

The Inclusive Gospel
Pastor Ashley Brown
Wasilla Bible Church
November 30, 2008

We are going to be looking at a passage here today in Acts 10 and 11. As you turn there, I'll give a little bit of preface here. Two weeks ago, following last time that I preached, there was a friend of mine. And he asked if I really believed what I had said in that sermon, that Jesus is the only way that someone can know God. And I responded to him, "Yes, I do." Of course, the follow-up question to that that naturally comes is "Well, what about the good Muslim person, the good Buddhist person, the good atheist...whoever it is, who does not believe in Jesus? They don't trust in Jesus for salvation, or whatever else. Would God really send that good person to hell just because they don't accept Jesus?" And I had to respond, "Yes, He would. That's what the Bible teaches." That's a teaching that is not very popular in our culture today. It's something that, quite honestly, seems elitist. It seems arrogant to say that this is the one right way. It seems exclusive...we're cutting certain people out. We aren't being inclusive and tolerant.

But what we're gonna look at here today in the gospel...or excuse me, in the book of Acts, is that really the gospel is extremely inclusive. And we're gonna see that in the story of Peter and Cornelius. But before we do, I just want to point out one thing. It's kind of a silly accusation to say that Christianity is exclusive and hold that against Christianity because, see, Christianity is actually the most inclusive, the most accepting world view, belief system, mental structure, faith structure in the entire world. It's the biggest one in existence that is most accepting, and everything else. And here's the irony—every single person in this room is exclusive. Everybody is! We all have things that we accept people for or reject people for. I have yet to meet the person who says that Hitler is a good guy simply because he was humane to animals. He, right there, is an extreme example of somebody that probably we would all put on the 'bad' list, ok?

Yet it goes even closer to home than that. Hitler's an extreme example, but let's put it this way—my daughter, she's about to turn 6. So in like 32 years, when I finally say she can consider dating, there is going to be a point in time where a guy drives up to the house to pick her up, or whatever else. If this guy hops out of the car...or no. Let's say this guy stays in the car, ok? And he just kinda honks the horn. I'm gonna look at Charlotte, and I'm gonna be like, "You aren't goin' anywhere, girl. Uh uh." You know, of course then he gets out of his car, and he starts walkin' up, and he's kinda got that gangster strut and everything, dressed like a thug, and I'm gonna be sittin' here thinkin', "What in the world! Am I gonna let my daughter go out with this guy?" I'm concerned.

Now, of course, on the other hand let's say guy number two...he comes up, he gets out of his car, he's got these roses, everything else. Comes up, knocks on the door, says, "Hello, Mr. Brown," you know, looks me in the eye, shakes my hand, well-dressed, nice clean-cut lookin' kid...I'm probably going to be more willing to accept him. And I think that I'm probably not the only one. I suspect that any of you who have daughters out there may think that you might have similar sort of thoughts here.

But what it points to is that we have these standards by which we automatically judge people. Now, sometimes these judgments take stronger or lesser forms, but it just points to the fact that we are exclusive. We look at somebody and we have these unspoken, unwritten standards that we hold people to. And if they meet those standards then they're in. We trust them, we accept them; they're on the 'good' list. And if they don't, they're 'bad.' That's kind of that assumption behind the question, "Well, what about that good Muslim person? What about that good...that good Hindu person, or the person who's an atheist? But they're just a really good, moral person!" See, you're assuming that your standards—that are unwritten, that are based basically on your own thoughts and feelings and everything else—should be the one...the ones that God lives by. You're basically placing yourself in the position of God. And you're being exclusive because when you say that this person is good, you're by default saying there are other people who don't live up to your standards who are not. Everybody is exclusive.

So the question is how will we decide who is accepted and who is not? What we'll see in the gospel is...the gospel is actually the most inclusive framework by which you can look at somebody. God is willing to accept anybody. And that's what we're gonna see here in Peter and Cornelius.

I'm gonna summarize this story, because I don't wanna read through, you know, two chapters pretty much. That's a lot to read through. So follow with me here. I'm gonna summarize the story up to a critical point here, ok?

It starts off...in Scene 1 we see Cornelius. He is this centurion man, which means he's like a company commander in the Roman army. He's worked his way up through the ranks. He's dependable, he's earned respect. He's a very generous man; he gives charity to all kinds of people—to the poor, to the needy. He prays on a regular basis. In fact, we find out just a little bit later that Cornelius is so good, and he is so moral, that people—even in the Jewish nation—they love him! They think he's a great guy. He's well esteemed. This is pretty impressive considering the fact that the Jews looked at the Roman occupiers in the same way that a Frenchman would look at the Nazi occupiers in World War II. The simple fact that this guy could have the approval of a whole bunch of Jewish people is a pretty amazing feat. He must have been one good guy!

Well, one day he's sitting here and he's praying to God. And God sends him this vision, an angel. And the angel tells Cornelius, 'Listen, God has heard your prayers. And so here is what you need to do. You need to go and find this man named Peter. He's in the next town over, about a day's journey from here. Go over there and he'll be able to tell you about God.' And so Cornelius...the angel leaves and Cornelius...he calls in three of his servants and he says, 'Listen...I've just had this angel...he's appeared to me, and he said I could know God. But we need to find this man, Peter. He's over in this town. So go find him, ok?' These guys, they end up leavin'. They say, 'Yes sir.' They head out, and they're runnin' over to the next town over. That's the end of Scene 1.

Now then we cut over to Scene 2. Scene 2 is Peter. It takes place the next day. And Peter is on his rooftop, ok? It's kind of a big, flat area. I don't know, sun bathing, whatever he's doing, I don't know. But he's up here, and he decides to start praying. And as he's spending time in prayer he has this vision. God gives him this vision; it's around lunchtime, and so he's probably nice, hungry, waiting for lunch to be done. And God brings this blanket down from heaven. And on this blanket there's these unclean animals. It's like...think of...what comes to my mind is a pig pickin' from in the South. For those of you who don't have any reference for what that is...from what I've heard of a luau, it's similar to that. It's...you take...you know, those trailers out at the state fair that they do the turkey legs on, big old massive barbecue grills? Take one of those, cut a pig in half, throw it up on there, and let that puppy cook and roast and barbecue all day long. And by the time evening rolls around you've got this pig, and you pick off whatever parts of the pig you wanna eat—pig pickin'. Ok?

Peter looks at this, and he says, 'That is absolutely disgusting! There is no way that I can touch that! It's totally unclean! Pigs are unclean. I'm a Jewish man; I have never let anything that nasty ever touch my lips.' It's the same sort of reaction that the pastor of the church where I was at in North Carolina...he made this analogy for dietary laws with Peter here. It would be like...imagine with me, if you will...you have a southern, conservative, Baptist preacher. And all of a sudden God gives him this vision where he lets down a blanket and on there there's a Bud Light and a crack pipe, and God says, 'Here. Drink and smoke, man.' And the pastor would have a conniption. You can't do that! It's totally 'uh, uh.' No. Now I'm not saying, 'Go out and start smoking crack pipes and everything else.' But that's the sort of reaction that Peter has here. It's just this visceral reaction that totally repels him. And God says, 'Go ahead, take this and eat it.' Peter says, 'No way! I haven't let anything unworthy or unclean touch me.'

So God goes ahead and He says, 'If I've told you that it's clean, don't call it unclean.' And he gives Peter a second try. And He puts down a second blanket. And the same thing happens over; and a third time. And he sees this third blanket, and Peter again says, 'No way! Uh, uh.' And God says, 'Listen. If I've said something is clean, don't call it unclean. There's three guys who are about to show up here. And when you see 'em, you're gonna think that they are unclean. It doesn't matter. You go ahead and go with 'em.'

The vision ends, and right about that time there's a knock on the door. Peter goes to the door; he opens up the door, and there's these three men standing here. They're Gentiles; they're unclean. He would look at them, and they are people of a race that are not worthy. They are people who are not worthy of his time and attention. They are people who don't measure up to his standards. Yet he sits here and he puts two and two together. He says, 'Hey, wait a second. There's three blankets; God let's 'em down. I apparently failed the test, or whatever, 'cause I said "no." There's these three guys sent by God. I guess I should probably go with them.' So they go ahead and they take him with them to Cornelius' house.

So now we go into Scene 3. Scene 3 of this story begins as these...as these men (and Peter took a few more friends with him)...as these men arrive back at Cornelius' house the following day. Now, Cornelius has gathered together all his family and his friends. They're all sitting here waiting to hear what it is that this man from God has to say.

And so they get to the door, and the first thing that Peter says is, 'You know, I really wouldn't come, because really, it's not...it's not ok for me to be visiting somebody like you. But God's told me I have to be here, so I came.' That's not exactly the welcome that...or, the hello...that I would expect a gracious guest to give, but that's what Peter says. And so, then Cornelius says, 'Well, come in. And, you know, I've had this vision. And God has said that you can tell me how to know Him.'

Now, this is where the light starts comin' on in Peter's head, finally, of the thing of 'Wait a second. Ok, so I'm supposed to tell this guy about Jesus, and preach.' So Peter starts doing that. And we're going to pick up in verse 37, and I'm gonna read just a few verses here. And this is as Peter is preaching, and he's telling...he's telling Cornelius about Jesus. And he says,

"You yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. And we are witnesses of all that He did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging Him on a tree, but God raised Him on the third day and made Him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with Him after he rose from the dead. And He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that He is the One appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To Him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name."

While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard.

...meaning those who were gathered with Cornelius in his house.

And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter...

...Peter and his friends, these other Jewish believers...

...[they were] all amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. For they were hearing them speak in tongues and praising God.

What we're gonna see here...we're gonna stop right here, because this is the pivotal point, I would say, in this story. These two or three verses right here in verses 44 to 46—this is the pivotal moment, I would say, in this story. And quite honestly, I think it's probably the pivotal point in all of the book of Acts, and arguably in the Church. This is where the Church was headed along in a certain direction, and the gospel was conceived of in a certain way by Peter and the other apostles, the other Jewish believers. It was conceived of in a certain way such that after this point they see things in a totally different light.

Why is that? Well, there's a central truth of the gospel that is included in the...that is indicated here in these couple of verses. It's the simple truth that the gospel is open to everyone. It does not matter what race you're from; it does not matter what socio-economic background you have; it does not matter how moral you have been; it does not matter. The gospel is open and accepting of everyone.

We see this in two different ways. There's two different illustrations, so to speak, of how this gospel...or how this truth about the gospel...plays out. One is the speaking in tongues. That is a signal; it's an indication to Peter; and how he starts to realize the truth of this, the speaking in tongues is an illustration of that. The second one is praising God. That's a signal to Cornelius. And so we're going to look at these two things and how they play together. It's like two sides of the same coin, ok? And we're gonna look at how this is, and how this points to the inclusiveness of the gospel.

And we're gonna take these in reverse order. I know you're probably sittin' here saying, 'Ok, speaking in tongues—what's that all about?' But you're gonna have to wait for just a few minutes, ok? Because first we're going to look at this—praising God.

It shows this truth that the gospel is open to everyone. It shows that in Cornelius, and here is why. You look at Cornelius throughout the first half of this story... We have to get...we have to realize that, in our mindset, we're so used to Christianity that we lose the impact that this would have had. See, throughout the first half of this story, up to verses 44 through 46, Cornelius is the one who is praised. Everybody pats Cornelius on the back; everybody looks at Cornelius and says, 'He is worthy of being praised.' He...if anybody is worthy of being accepted by God, it's Cornelius. He's a good man. He is generous, he's charitable, he is somebody who is actually so good that even the Jewish people who are being occupied appreciate and like this guy who is part of the occupying force. He is one good man. You would expect that this is the sort of guy...that this man would be accepted on anybody's 'good' list. He would be inside the circle of acceptance. He would measure up to anybody's standards of acceptance.

But the amazing thing is that, as Peter is preaching, all of a sudden he is preaching about how Jesus is the only one who is the judge of the living and the dead, and Jesus is the only one who has the power to forgive sin. And as Cornelius hears this, the truth of it starts to sink in to him, into his heart, and he realizes that, 'You know what? I have not been forgiven. No matter how good I am, I have not been forgiven.' And all of a sudden God pours His Spirit out on Cornelius, and Cornelius and those with him begin to praise God. And from this moment on in the rest of the story, God is the one who is being praised. Up to this point it's been Cornelius. After this point it's God.

See, there's something that Cornelius realizes here. The gospel is open to everybody. It does not matter how good you are. No matter how good I am, I am not good enough. It doesn't matter how good people say that I am—I'm not good enough. This is part of the reason that the gospel and Christianity is the most inclusive world view, belief structure, mental mind...whatever. This is the most inclusive and accepting belief system out there, because it says the gospel, and acceptance by God, is not a reward for morality. It's not some reward for something that we do. It's not something where we have to measure up to some certain standard, and if we measure up then we've made it and we're in. It's the simple fact that if we trust in Jesus, if we actually trust that He has the power to forgive sins and He will forgive my sins if I only ask Him and I trust in Him, then He'll do it. Cornelius realized that, and he begins to praise God. All of a sudden there is this weight lifted from him—that he doesn't have to be good enough. He praises God.

See, every other belief structure out there...again, even if it's atheism, ok? Think about this. Everybody has this structure by which we assess and accept, and assess and evaluate, other people to determine who we're going to accept and who we're not going to accept. If they measure up, they're in; if they don't, they're out. But God says, 'I'm an equal-opportunity 'bad' list sort of guy. Everybody's on the list. And the only way you get off is if you trust that My Son's sacrifice was enough, because He's the only one that can pay that cover charge, so to speak, to get inside the circle.' But we'll go on, see, because there's a second aspect here, and this is one side of the coin where Cornelius realizes that no matter how good you are, you can't be good enough.

On the flip side of the coin we have Peter. And this...this moment here is a major moment of realization for Peter. And it takes place in the speaking of tongues. And in speaking in tongues, Peter...it's...God is giving him a "Gospel 101" class. In fact, it's probably not "Gospel 101"; it's like "Remedial Gospel," because apparently Peter didn't get it the first time back in Pentecost. And so what he does is Peter is in this mindset where it's almost like he's of this mindset that, 'Ok, you can trust in Jesus and that's good, but you still have to, in addition to trusting in Jesus, to really be worthy you have to live up to my standards of how you dress, how you walk, how you talk, how you eat, what you eat, what you don't eat, what you drink, what you don't drink. You have to measure up to these rules to really be worthy and accepted by God.' That's why he comes and he tells Cornelius, 'You know, I really shouldn't be here. I shouldn't, you know, be associating with you much less visiting your house, but God told me I had to come. So I came.'

That's also why, when Peter goes back home, he ends up running into other Jewish believers and they end up saying, 'What in the world were you thinking?!? You went and you visited these guys! I mean, they're unclean, they're unworthy. They aren't worthy of God! I mean, and not only that; you actually ate with them...you're filthy! What in the world were you thinking?!?' They don't get it. They don't understand that the gospel is open to everyone. And what Peter does is he explains, 'Wait a second.' He starts to defend himself. He says, 'Listen. I was up on my rooftop. I had this vision. This is what the vision was. And so these three servants show up, and so I went with them. And when I went with them, I started preaching and I told Cornelius about Jesus and what happened. And all of a sudden God poured out the Holy Spirit on them! I wasn't even giving an invitation. And He pours out the Holy Spirit on them. They didn't get my stamp of approval—they got God's stamp of approval! They heard the gospel and they believed it, and God poured out the same Spirit on them. I know it's the same, because the same thing that happened to us when we believed on Pentecost, when all of a sudden we started speaking in tongues here...it happened to them!'

God used the speaking in tongues right there to be a lesson to Peter that the gospel is open to everyone. It didn't take Peter's stamp of approval for these people to be accepted by God. It only took God's stamp of approval, and that happened when God entered in and when, all of a sudden, Cornelius and his family and his friends heard the gospel and they believed it. And they trusted in Jesus. And all of a sudden the Holy Spirit entered into their lives. And so God had Cornelius and his family go ahead and start speaking in tongues as a lesson to Peter, and say 'Listen, you are no more or less than they are. And they are no more or less than you. They have My same acceptance as you do.'

That's where Peter...the thing that he really needed to learn—it's the flip side of this equation. It's that the gospel is open to everyone. It's the flip side of the coin, that there are no prerequisites on the gospel. There is nothing that you have to do, some requirement that you have to meet, before God will accept you. You don't have to measure up to some sort of standard. Once again, this is why the gospel is so inclusive. God says, 'You know what? You don't have to get your life right before I am willing to accept you. The real question is, are you willing to trust Me and let Me begin to transform you from the inside out? Because you cannot do it yourself. And if you let Me, I will make that possible through the sacrifice of My Son, His death, and His resurrection.'

There's a couple simple points of application here for us today. If you're not a follower of Christ, it's simply this—you can try and measure up all you want. As long as you are still trying to earn God's favor you're still fighting against it. And really what it comes down to is this: the reason we reject Christianity, and we push against Christianity and Jesus so much, is the simple fact that there's this claim that somehow we are not good enough. And if I go ahead and accept that, then that means that I have to submit to the fact that I'm not a good enough person; and that doesn't make me feel good inside. And not only that, but it means that I actually have to submit to God's assessment of my life. And that's very uncomfortable. And so we don't want to do that, and instead we say, 'No, there has to be some other way. It's arrogant, anything else; it's exclusive, you're just being intolerant.'

Everybody is exclusive. But God is the most inclusive person of all. And maybe what it is, is we really don't want to admit that in the same way that God saved Saul—someone who was like a Taliban member, hauling people out of their homes in the middle of the night to beat them, imprison them, kill them—God will accept that person just as readily as he will accept me. Because I'm no better than that person. But if you're willing to accept that, God's message is, 'Guess what? You don't have to be good enough. The burden of being good enough is off of your shoulders, and it's on Mine.'

But there's a second point of application here, and it's for those of us who are followers of Christ. It's simply this: as we look through the book of Acts, there's a lot of people sharing their faith here. And in many ways this is an intimidating thing. I will simply point out this one factor—Peter and all of these other stories...they aren't puttin' people in headlocks and just startin' to beat 'em on the head with a Bible. That's not what they're doing. In fact, Peter didn't even go looking for Cornelius. He wasn't looking for Cornelius. Instead, what you see is you see a bunch of believers who are willing to follow the Spirit wherever the Spirit leads. They're willing to step through doors that the Spirit opens. They are willing to take opportunities that the Spirit provides, to share their faith in just real ways.

It's kind of like that analogy talked about a week or two ago, about the wave. When you're surfing you don't tell the wave where you want the wave to be so that you can approach the beach in a certain direction. You go ahead and you move yourself to be in line with the wave. It's the same thing. We don't tell the Spirit whose life we want Him to work in and what way, what opportunities, we want Him to open. Instead, we get ourselves in tune with the Holy Spirit and we wait, and we watch. And when He provides an opportunity to speak truth in a loving way, that's what we do.

If you're sittin' here and you're askin', 'How in the world do I do that, though? I don't know how to even recognize the Holy Spirit active in my life. I'm not sure.' Very simple, practical step you can take—followin' the holidays there is an application group, a rotation of application groups, where we help...we are helping people in our church know how to recognize and respond to the Holy Spirit. But in the meantime, simply pray and ask God that if there is an opportunity for you to share your faith, that He would make it plain to you; that He would say, 'Hey, this is it. Go ahead and take it.'

Please stand.

[Congregation sings blessing song.]

Go in grace.