

# *The Impartiality of God Glorified through His Gospel*

Acts 10:44-11:18

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Have you ever been chosen for a kickball game? Yes? Or how about, I guess the question arises, have you ever been chosen last for a kickball game? Even now we can sense the angst kind of rising within, of that team captain that was picked for some reason, scanning the list of potential players to assess their strengths and their weaknesses in order to comprise the kickball dream-team, so that kickball domination can occur. I guess we could insert any type of activity in which humans are grouped together and expected to forge a team in order to accomplish a stated goal. Any activity where humans are grouped together, expected to forge a solid, unified team in order to accomplish a stated goal. It's not just for kickball, after all.

How does that translate, I wonder, when we think about the church of Jesus Christ? When we think about the bride of Christ? When we think about the body of our Lord, the church? Does that choosing for kickball kind of enter in to the way we think about God? Did God determine by some set of criteria known to God who becomes a part of his chosen people, and then he went searching through all of creation for that criteria to be met? Perhaps it comes in the form of certain conditions. Maybe it's more subtle. Maybe it's within us—a set of certain conditions that must be met by others, and then we deem them worthy to hear the message of the gospel of God's grace, and we'll share our faith with them. We evaluate them, we examine their strengths and weaknesses, and then we deem them worthy to hear the Word.

Well, our text today in Acts—in the beginning of chapter 10 to the end of chapter 11—our text today clears up any confusion surrounding who the focus of the gospel proclamation is supposed to be on. If you were confused when you came in, my prayer is that you will not be confused when you leave today. Who should be the recipient of the gospel proclamation? In today's sermon it may sound like déjà vu all over again. It may sound like a repetition—and if it does, the reason lies not with Pastor Randy from last week's message or even with me for this week's message, but we can lay the blame at the inspired author of the Book of Acts because he repeats himself verbatim. We know from the rhetorical device of repetition that repetition is often employed when an important point is being made and we want the hearer and we want the reader to get it. Well Luke, inspired by God Almighty, wants us to get it today.

What Luke is presenting is this ground shaking pivotal moment in the life of the church. Some theologians have called this, these two chapters ten and eleven the most pivotal chapters in the life of the early church. The most pivotal event, even: the gospel coming to the Gentiles. It doesn't eclipse the cross; it doesn't eclipse the resurrection and the empty tomb of our Lord, or His ascension to the right hand of God the Father where he intercedes for us every moment—but it is *extremely* important. It's important for all of us Gentiles, because the Gospel came to people who were not the nation of Israel. That's what's going on here. That's why Luke makes this point. Last week, we heard of salvation coming to the house of Cornelius, a Roman centurion. He lived in Caesarea, the capital city of the Roman province of Judea; through the ministry of Peter, a Jewish apostle of Jesus Christ. We read those and we think, "Yeah, so what?" At the time that was revolutionary. Christianity was not just going to be a small sect or a sub-sect of Judaism. Christianity was going to be the fulfillment of Almighty God calling his bride to himself. So Luke essentially conveys the idea in the part of chapter 10 that we are going to read and the first part of chapter 11. Let's read together then; let me read, and you follow along on the screens, the story of Peter. It will sound familiar because we heard some of this last week in chapter 10. God's Word for us:

While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.

Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them." But Peter began and explained it to them in order: "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me. Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' But I said, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But the voice answered a second time from heaven, 'What God has made clean, do not call common.' This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 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?" 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."

God's Word for us. Maybe you're familiar with the idea of the "big reveal" in a movie or a novel. If you've ever seen episode five of the Star Wars saga, you know the interaction between Vader and Luke Skywalker where ultimately the most misquoted line of all, "No, I am your father!" (There's no Luke in that line, by the way, you can check me out later.) The big reveal where clues along the way are supposed to give an indication of what is now being revealed in full glory. That's what chapter 10 & 11 of the Book of Acts is. God is the God of no distinction, he is the impartial God, and all along the way, even though he had one nation he had selected, and he had protected that nation through ceremonial law and dietary law and all the other things to keep them separate so that they might be a light to the nations and glorify Him to the other nations—those were simply clues pointing to the day when the Gentiles would receive the good news of salvation in Christ alone.

That's what's happening here. This is the big reveal. All along we've had clues throughout the scriptures. God had one nation, Chosen People; he protected them until Paul records in Galatians 4 in Chapter 4 that in the fullness of time, God could send forth his son, born of woman, born under the Law, so that he might redeem those under the Law so that we might receive our adoption as sons. The "we" there is the Gentile church. That's who Paul is talking about. In Colossians chapter 1, Paul describes the big reveal this way: "the mystery that's been hidden for ages and generations is now revealed to all his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery." What is the mystery? Christ in you, the hope of glory. No longer do people that follow God go to the temple for sacrifice. No longer is there now a yearly slaughtering of an animal, because Jesus Christ

the Lamb of Christ shed his blood to cover your sins. Now, Christ is living in you. That's our hope of glory. That's the big reveal. The God who has for centuries interacted through a mediator and the priesthood now interacts with his people through the sacrifice of Christ Jesus himself. That's what's going on here. That's the mystery going on here: God revealing his impartiality and the free offer of the gospel to anyone who would believe—*anyone*. Any tribe, any tongue and ethnicity, any age. See how this is such good news? I want to try to make three observations about the way that God's impartiality is glorified through the gospel of Jesus Christ, three observations that I think we can pull from this passage.

The first one is this: God will have mercy on whom he will have mercy. God is absolutely sovereign in salvation. If we are dead in our transgressions and sins and by virtue of being dead in our transgressions and sins, we cannot initiate a relationship with our creature. Dead things can't operate that way. And so salvation belongs to the Lord, to him alone who is worthy to be praised. To him who sits upon the throne. If any one is saved, it's because the Sovereign God has lovingly and graciously initiated that salvation and has accomplished that salvation through the finished work, the life, the death, and resurrection from the dead of Jesus Christ our Lord. It's not your works. It's not your good deeds. It's not the tears that you weep in remorse over your sins either. It's Christ alone. That's the message of the New Testament. That's the gospel of Jesus Christ; it's less about us and more about him.

Recall from Acts chapter 10 last week, we heard from Peter describing to Cornelius in verse 34 and Peter opened his mouth and he said, "Now I truly understand that God chose no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." God goes by his spirit and prepares the hearts for the gospel message, and people repent and become engrafted into this family. That's how you got here, believer. You didn't get here by your own strength; you got here by the grace of Jesus Christ. That's how I came in. See these clues that are given along the way in John chapter 10 when Jesus is speaking to his disciples? He is referring to himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. And of course in that audience it's a Jewish audience. And then he goes on with these assuring words that he has other sheep that are not of this fold and I must bring them also and they will listen to my voice. And so there will be from the Jews and the Gentiles one flock and one shepherd. See those are the clues and this is the reveal. This is good news for you and me. We would have never heard of Christ, we would have never thought it possible to come to Christ, except that Jesus has come as the Good Shepherd.

Impartiality of God is glorified through the gospel of Jesus Christ. There is no distinction in God. In Acts 10 verse 34 that we just read, Peter is recounting the wonderful news of a savior who lived and died and rose from the dead. And at the moment the Holy Spirit falls on all who heard that word. In verse 45 it says, "And the believers who from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed." Why were they amazed? Because of the gift of the Holy Spirit was being now poured out even on the Gentiles. You see Luke's precision there? Even on the Gentiles the amazement of the circumcised group because they thought it was reserved for the Jews. Even among the Gentiles. And look at what Luke does for us too: he records that all who had heard the word received. There is no second class Christianity in the church. This was the same thing that had happened on the day of Pentecost. That's what Peter is pointing out: as it happened with us, so it happened with them, brothers! And now we are called to embrace the Gentiles as brothers. So the event makes clear that God has mercy on whom he will have mercy, but we can also observe that God's mercy and grace compels his people to love the way that he loves. God's mercy and grace when rightly understood compels us to love like God does. We can't love that way in our natural state. We're self centered. We're closed off. We pick and choose based on who looks like us or who sounds like us or who has the same likes and dislikes as us. It's not the way God works. While we were his enemies Christ died for us. He didn't look for something similar; he looked for something actually pretty ugly, so that he could redeem it to the praise of the glory of his grace. Amen?

Whenever God is moving in the lives of people, however, we see this here: there will be distracters, nay-sayers, those who stand apposed to the free offer of the gospel of Jesus Christ. That's exactly what Peter encounters in chapter 11. When Peter went up to Jerusalem, news of what happened in Judea had already reached the Jewish converts belonging to the circumcised party. And they were ready. They were loaded for bear. They were organized, and they were antagonistic to the gospel, and they criticized Peter. See, this adds to the challenge of proclaiming who Jesus is and what Jesus has done. This is the additional challenge of persevering in the presence of those whose grasp of the gospel is not as firm as what it appears to be. That's what the circumcised party shows them to be; they are weak holders of the gospel of grace. They've raised some additional criteria, and they criticized Peter and accused him of eating with uncircumcised men. You see, they were still under the mindset that under the dietary laws, if Peter did what he did under the old covenant, he would now be unclean—ceremonially unclean, unfit for service for God, not acceptable to God.

Peter is the guy that, you know, we've followed his career over his time with Christ. He is the one who backed down over a little girl at a fireside, but this is the same Peter that preached and stood at Pentacost. Peter stands and he knows that this is a moment. Now I don't know what's going through his mind we don't have that recorded by Luke, but we know what Peter does. He stands and he defends the gospel of Jesus Christ. He defends it against the circumcised party because he knows that if the gospel isn't defended on this point, Christianity is threatened to be just another sect of Judaism and to disappear. It takes one generation. And so Peter stands and he defends the free offer of the gospel of grace to all people. Peter had already been experiencing the affect of God's impartiality all along the way to this point. We read at the end of Acts chapter 9 that Peter stayed at the home of Simon the tanner. He didn't own a tanning salon in Judea; he was responsible of skinning the hides off of animals, and the blood that he would have come into contact with would have made Peter unclean. But Peter spent time with him, he fellowshiped with him, he ate supper with him, and he stayed overnight with Simon the tanner. You see, Peter is already being molded by what God's impartiality does to a believer.

Peter is like, "I was Jewish; nothing unclean has touched these lips." Remember his argument with the spirit in the vision? But God calls us to love in the way that God loves. The dietary laws, the ceremonial laws—they served a purpose in the history of Israel. They served a distinct purpose: they identified this nation, and they established everything that Christ would come to fulfill and to aggregate. There is no more need for a sacrifice for animals on a yearly basis, because the Lamb once and for all has shed his blood for your sins and mine. That's what's going on here. The Jews began to believe that their ethnic separation was the founding for their right standing before God. Does that sound familiar?

The Jews believed that their ethnic separation became their foundation for their right standing before God. We do this in the church. We cordon off ourselves and we come up with Christian music and Christian whatevers and everything so that we forget the fact the we came to this bride, we came to this body, we came to this relationship by God's grace alone. We can't lose sight of that. When we lose sight of that, God's love ceases to flow from us. We cease to be amazed by that love. We cease to marvel that someone like me would have been invited in. We can't cease to do that. That's what Peter is defending here. He defends the impartiality of God, the free offer of the gospel to all who believe. Luke tells us that Peter went about to explain it to them in order—not in order *that* something—just, let me lay out the timeline. That's why Luke repeats himself here. Peter says, "this is important." Peter says, "There was a vision, and it came to me about lunch time. And I was hungry so maybe it was about food at that point." He doesn't say any of that stuff but I see all these things and there's clean and unclean, and they are presented to be me. Rise, kill and eat. Peter even argues, "no this can't be, can it be?" What God has made clean, do not call common. That's the recurring phrase, the theme that comes out here. In Acts 10:15 and Acts 9, Acts 11:9, what we need to take away—if we don't take away anything else, take away

the phrase from Almighty God: what God calls clean, do not call common. Peter was compelled by the joy-filled message that God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever—whatever ethnicity, whatever tribe or tongue, whatever age group, whatever type of sinner you are—whoever believes on Jesus Christ for salvation will not perish but will have everlasting, joy-filled, abundant life in the presence of God himself eventually. That's what Peter is defending. That is what our call is, too, believer. Our call is to glorify the impartiality of the gospel of Christ by defending the free offer of the gospel to all nations and to live it out.

So he explained it to them in order; Peter reminded the Jewish believers of the sovereign mercy of God. What God has made clean do not call common. Peter continues his defense, and he says this in verse 17 of 11, "if God gave the same gift to them that he gave to us at the beginning, then when we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, then who was I that I could stand in God's way?" I think we probably need to memorize that phrase. If God is doing something, then who am I to stand in God's way? So God, please help us to see what you are doing. Give us that clear sense of who belongs to you, that we might receive them as well, because you have received them—even though they don't look like us. Peter, "Who was I that I could stand in God's way?" Who indeed! See, we don't have permission to judge, right? To prejudge who gets to hear the good news of Christ, and when evidence of faith, if evident, we don't have the luxury to say whether or not we will receive them. All types of sinners are called to forsake their sin and plead the mercy of Christ. All types of sinners. Maybe sins that you never committed. But Jesus saves all types of sinners, doesn't he?

He doesn't leave them there; we are called together in this body so that we can grow in grace. We forsake those things that are not in keeping with God's law. God's law shows us what's pleasing to God, so we turn away from those things, and we want to repent and forsake and grow from that. That's what makes life in the church sometimes difficult, right? Because we are self-centered to the core. We think that because we've conquered something, then everything else should or ought or must have conquered the same thing that we have. "I've got this area of my life together, and I don't understand why in the world you don't have this area of your life together. I've got it together. Get it together." And we see ourselves distancing ourselves from those who don't have it together the way we do, and yet all the while there's this huge log flopping around knocking people out, stuck out of our eye because we don't see the log. That's me. That's my experience. Maybe it's not yours—maybe I'm the only one that lives this out, but that's the way this heart of sin works.

We're all in different places with our journey with Jesus Christ. He's shored up in my life; he's likely to use whatever's been shored up in me to encourage you in your walk and vice versa. He doesn't save us then set us down on a mountain top or an island somewhere and say, "Hey, just wait it out. Breathe deep. Think good thoughts until glory and I'll bring you to me." What he does is he saves us and then we grow in grace and we get so filled with the joy of who Christ is that we want to share it with others. Why? Because we really do want to see millions of people from every tribe and tongue and nation and ethnicity, age group, and types of sinner all gathered around the throne dwelling together in harmony. That's what Pastor Randy was talking about. John Lennon didn't get it. He didn't go far enough! Imagine... the world living together in unity. In harmony. It's only possible through the gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Paul picks up on this theme when he says to the Christians in Rome in chapter 15, "Listen. We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves." Those are hard words. Paul continues, "Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up, for Christ did not please himself but as it is written, the reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me." In verse 7 of chapter 15 Paul says, "Therefore, welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you for the glory of God." Can you imagine a church like that? I can too. I know your answer was yes. We can imagine

a church like that because Jesus Christ would then be preeminent there. He would be receiving the glory, because he's the one doing the changing. He's the one doing the transformation. It's his gospel preached. So we see from this story of the gospel going to the Gentiles that God has mercy on whom God will have mercy. God's mercy and grace compels people to love the way God loves.

And one final point, one final observation: God's love produces hearts that glorify God and welcome and receive God's people. God's love at work in you and in me, God's love rightly understood, God's love by faith received—it changes us. It makes us more like God. That's what we look for in one another. That's what I need you to look for in me. If it's not showing up in me, I need you to come with correction, and I want to do the same for you. Said another way is this: when received by faith and rightly understood, the gospel of Jesus Christ produces lives that glorify God by extending the free offer of the gospel to all *and* receiving all who receive Jesus as Lord, and then patiently striving alongside them as we all grow together in grace. We need that. I could take you inside your heart and inside your mind, and we could unpack those points of exhaustion, those points of disparagement, those points of discouragement, where you've had to live up to a standard that somebody else has raised for you. I guarantee you that the gospel is the answer. Christ met the standard. Look at verse 18. Look what happened to these critics: "When they heard these things, they fell silent." Their mouths were shut. Their mouths were shut for just a moment, because then Luke records that they glorify God by saying, "It appears to us that to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life." This is the big reveal. This is the impartiality of God. This is the good news for every one of us.

Why is this important? It's important because we who were his enemies are now seated at the table. We don't have a place here except that Jesus Christ loved us and purchased us. Why is it important? Because we who were estranged are now adopted into his family. We're joint heirs with Christ. Everything that he has obtained is now ours by faith. Why is it important? Because we who were condemned justly because of our sin have been declared not guilty because of Christ. Why is it important? It's important because we who are devastated by the guilt and pollution of our sins can now receive the forgiveness of sins that frees us from the shame and condemnation that is right there on your doorstep, ready to tear you down. We've been cleansed by the precious blood of God. Why is it important? Because we have no good thing to offer him in and of ourselves, and by faith we're clothed with the righteous deeds of Christ. That's what we celebrate here today. It's the life of Christ. It's his righteousness offered to you freely, that you received by faith. And it's his death, his substitutionary sacrificial death, his blood, that represents that he cleansed you from all your sin. You don't have to live in shame anymore. Why is this important? It's important because we still live in this present age. We still live in this present age of sin, with all the trappings of these frail mortal bodies, and we have the hope that one day he will take us to be with him. Just as he promised, we'll be fitted with that resurrection body and we'll have full knowledge of him. Fitted with a resurrection body that's free from lust, and free from greed, and free from bitterness, and free from rage, and free from envy, and free from strife, and free from sickness, and free from disease, and free from death. That's what Christ has done. That's why Peter—thank you, Peter—for standing and defending that gospel on our behalf and on behalf of the millions who worship Christ today.

Why do we need this supper today? We need this supper because we are still weak and frail. We champion Peter in Acts 11 because he stood and defended the uncircumcised party to the circumcised party, but when we look a little bit further on in the book of Galatians, we see the apostle Paul needing to rebuke Peter openly and to his face—why? Because when those of the circumcised party came to Galatia, Peter withdrew from the uncircumcised group and, because of his fear of the circumcised party, he withdrew and made a hypocrisy of the gospel even such that his hypocrisy drew others away into that action. Even Barnabas—we'll meet him at the end of chapter 11—even Barnabas was caught up in it.

We need this supper because we have not yet arrived. We need the full gospel, the gospel of the impartial God who makes no distinction. Any type of sinner can be welcomed at this table. They are welcome at this table if they have seen that their efforts to live for Christ are of nothing, that Christ is their only hope. This table is for the believer whose been baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. This table is for all those who have seen the void of righteousness that they have and cried out to God to give a righteousness that comes from another. This table is for all those who have said and agreed with God that they are sinful to the core, and that sin is justly deserving of hell forever, and yet Christ has forgiven them by his blood. That's who this table is for. It's for you, beloved. In humble reliance on God's grace we receive these two elements—the bread and the cup—as signs of that which they signify. They signify Jesus Christ given for sinners. That's why we call this a celebration of the Lord's Supper. It's where he reminds us of who he is, who we are, and that he will see us through. Let me pray for us, and then we will celebrate God's table.

Gracious heavenly Father, we do ask now that you would show us Christ in a particular way for each of us. Lord, I only know what I need to see today. I don't know what these here with me need to see, but you do, and we praise you for that. We praise you that you know and you search our hearts and you know them. Lord, test us. Try us. Remind us of Christ even as we receive by faith now this supper. We ask for your blessing on us now. In Christ we pray. Amen.