

## Discrimination Within the Church - Still?

Acts 10

Last week we looked at the grace of God displayed in the life of Saul (who would later become known as Paul) He was known as a great persecutor (even murderer) of Jesus' followers, but became himself a follower of Jesus. On his way to Damascus Syria, he encountered Jesus and that experience forever changed his life. It's an incredible story. The believers in Damascus were nervously shocked, but eventually they embraced Saul within their fellowship. I think it's pretty cool to learn that there even existed a group of Christ follower's in Damascus. Damascus is over 200 miles away from Jerusalem, it was one of the major cities included in the Roman occupied region known as the Decapolis. That region might sound familiar to some of you, Matthew records that during Jesus' ministry in Galilee, that there were some from the Decapolis region that had heard of His work and came to follow Him in His ministry. ([Matt. 4:25](#)) And then in the book of Mark, Jesus and His disciples landed on the eastern shores of the Galilee, which was considered the border to the region of the Decapolis, and there Jesus healed a man oppressed by a legion of demons. That man wanted to follow Jesus, but Jesus told him to go back to his home and tell the people the great things the Lord had done for him, and so in [Mark 5:20](#) we are told "*And he went away and began to proclaim in Decapolis what great things Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.*" And a couple chapters later in Mark, we see Jesus return once again to minister on the Galilean shores of the Decapolis region. ([Mark 7:31](#))

So here we are in the book of Acts, years later, and we see that because some curious few from Decapolis followed Jesus around the Galilee, and because of a healed man sharing about the work of Jesus with others in his hometown, and because Jesus returned to the border of that area- knowledge of Jesus has now spread miles and miles away from the land of Israel and there is now a group of believers meeting together in Damascus... whom Saul learned about, set out to hunt, along the way had a change of heart, and now is living in Damascus amongst those he had previously set out to arrest. And during his time there, some of the Jews living in Damascus

made attempts on Saul's life. I can imagine they were bothered by the few believers there, but they were *really* bothered by someone like Saul who was previously a devote religious leader like themselves, who had now become a bold and obnoxious follower of Jesus. But God protected Saul through the other believers there, in [verse 25 of Acts 9](#) we see they lowered him down the city walls in a basket, and he was able to escape, making his way back to Jerusalem- [verse 26](#). We later learn that Saul was in Damascus and other parts of Arabia for three years, before coming back to Jerusalem. ([Gal. 1:18](#)) Now, in returning to Jerusalem, we see in the following verses that the believers' minds there were blown- they as well couldn't believe Saul had truly changed- but with the help of Barnabas, eventually they put down their guard and Saul ministered amongst them until again, other folks were seeking to take his life. The believers in Jerusalem helped him escape to the coastal city of Caesarea, from where he got on a boat and sailed to Tarsus, a city in Turkey where Saul was born and raised as a child, before his family had moved to Jerusalem.

Now remember, Saul was one of the key leaders who had been instigating the persecution amongst the church- perhaps he was even the main dude heading up the persecution- but now having submitted to Jesus, there's not too much persecution going on against the church- just some groups aiming their persecution directly at Saul. So, Saul took some heat off the church, and now with his move far away to Turkey, [verse 31](#) tells us...

And in the verses that follow, we learn about more miracles that were done during this special time of God's working and spreading the good news of Jesus. We learn about Peter traveling around Judea, Galilee, and Samaria, and about how he heals a paralyzed man in the name of Jesus, and as a result, more people place their faith and trust in Jesus. And then Peter prays over a woman who has died- a well-known, kind-hearted woman who had loved others well- and she is raised up back to life. And as a result, more people place their faith and trust in Jesus. The city where this occurred was Joppa, a coastal city, now known as Yaffa/Tel Aviv. And about 40 miles north of Joppa is Caesarea, the city Paul sailed out of, and the city in which Philip

eventually landed as he preached Jesus up the coast of Israel, back in Acts 8. ([Acts 8:40](#))

So, while Peter is in Joppa and God is miraculously raising a woman back to life, God is also at work simultaneously in the life of a man 40 miles north in Caesarea- a man by the name Cornelius. And we're about to see God's orchestration of bringing Peter and Cornelius together, an extremely unlikely encounter that forever shaped the face of Christianity, an encounter that heavily impacted and completely transformed Peter's perspective, and as a result broke down spiritual barriers, cultural tensions, racial discrimination, and spiritual elitism. May our reading of this encounter heavily impact and transform our perspectives, may we allow the Holy Spirit to shape our understanding of Christianity, and our understanding of God's heart for those *different* than ourselves. Join with me as we read from Acts 10, if you don't have a Bible, please feel free to grab one from the back of the pews- you're even free to take it home with you if you don't have one. There are a few different translations scattered throughout the church, find one you like and you're more than welcome to keep it. [Acts 10:1-2...](#)

Verse 1 tells us this guy is a Roman soldier, a real deal Italian Roman soldier who, as a centurion, was in command of 100 men. Verse 2 tells us he is a decent guy- he fears God, has taught his household to fear God, he gives money to the Jews living around him who were poor, and he prays to God. Who knows how much or little he knew of God and what the scriptures say- it sounds to me like he's just doing his best to do what's right, and to be humble and gracious before his creator. And God wants to draw him into His Kingdom. Verse 3 and following... ([Acts 10:3-8](#))

Now I want you to note that God very well could have directly given Cornelius the full message that God wanted to give him, yet God was fulfilling His promises to use the Jewish people as the mouthpiece proclaiming salvation to the world. In addition to this, I believe there was double work that God wanted to do that would best be accomplished in a corporate, unifying setting, rather than in an individualistic setting with Cornelius alone, and then Peter alone. So, Cornelius obeys and sends his

men on to fetch Peter, and like we've seen before, this was just a single step of obedience, without knowing anything about the steps or results that would follow after this. [Verses 9-16...](#)

So, Peter has this dream- a vision- and having been hungry, perhaps he first thought this vision was a bit of a spiritual test. God gave the Jewish people dietary restrictions in the Old Testament, particularly concerning meat. For example, concerning land mammals, they were only to eat meat from animals that have a split hoof and eat grass. A cow is such an animal- so there was no problem with tenderloin steak or a juicy quarter pounder with fries. However, a camel or a rabbit, though they both eat grass, neither has a two part, divided/split hoof- it's joined together- and therefore camels and rabbits were off the menu for Jewish cuisine. A pig has a split hoof, but doesn't eat grass, therefore it too is off the menu. "Where's the bacon?" No bacon for you! Concerning seafood, the animals that could be eaten must have scales *and* fins- salmon, tilapia, tuna, trout- all good. Shrimp, catfish, flounder, crab- no sir. Predatory birds were off the menu- no vultures, falcons, hawks, and also no mice or reptiles. And then there's this verse that says do not boil a young goat in its mother's milk, which has been taken to mean do not eat dairy with meat. In other words- no cheeseburgers, and especially no cheeseburgers with bacon! These are all part of what is known today as kosher food laws- and what that has to do with a dill pickle- I won't take the time to explain- but just know these kosher food laws have been followed by Jewish people for thousands of years. Contained in the Old Testament law are also other guidelines concerning dress, family relations, sexual relations, cleanliness, disposal of excrement and carcasses, dates for certain celebrations- all kinds of rules for living that God gave the Jewish people upon their exit from Egypt. So, these laws were given specifically to the Jewish people living in a specific time, and while there is a little bit of debate surrounding understanding the Old Testament Law in light of the New Testament, one of the more predominate views is that the Old Testament law consists of three types of law: ceremonial, civic, and moral. The *ceremonial laws* related to Israel's worship of God (temple activities, sacrifices, priestly duties) and are now considered fulfilled by Jesus- followers of Jesus are no longer bound to them- but the underlying

principles *behind* the ceremonial laws: worshipping, loving, and serving God still apply. The *civil laws* pertained to Israel's daily living and contained the consequences for harming your neighbor intentionally or unintentionally- and again Jesus fulfilled the law- followers of Jesus are not bound to ancient Israel's civil codes, many of which would be very difficult to specifically follow in today's modern cultures and societies. But still, there are many underlying principles that we can glean from these laws and apply to living with respect and harmony within our communities. The *moral laws* pertained to ethics, right and wrong, most of the ten commandments are good examples of moral law, and again Jesus' life, death, and resurrection fulfilled even the moral law, but what Jesus taught is that His New Testament standard of keeping the moral law was even higher than what the Old Testament law stated- as He aimed at the purity of one's heart, mind, and intent in addition to just merely the outward action of keeping the law.

The dietary laws fall under the category of ceremonial law- one who ate of the forbidden foods, or one who even touched a dead carcass of one of the forbidden animals was considered unclean, and thus not able to take part in the corporate worship of God. In the New Testament, Jesus teaches the disciples, (in the book of Mark) that food itself coming *into* the body does not defile one spiritually, but rather it's the evil that comes *out* of the body, out from within one's heart, that defiles one spiritually. And as we'll see later, Paul will make the case in his letters that followers of Jesus are no longer bound to Jewish dietary restrictions, but- some believers to this day still attempt to abide by the Jewish Kosher food laws, not because they believe it's a sin to eat bacon, but because they believe God set these parameters for the Jewish people out of a genuine interest for their well-being and health, and therefore it's a good diet to keep. You can perhaps see some of the health concerns, especially for primitive societies, in many of the prohibited foods. Many of the prohibited animals don't rid their bodies naturally of toxins, or they are scavengers who eat dead animals and even excrement- and thus have a higher probability of carrying diseases. But other theologians would argue that the dietary laws had nothing to do with health, but rather they were just laws to further set apart the people of God

from the surrounding nations- laws given in order to make them look and act drastically different than the societies and cultures around them.

Now I don't want to spend a huge amount of time on this, we'll probably talk more about this as we get into some of Paul's New Testament letters, but I wanted you to have a little background on the dietary laws as we look at Peter's vision. And I'm going to go ahead and give you a spoiler alert- Peter's vision has nothing to do with if it's ok to eat bacon, or whether it's ok to indulge in a cheeseburger. That's not the take away here. Again, there are other scriptures you could specifically apply to the issue of foods, but as we'll see, the issue here has nothing to do with food, rather it has everything to do with *people*. Let's keep reading, verse 17... ([Acts 10:17-23a](#))

Now I'm sure this had to be a little intimidating for Peter in light of previous encounters with Roman soldiers- you have to remember here that the Romans are the enemies of the Jewish people- the Romans are the conquerors, the oppressors, the unfair tax collectors of the land. The Romans believed in all kinds of false gods, their presence in Israel brought in all kinds of perversion of God's commands- they were a ruthless people, despised by the Jews. But, God's Spirit prepares Peter's heart ([verse 20](#)) and says go with them without any "misgivings," in other words- without any fear, regret, hesitation- because God Himself has sent them. Verse 23 ([Acts 10:23-28](#))

And here in [verse 28](#) we have the interpretation of the vision. Not just the Romans, but foreigners in general, were so despised that the Jewish people had created their own laws -not God's Old Testament Laws, but their *own* laws- that made it illegal for a Jew to associate with a foreigner, much less visit a foreigner's residence. Now there were many examples demonstrated to the disciples of Jesus showing God's heart for other cultures and nations, but I think many of those examples were perhaps brushed off and explained away. The Samaritans were hated, but they were at least a mix culture of some Judaism. There was a rub with the Hellenistic Jews who had conformed to Greek culture, but they were still Jews more or less. Sure, Jesus healed the Syrophenician woman's daughter, and another Roman

centurion's servant, and as I mentioned earlier- the demoniac from the Decapolis region, but maybe the disciples saw these as isolated events, or as compassion that only Jesus could express, or they saw some of these acting "Jew enough" for them to temporarily overlook any differences in culture or nationality. Either way, somehow, Peter is just *now* realizing that Jesus has broken the cultural, racial, and spiritual barrier- no one should be considered unholy or unclean- no, God's heart is that the whole world would follow Him and look to Jesus as King.

In the following verses, Peter then asks why he was summoned, and Cornelius then responds conveying what had happened with the angel of God telling him his prayers had been heard and for him to fetch Peter, and then Cornelius basically says, "Lay it on us Peter- tell us why we're all here."

[Verses 34-35...](#)

Here it is again, the meaning of the vision- does God welcome to Himself only certain "foods"- certain colors, races, nationalities? No, he welcomes one who fears God and who does what is right- no matter their background, experience, color, ethnicity, household religion. Now before anyone takes this to mean God approves of universalism, and that all roads eventually lead to Him, let's see what Peter says to them about what it looks like to fear God, do what is right, and be welcomed by Him- [verses 38-43...](#)

There we go: Jesus, sent by God, did good and healed, was put to death, but was raised up on the third day, this Jesus is the Judge of the living and the dead. His coming has been proclaimed by prophets for years and years, and *EVERYONE* who believes in *HIM* receives forgiveness of sins. *Everyone* who places their faith, trust, hope, and belief in Him and Him alone- receives forgiveness of sins and eternal life. This is the true gospel message, and anything other than this is *not* the true gospel message. It's wild to think that as close as Peter was to Jesus, and the awesome ways in which God had used Peter- at Pentecost when thousands were saved, later healing the lame beggar at the temple gate and thousands more saved, raising someone back to life, etc.- despite all the good Peter was doing and the way God was using him, he was still intellectually missing the full gospel message. He still had

been holding on to some internal biases, prejudices, spiritual and cultural pride- that was preventing him from seeing the full gospel, and preventing him from experiencing its full power. Author and seminary professor Chris Green says this: “Man has one problem: sin; there’s one Savior: Jesus; we’re all part of one race: human; with one hope: the resurrection.” That pretty much frames the Biblical response followers of Jesus need in dealing with the highly polarized issues of our time. [Verses 44-48...](#)

These Romans heard the gospel message and believed, and were instantly filled with God’s Holy Spirit. No delay, no laying on of hands, they believed and received God’s Spirit- and during this time the Spirit of God was displaying Himself through the gift of speaking in other languages, most likely for the quick startup and advancement of the gospel message around the world. Maybe the Romans understood Aramaic, the common trade language of the day, or perhaps Peter knew a little Latin and spoke to them in Latin (the Roman language of the day), or perhaps there was an interpreter, but I bet when these Romans received the Holy Spirit, they just might have begun praising God in Hebrew, the heart language of Peter and the others with him- which would have blown their minds and proved to them that God indeed had accepted these Romans. But there was perhaps even still some resistance from amongst these who accompanied Peter, but in [verse 48](#) Peter ordered that the Romans would be baptized, making sure that no one would exclude them from taking that first step of obedience in publicly proclaiming their new life in Jesus Christ.

This issue of elitism was a big issue for the early church to tackle. In the chapters that follow we’ll see that even later there was still some resistance to the idea that God desires *all* of mankind to follow Jesus, and not *just* the Jewish race. Even today, this is still something I believe God’s people can wrestle with. I want us this morning to put ourselves into Peter’s shoes and to ask ourselves: “Is there anyone who we might consider unworthy of the gospel?” Now, I know that most of us can probably say, “No, we don’t think that- Jesus died for everyone”- and quote [John 3:16](#). But perhaps by our *actions* we can *appear* to deem some people unworthy of the gospel, or unworthy of Jesus’ compassion, or we see them as in-capable of ever



understanding Jesus. Have we perhaps written off the family member who is extra annoying towards us when we mention something of spiritual significance? Are there certain people we feel have rejected God and there is not much hope for them- because of their weird beliefs, or because of their lifestyle, or because of their viewpoint, or because of the monstrous sin they have committed, or because of the awful way they treated us? How about this, how well are we supporting organizations and people who are attempting to reach the unreached with the gospel? Could we perhaps, in action or lack of action, be deeming others unworthy of the gospel by personally not going to share with them, or by not praying for them, or by not giving financially to organizations/people attempting to reach them? Or, perhaps we are so overwhelmed with the problems of the world, with the viewpoints we feel are incorrect, with the widespread corruption, with all the people that disagree with us- that we forget “Man has one problem: sin; there’s one Savior: Jesus; we’re all part of one race: human; with one hope: the resurrection.”?

May we come to the same conclusion as did Peter, and may our lives and His church reflect this message: That God does not show partiality, but *anyone* who fears Him and does what is right by accepting Jesus, is welcome to Him. No matter the past, no matter the current situation, there is hope for everyone to turn to Him. And we never know when that day might be that someone who has been so opposed to Jesus their whole life, on day might finally do a 180 and choose to follow Jesus. A pastor friend of mine, his dad who is in his 80s, just last year after resisting Jesus his whole life- for 80 some years, finally placed his faith in Jesus. Don’t lose hope. Don’t write off people. Continue to live out and share Jesus to this world without partiality.