In their silence, God moves their hearts. God helps them see the wonderful work of grace he is doing. Through what Peter reports, they can see that God has granted these Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.

What is this “repentance”? To repent is not complicated; it’s really simple. It means to turn away from our sin, turn toward God, and put our faith in our Lord Jesus (20:21; cf. 2 Cor.7:10). But how can we do that, especially if we feel cut off from God in our sin? It’s because of what God offers us in Jesus. In Jesus, God is offering us his great forgiveness. Jesus paid it all, all the cost, all the punishment of our sin. God is promising us that if we just turn from our sin and put our trust in Jesus, he’ll blot out all our sins and give us times of refreshing in his presence (3:19–20). He’ll give us the Holy Spirit to change us from deep within. In his forgiveness, we’ll learn all about this new life in Jesus (5:20). Paul

declared this life like this: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor.5:17). He also wrote: “We were therefore buried with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom.6:4). Paul shared personally what this life meant to him: “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal.2:20). In this new life of Christ, this new love of Christ, Paul, the former legalistic Pharisee, could freely embrace all kinds of Gentiles. So, what we’ve been thinking up until now doesn’t matter. How we’ve been living up until now doesn’t matter. Our Lord Jesus is inviting all of us listening today, even us, to experience this repentance that leads to life, and to share this good news with others.

Read verse 18 again. “When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, ‘Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.’” The change of heart of these critics is also the mighty work of God. May God open our eyes to see the work of the Holy Spirit in new believers and welcome them as our dear and equal brothers and sisters in Christ.