Acts 2024 Juan Seo (June 23, 2024)

**GOD DOES NOT SHOW FAVORITISM**

Acts 10:1-11:18

Key Verse 10:34-35

***34 Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism 35 but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.***

Last week, we learned about the Apostle Paul's early ministry in Damascus and Jerusalem. God prepared Paul to be a light for the Gentiles. The next story, which we didn't cover last week, is about the Apostle Peter ministry in Judea. Look at the map. Peter left Jerusalem to visit Lydda, where he healed Aeneas, who had been paralyzed for eight years. Then, he went to Joppa, a city on the Mediterranean coast, and raised Tabitha from the dead. As a result, many people believed in the Lord. Peter then stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon. Today's message begins with this background.

Look at 10:1: ***“At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment.”*** Caesarea was located on the Mediterranean Sea and named after the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus. It was about 34 miles north of Joppa, where Peter was staying. In Caesarea, there lived a man named Cornelius. What kind of person was he? He was a centurion in the Roman army. A centurion was an official in command of 100 soldiers. He was a Roman citizen, but from the Jewish perspective, he was a Gentile. However, he and all his family were devout and God-fearing. We do not know how he came to know the God of Israel and adopt Judaism. He revered God and faithfully kept God’s commandments. Moreover, he generously helped those in need with God’s love and prayed to God regularly. Therefore, he was respected by all the Jewish people. He had a genuine faith in God. He awaited the coming of the Messiah. He was ready to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ and accept Jesus as his Savior.

What happened to him? One day at about three in the afternoon, while he was praying, he had a vision and saw an angel of God. What do you think he prayed for? He may have been praying to meet the Messiah he was waiting for. He had probably already heard about Jesus and wanted to know Him personally. The angel said to him, ***“Cornelius! Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God.”*** Through the angel’s words, we learn that God hears and remembers every one of our prayers. Sometimes we think, “Why doesn’t God listen to my prayers?” and we complain and distrust God. When that distrust grows, we may even doubt, “Is God really alive?” But God listens to our prayers and fulfills them in His time. Psalms 116:1-2 say, ***“I love the Lord, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live.”*** Additionally, God was pleased to see Cornelius generously helping the poor. Cornelius did not help the poor out of obligation or to gain recognition from others. He loved God and understood God's heart for the poor, so he helped them sincerely. God was pleased with Cornelius's prayers and good deeds, loved him, and graciously opened the way of salvation to him. The angel instructed Cornelius to send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Peter. Cornelius obeyed the angel's words. He called two of his servants and a devout soldier and sent them to Joppa. This devout soldier probably came to know the God of Israel through Cornelius.

Look at 10:9: ***“About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray.”*** Now the background of this story shifts from Caesarea, where Cornelius lived, to Joppa, where Peter was staying. Devout Jews prayed three times a day at 9 am, noon, and 3 pm. Peter also went up to the roof to pray at noon. But he became hungry and wanted something to eat. He probably fasted in the morning, so by lunchtime, he was very hungry. In the downstairs kitchen, lunch was being prepared, and the delicious smell of food wafted up. Peter was so hungry that he became almost delirious. Then he fell into a trance. The Greek word for trance is ἔκστασις (ekstasis), which refers to a half-conscious state between sleeping and waking. God often revealed His will through trances, though the distinction between 'trance,' 'vision,' and 'dream' is not always clear. Because Peter was very hungry, he seemed to have a vision related to food. We have similar experiences too. We fall asleep hungry and dream of luxurious and delicious food from a five-star hotel. We happily eat like kings and queens in our dreams. But we wake up and realize we are still hungry and feel disappointed. In his trance, Peter saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. The large sheet contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. If you look at this picture, you see a giraffe, horse, camel, pig, bear, ostrich, peacock, snake, crocodile, and even a dog, except for the fish in the sea. Then a voice told him, ***“Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.”*** If we were in this situation, how would we respond? I probably would have said to God, “Please leave out the puppy.” If that large sheet contained deliciously cooked steak or pork ribs, we would probably get up immediately and eat it with great pleasure. However, it is not easy to kill, cook, and eat live animals. When I went to Paraguay more than 20 years ago, Missionary John Lee was running a farm there and specially cooked an alligator for us. But the meat was so tough that it wasn’t very tasty.

What was Peter's reaction to God's command? ***“Surely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.”*** Peter's strong negative response, “Surely not,” was due to Jewish law. As he said, “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean,” Jews had clean foods that they were allowed to eat and unclean foods that they were not allowed to eat. Sheep, cows, goats, chickens, and turkeys were allowed, while camels, rabbits, pigs, eagles, snakes, and lizards were classified as unclean foods and should not be eaten. Why did God give these dietary laws to the Jews? It was to distinguish the Jews, his chosen people, from the Gentiles. God gave various laws to separate the Jews from the Gentiles for ritual purposes. Therefore, these dietary laws were a very important matter related to their identity for the Jews. As a devout Jew, Peter had never eaten those forbidden foods. When he replied, “Surely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean,” his identity and pride as a Jew, different from Gentiles, were implicitly expressed. Due to his cultural and religious prejudices as a Jew, Peter, even in a state of extreme hunger and semi-consciousness, could not overcome his barriers and refused the unclean foods.

What was God's response to this? ***“Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”*** Who designated clean and unclean foods? It was God. Then who can remove the distinction between clean and unclean foods? It is God. The God who said, “These foods are unclean, do not eat them,” can also say, “Now these unclean foods have become clean, so you may eat them.” All of God's creations were clean, and God saw that it was good. However, due to human sin, humans and creation became unclean. Therefore, God has been carrying out his redemptive work to cleanse and restore these defiled creations. He chose the Jews to be His holy people and gave them the privilege of having His Son, Jesus, come to this earth as a Jew. Jesus served humanity, suffered, was crucified for our sins, and resurrected from the dead, opening the way for the restoration of humanity and creation. Now, in Jesus, all that was unclean has become clean. Now, in Jesus, the religious, cultural, and ethnic barriers between Jews and Gentiles have been removed. Gentiles can also become God's people in Jesus Christ. Therefore, God said to Peter, ***“Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”*** This statement is God's command for Peter to break through his religious, cultural, and ethnic barriers and to open new horizons in missionary work by preaching the gospel to the Gentiles. This event happened three times, signifying that the vision was not just a random dream due to Peter’s hunger, but a holy revelation from God.

While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found Simon’s house and stopped at the gate. How perfect is God's timing! God planned each of these events and accomplished them according to His timing. At that moment, the Holy Spirit gave Peter clear direction: ***“Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.”*** Accepting Gentiles and a Roman soldier into a Jew’s home was a great burden and a dangerous act. However, Peter obeyed the guidance of the Holy Spirit, met them, and welcomed them into the house. The next day, he left for Caesarea with them and some of the believers from Joppa. They arrived at Cornelius's house the following day. Cornelius believed that Peter would come to his house and had already called his relatives and close friends to wait together with him. When Peter entered the house, Cornelius fell at his feet in reverence. This act shows how much Cornelius revered God. Although Cornelius was a Roman army officer, and Peter was a Jew under Roman colonial rule and of lower social status, Cornelius thought of Peter as God's servant and showed him reverence. However, Peter humbly said to him, “Stand up. I am only a man myself.” When Peter went inside, he found a large gathering of people. Peter probably did not expect so many people to be gathered there and realized how fervent Cornelius’s love for God was. Peter told them that it was against Jewish law for a Jew to visit a Gentile's house, but he had come in obedience to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. He then asked why they had called for him. Cornelius explained that he had seen an angel in a vision who instructed him to bring Peter to his house. He added that they were all there in the presence of God to listen to God’s words through Peter.

What was Peter's response to this? Let's read verses 34-35 together: ***“I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.”*** Peter says, “I now realize how true it is…,” emphasizing that he has truly understood. The truth is that “God does not show favoritism.” What does ‘favoritism’ mean? Favoritism refers to the practice of giving unfair preferential treatment to one person or group at the expense of others. An example of favoritism in the workplace would be if a hiring manager prefers candidates of a certain race over others, regardless of qualification; this could be considered racial favoritism. Acts 10:34, along with Romans 2:11, clearly states that “God does not show favoritism.” The content of “God does not show favoritism” as taught in the Bible is well explained in verse 35: ***“(God) accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.”*** This means that God accepts anyone who fears Him and believes in Jesus, whether they are Jews or Gentiles. Therefore, the statement “God does not show favoritism” in the Bible cannot be applied to the claim that it is unfair for people who do not believe in Jesus to be judged. God does not judge us based on appearance, nationality, race, skin color, economic ability, social status, or achievements. God sees only our faith as the condition for salvation. All people are equal before God, and everyone can receive the grace of salvation when they believe in Jesus. The truth that the Apostle Peter realized was a great discovery for the spread of Jesus’ gospel of salvation to the entire world.

Having realized God's heart for the Gentiles, Apostle Peter preached the gospel of Jesus Christ to Cornelius and those gathered with him. He testified that Jesus Christ is the Lord of all and witnessed Jesus' death on the cross and His resurrection. Peter clearly testified to the truth that everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through His name. What happened then? While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The Holy Spirit enabled the Gentiles who were there to speak in tongues and praise God. This was an undeniable and outward manifestation of the Holy Spirit's work. It was also clear evidence that God had accepted the Gentiles. At the same time, it was a clear message to the Jewish Christians, including Peter, to overcome religious and cultural barriers and accept the Gentiles into the church of Jesus Christ. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. Witnessing this work of the Holy Spirit, Peter said, ***“Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.”*** Immediately, Peter baptized the Gentiles in the name of Jesus Christ. This meant that the Gentiles were welcomed into the church of Jesus Christ. Afterward, Peter returned to Jerusalem and explained the whole story to the members of the Jerusalem church. Then the members of the Jerusalem church praised God, saying, “So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.”

Through today's message, we learn three important lessons:

***First, it is God who opened the door of salvation to the Gentiles.*** As we study the book of Acts, we continuously realize that it is God who carries out the ministry of world mission. It was God who connected Cornelius with Peter. It was God who showed Peter the vision and helped him break through his religious and cultural barriers. When Peter went to Cornelius’s house and preached the gospel, it was God who poured out the Holy Spirit on the Gentiles. It was God who enabled the Church of Christ, which was centered on Jews, to welcome Samaritans and then Gentiles, thereby spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ to the entire world. This living God continues to carry out His missionary work today and desires for us to participate in His mission. Therefore, we must carefully observe this missionary work of God and actively follow and participate in it.

***Second, God shows no favoritism to anyone and wants people from every nation in the world to believe in Jesus and come to salvation.*** 1 Timothy 2:4 says that God wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. Can you feel God's heart for all people in the world to believe in Jesus and be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth? A great number of people in the world are suffering and dying because they don't know Jesus! I can't forget my visit to Nigeria and South Sudan in Africa in October 2022. Have you ever heard of ‘water slums’? There is the largest water slum in the world called Makoko in Lagos, Nigeria. There are between 40,000 and 300,000 people living in those poor conditions. When I went to South Sudan, I heard stories of many people living in suffering from a long civil war. I also heard about many children being victims of sexual violation. I recently watched a video on YouTube about the situation in Haiti, and I was devastated. In the first quarter of 2024 alone, more than 2,500 people were killed or injured in anarchy. What must be God's heart toward these people? They are all people who need the gospel of Jesus Christ.

***Third, God wants us to break through our personal, cultural, and spiritual barriers and actively participate in the work of salvation through the gospel of Jesus Christ.*** The early church believers broke through their barriers and devoted themselves to spreading the gospel. Recently, we have been continually challenged through the book of Acts. We are praying to live Spirit-filled lives and become a Spirit-filled community. What are the barriers we face living in New York? I have only been in New York for six months, but I have realized how tough it is to survive here. I have seen how busy New Yorkers are, living each day just to survive. But should we live confined by the limitations of surviving in New York and remain unaware of God's love for the world? God wants us to overcome our personal limitations, understand His heart, and actively participate in His mission. Indeed, New York is the most suitable city for God’s world mission work. As you know, New York is home to people from diverse nations around the world. We can share the gospel with them. It is a great privilege for us to preach the gospel of Jesus to college students from all over the world, who will be the future leader of their nations. Additionally, we can easily travel anywhere in the world from New York. In April next year, there will be an International Conference in Mexico. I pray that many of us can attend that conference and receive the vision for missions in Latin America. Last week, Missionaries Alex & Eunice returned from Belize. We thank God for their missionary life. Missionaries Juan & Susana Baek from Venezuela are visiting us today. I pray that we can pray for and support our missionaries who are faithfully serving in their mission fields. I pray that we can go out and do God’s mission in Latin America and all over the world. I pray that we can actively participate in God's mission, preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world. Amen.