

One of the first non-Jews to embrace the gospel was Cornelius, a Roman centurion stationed at Caesarea. God gave separate visions to Cornelius and Peter to set the stage for their meeting and to show Peter that Gentiles were included in God’s plan of salvation, an incredibly radical idea in the first century. After Peter received a vision from heaven, he was still wondering about the meaning of the vision, and was waiting for an invitation to the house of Cornelius. Three men came to show Peter the way to Cornelius the centurion, *“a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people”* says verse 22. Peter had no idea who else might be waiting for him at the Gentile’s house, but he was under orders to go there and to tell whoever would listen the message of Jesus and the gospel.

The context for this story begins with God’s call of Abram, when God promised, *“All of the peoples on earth will be blessed through you”* (Genesis 12:3). While the Old Testament relates the story of Israel as God’s chosen people, there is also an undercurrent that reminds us of God’s love for the Gentiles. And so, the Jewish law prescribes fair treatment for “foreigners” (Exodus 22:21; 23:9; Deuteronomy 10:19)—and Rahab (Joshua 6:25) and Ruth (Ruth 1:16-17), both Gentiles, became part of Jesus’ genealogy (Matthew 1:5)—and God sent Jonah to Nineveh to save the Ninevite Gentiles (Jonah 1:2).

In the New Testament, this openness to the Gentiles accelerates like a NASCAR racing car. After his resurrection, Jesus tells the Apostles, *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”* (1:8). This is THE pivotal verse for the entire story recorded in the book of Acts. At Pentecost, Peter (not yet grasping the full impact of his words) says in his sermon, *“The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call”* (2:39).

In the early chapters of Acts just the opposite was true. Membership in the church required prior membership in a Jewish synagogue and the Jewish faith community. But then in chapter 8, we saw that Philip baptized an Ethiopian eunuch—a man who was not eligible to become a full member of the Jewish community. Then, as we saw last week, Saul the murderous persecutor of the followers of Jesus, makes a complete 180 and become a devout follower of Jesus himself, who eventually becomes God’s Apostle to the Gentiles.

And then in the first half of Acts 10, Cornelius and Peter saw two visions given to them by God. In his vision, Cornelius, a Roman centurion and a devout Gentile, was ordered to send for Peter (Acts 10:5-6). In his vision, Peter saw unclean animals (*unclean* according to Jewish law) and received an order from God to kill and eat them (Acts 10:11-16). In the meantime Peter was trying to understand this troublesome vision, when men sent by Cornelius arrived.

“While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Simon, three men are looking for you. So, get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them” (10:19-20). Peter went with the men to Joppa, where he met Cornelius. Cornelius had gathered together his relatives and close friends to meet with the God-sent Peter (10:24).

Verse 25 records, *“As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence.”* Some English translations say Cornelius *“worshiped”* him. It seems natural enough that Cornelius would fall down at Peter’s feet to worship him. After all, an angel of the Lord commanded Cornelius to send for Peter (10:5-6), so Cornelius can assume that Peter is a God-sent emissary, at the very least—or a deity, at the very most.

When in doubt—especially in the Middle East where hospitality is strictly and universally observed—it’s a safe bet to give a stranger more honor than they deserve rather than less. It’s easy to ratchet down; but can be unnerving to have to ratchet up. Cornelius takes the safe course by “falling down” at Peter’s feet and in essence worshipping him.

Does this sort of thing happen today? I haven't had anyone "fall down" at my feet and worship me lately, but like many clergy I have experienced people putting me on a pedestal just because I am ordained. Maybe that's not always appropriate. How does Peter respond to the exaggerated hospitality of Cornelius? How would I deal with something like this? Verse 26 gives me an apostolic example to follow, *if ever someone tries to worship me...*

"But Peter made him get up. Stand up, he said, I am only a man myself" (10:26). Peter wisely refuses to allow Cornelius to worship him. He calls Cornelius to, *"Stand up,"* a posture that places them eye to eye—a posture that suggests equality, not subservience. Peter spells out his way of thinking in detail: *"I am only a man myself,"* he says. His answer suggests that Peter thinks of Cornelius as an equal or a near-equal. Still, there is the fact of the matter that Peter is an Apostle and Cornelius is not. But Peter doesn't bring up any difference or distinction that separates them. He mentions nothing like that.

Paul and Barnabas face a similar situation later in Acts when a crowd at Lystra, seeing Paul heal a crippled man, says, *"The gods have come down to us in human form!"* (14:11). They call Barnabas "Zeus" and Paul "Hermes"—and the priest of the temple of Zeus brings oxen and wreaths to the city gates to offer sacrifices to Paul and Barnabas. But Paul and Barnabas tear their clothes—a public expression of dismay—and say to the crowd, *"Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human, like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them"* (14:15). Additionally, in the book of Revelation, John falls down to worship at the feet of an angel, but the angel responds, *"Don't do that! I am a fellow servant with you and with your fellow prophets and with all who keep the words of this scroll. Worship God!"* (Revelation 22:9).

Getting back to Acts 10, Peter proceeds to talk about his transformed understanding of the Gentiles. He says to Cornelius and the others: *"You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or*

unclean” (10:28). In verse 34, Peter speaks, saying, “*I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism...*” The Hebrew Scriptures always prohibited Jewish people from showing favoritism to wealthy or powerful people, and made it clear that Yahweh did not show favoritism to people of privilege (Leviticus 19:15; Deuteronomy 10:17-18; 2 Chronicles 19:7).

But the favoritism of which Peter speaks is favoritism *toward* the people of Israel. In the Old Testament, we remember that God chose Abram and Abram’s descendants, bringing them into a covenant relationship that meant Israel was to be known as God’s “*chosen people*” (Genesis 12:1-3; Exodus 19-24; Joshua 24; 2 Samuel 7:12-17). However, these covenants were all preliminary to the covenant established by Jesus (Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25). As the Apostle Paul later says to the Galatian churches, because of Christ’s work, “*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus*” (Galatians 3:28).

In verse 35 Peter says, “*but [God] accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.*” The word “nation” comes from the Greek word *ethnos*. While *ethnos* can have various meanings, in the New Testament it is often a code-word for the Gentiles. Peter’s phrase, “*every nation,*” clearly means people from Gentile nations. But if God is not partial to people of a particular race, *God is partial to those who fear him and who do what is right.* The standard for righteousness in the past was adherence to the Jewish law. Yet Peter says he now understands that fearing God (having reverence and awe for God) and doing what is right are criteria by which God will judge.

Doing “*what is right*” is not works-righteousness (the kind that brought about the Protestant Reformation) but is rather acknowledging that *God expects our faith to correspond with our behavior!* A person who reverences God will try to honor God by acting in accord with God’s will. Grace is still essential, because “*all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God*” (Romans 3:23). But God knows our hearts. God knows whether we are trying to honor him by doing his will. We cannot profess faith in Christ while making no effort to do God’s will.

Peter goes on to preach a sermon similar to his Pentecost message in the house of Cornelius. He concludes his sermon with these words, “*All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name*” (10:43). Remember that Peter is preaching to Gentile people (non-Jews, like us), so the word “everyone” means EVERYONE.

I confess to you that we preachers have wasted time preaching trivialities. But there is one point of interpretation that I don’t think is trivial. Some scholars and theologians claim that verse 35 suggests Cornelius and others like him are *already* saved by grace. I do not share that understanding of verse 35, mainly because of verse 18 in the 11th chapter. When the apostles hear Peter tell the story of Cornelius, their initial misgivings are silenced and Luke writes, “*When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, so then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life*” (11:18).

“*Repentance that leads to life*” means that the repentance of any Jew or Gentile would lead to their eternal life. They did not already *have* eternal life. They received it when they heard the message about Christ and turned to him and believed in him. So, I conclude that Acts 10:35 does not mean that Cornelius was already saved because he was “*righteous and God-fearing,*” but because he received “*the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all*” (10:36).

My friends, the bottom-line message of this biblical account of Peter and Cornelius is all about *Unity Among Believers*. We know that the church should be a place of unity and harmony, focusing on worshiping and serving and honoring God. But all too often church groups fall into the “us/them” trap of discord and disunity. The early church, primarily made up of Jewish believers, had these struggles too. God wanted to expand the boundaries of God’s people beyond the Jews to the Gentiles, but they weren’t quite ready for that. Think about our own church. Is it a place of unity? Have we ever put ourselves in the place of outsiders or first-time visitors when they walk through the doors of our church? *If not, it’s time that we should!* Thanks be to God! Amen.