

Welcoming Others in Christ

Devotional Reading: Colossians 3:1–11
Background Scripture: Ruth 1:1–18; John 4:5–10;
Acts 10:1–11:18

Acts 10:9–15, 30–35

⁹ About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. ¹⁰ He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. ¹¹ He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. ¹² It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. ¹³ Then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.”

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clothes stood before me ³¹ and said, ‘Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. ³² Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.’ ³³ So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.”

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.

Galatians 3:28–29

²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Key Text

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. —Galatians 3:28

Introduction

A. Equal Worth, Equal Access

In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln delivered a two-minute speech at the dedication of the National Cemetery in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. The speech, now known as the “Gettysburg Address,” contains several phrases that have become iconic in American culture. Boldly, Lincoln declares that “all men are created equal.” His words echo the Declaration of Independence, where the phrase appears as one of Thomas Jefferson’s “self-evident truths.” Jefferson himself probably borrowed the statement from earlier philosophers. In fact, historians found examples of the phrase as early as 1381!

However, neither Jefferson nor Lincoln nor any other philosophers originated the concept of equality. Human equality was established by our Creator God, who formed everyone in his image (Genesis 1:26–27). We all possess equivalent worth in God’s sight. The concept of equal worth is bound up in the notion of equal access to God’s grace. Today’s lesson explores that connection.

B. Lesson Context: Acts

The Christian church birthed on the day of Pentecost stemmed from a core of believers with Jewish backgrounds (Acts 2:5). The 12 apostles, seven deacons in Jerusalem (6:5–6), Paul and Barnabas (14:1), and Jesus himself were all ethnically Jewish or converts to Judaism. Most Jews in the Roman Empire kept themselves apart from Gentiles, forming distinct communities in their cities. Observant Jews saw Gentiles as unclean pagans who endangered Jewish religious and moral purity. They would not eat with Gentiles nor visit their homes (10:28).

Jewish faith drew a significant number of non-Jewish people. Some of these Gentiles became proselytes, devout converts to Judaism who were circumcised and followed the Law of Moses (Acts 2:10; 6:5; 13:43). Other Gentiles worshiped God but did not become total converts. These people were considered faithfully devoted and were referred to as “God-fearing Gentiles” (13:16, 26; 17:4, 17).

Social Teachings of the Church

Unit 1: Fulfilling Our Obligations to Neighbors

Lessons 1–4

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Recount the events of Peter’s interaction with Cornelius.
2. Explain Galatians 3:28–29 in light of Acts 10.
3. Make a plan to initiate conversations across the wider family of God to dismantle walls of division.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Equal Worth, Equal Access
- B. Lesson Context: Acts
- C. Lesson Context: Galatians

I. Extraordinary Vision (Acts 10:9–15)

- A. Descending Sheet (vv. 9–12)
- B. Declaring Clean (vv. 13–15)

Fiddleheads

II. Eminent Visitors (Acts 10:30–35)

- A. The Angelic Messenger (vv. 30–33)
- B. The Preaching Apostle (vv. 34–35)

III. Equal Value (Galatians 3:28–29)

- A. All Are One (v. 28)
Nursing Qualifications
- B. All Are Heirs (v. 29)

Conclusion

- A. Breaking Down Walls
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

C. Lesson Context: Galatians

The book of Galatians is a fiery letter from the apostle Paul to the church at Galatia. Paul wrote it to clarify the relationship between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Arguments arose debating whether Gentiles must follow the Law of Moses and be circumcised into the Jewish faith to be faithful Christians. Paul posits that Jesus fulfilled the law and Gentiles were not bound to follow it. Paul's knowledge of Hebrew law and tradition, paired with his sincere love for Gentile believers, created the necessary opening for God to bring unity to a diverse community.

I. Extraordinary Vision

(Acts 10:9–15)

A. Descending Sheet (vv. 9–12)

9. About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray.

The word *they* refers to a group of three men sent from Cornelius to find Peter and bring him back to Caesarea (Acts 10:7–8). The journey took the men a little less than a day. They came near *the city* of Joppa at midday.

The author notes that simultaneous to the group approaching their destination, Peter *went up* to the roof of Simon's house *to pray*. The roofs of this period were typically flat and functioned almost like an extra room. Tenants commonly used them for storage, worship, and socializing, especially during hot summer days.

What Do You Think?

Is it a good idea to set specific times each day for prayer? Why, or why not?

Digging Deeper

How do Daniel 6:10 and Acts 3:1 help frame your response?

10. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance.

Peter, ready for his midday meal, becomes *hungry*. His hosts begin to prepare food. Before refrigeration, most dishes had to be freshly made, so

Peter's appetite had time to grow during the preparations. While he waits, Peter falls into a *trance*. This state is separate from his hunger.

11. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners.

In the trance, Peter experiences a vision. He *sees heaven opened*. In the first century, people associated the sky with the dwelling place of God. Seeing it "opened" suggests God's presence and power (compare Jesus' baptism in Matthew 3:13 and Stephen's vision in Acts 7:56).

The text lets us "see" the vision from Peter's perspective. At first, he watches a mysterious *something* descend from the sky. It is *like a large sheet* lowered by its *four corners*. Sheets in the ancient world were made of linen and provided shade or covered people while sleeping.

12. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds.

The sheet's contents, a collection of live animals, surely surprise Peter. Our text's mention of *all kinds* of creatures may reflect the wording of the creation account (Genesis 1:20, 24). The animals on the sheet include all kinds of *four-footed animals* like livestock, as well as *reptiles* and *birds*. While the text does not name any specific

How to Say It

Abraham	Ay-bruh-ham.
Barnabas	Bar-nuh-bus.
Caesarea	Sess-uh-ree-uh.
centurion	sen-ture-ee-un.
Cornelius	Cor-neel-yus.
Deuteronomy	Due-ter-ahn-uh-me.
Ephesians	Ee-fee-zhunz.
Galatia	Guh-lay-shuh.
Galatians	Guh-lay-shunz.
Gentiles	Jen-tiles.
Joppa	Jop-uh.
Judaism	Joo-duh-izz-um or Joo-day-izz-um.
Pentecost	Pent-ih-kost.
patriarch	pay-tree-ark.
proselytes	prahss-uh-lights.
Simon	Sy-mun.

God's grace is impartial.



Visual for Lesson 3. *Point to the visual and ask, "How can we show God's impartial love to someone different from us this week?"*

species, the collection includes animals that were "unclean" according to the Law of Moses (see commentary on Acts 10:13, below).

B. Declaring Clean (vv. 13–15)

13. Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

Peter's vision continues as a *voice* commands him to slaughter the animals for a meal. This command comes as a shock to the apostle. While the Law of Moses acknowledges that God created all creatures as "good" (Genesis 1:25), it also lays out clear instructions regarding which animals are appropriate for food (Leviticus 11; Deuteronomy 14:3–12). Animals like cows and sheep are considered clean (Leviticus 11:3). Other animals, such as lizards and rats, are deemed "unclean" (Leviticus 11:29–30). Certain types of birds are also unclean (Deuteronomy 14:12–18). Eating, and in some cases even touching, an unclean animal is forbidden for observant Jews (Leviticus 5:2; 7:21).

If an animal species was named "unclean," it did not necessarily mean it was physically dirty or that it was somehow more "sinful" than other animals. It can be helpful to think of "cleanness" as a visible representation of God's unique holiness. A person had to be clean (pure) to approach God's holy spaces or participate in corporate worship (Exodus 19:10; Leviticus 7:21; 15:31; Numbers 19:13, 20). One of the ways the Jewish people

showed their commitment to God and displayed their status as his special people was by committing to "clean" practices and foods (Leviticus 20:26). This applied not only to the food they ate but also to the clothes they wore (19:19). In Peter's day, most Jews avoided any risk of uncleanness by refusing association with Gentiles, who regularly ate and touched unclean things (John 18:28; Acts 10:28).

14. "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."

Peter understands that the *voice* in verse 13 is God's voice, so he addresses him as *Lord*. Peter's response confirms that at least some of the animals on the sheet are *unclean*.

The apostle strongly protests that he has never *eaten anything* that would violate the Law of Moses. The Old Testament depicts Jews' refusal to eat unclean food as an act of faithfulness (compare Ezekiel 4:12–15; Daniel 1:1–17).

The word translated *impure* here is translated "defiled" in Mark 7:2 and "unholy" in Hebrews 10:29. In this case, it reflects the sense of something outside of God's boundaries for his people.

15. The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

The voice of the Lord responds to Peter with a final word. Despite Peter's reservations, *God* is the one who decides what or who is unclean. If God chooses, he can designate something as cleansed that was previously declared *impure*. This statement is consistent with Jesus' assertion that "all foods" are "clean" since the accurate measure of cleanness is based on a person's heart (Mark 7:19).

Further, God's words remind us of his promise to create a new, cleansed people for himself, who are willing and able to live out his commands (Ezekiel 36:25–28). Under this new covenant, God's holy people are not distinguished by a diet or a set of practices. Instead, they are marked by a complete inward transformation (Jeremiah 31:33; compare Hebrews 8:10).

The vision repeats twice more, highlighting its importance (Acts 10:16), although Peter does not yet understand it (10:17).

Fiddleheads

In Maine, we have a springtime delicacy called “fiddleheads.” They are edible ferns. When I was a little girl, my mom would cook them for me. They were a delicious treat.

I recently showed my children some fiddleheads growing in the woods. “You *eat* those?” they exclaimed. My kids struggle to eat green vegetables on a good day, so their palates are suspicious. I considered their question. After all, fiddleheads do look funny.

Peter and other Jews of his time were conditioned to sort food, actions, and even people into categories. But God called Peter to change his thinking. Today, we still tend to see some people the way my children look at fiddleheads. But God calls us to remove our biases (Acts 10:34). What biases do you hold that need to change? —B. R.

What Do You Think?

What makes you pure, clean, or holy?
What evidence do you have of your
cleansing?

Digging Deeper

What transformation have you experienced since becoming a Christian?

II. Eminent Visitors

(Acts 10:30–35)

A. The Angelic Messenger (vv. 30–33)

30. Cornelius answered: “Three days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me

The men from Caesarea bring Peter to *Cornelius*. He receives the apostle enthusiastically (Acts 10:17–29) and recounts his experience from Acts 10:3–6. This verse catches *Cornelius praying at three in the afternoon*. Regular afternoon prayers were a common practice for both Jews and God-fearing Gentiles (Psalm 55:17; Daniel 6:10). The book of Acts specifically calls three in the afternoon “the time of prayer” (Acts 3:1). During *Cornelius’ prayer*, a man dressed *in shining clothes* appears, whom *Cornelius* recognizes as an angel (10:22; compare John 20:12).

What Do You Think?

How should we react to claims of
angelic visitations today?

Digging Deeper

How do Galatians 1:8; Colossians
2:18; and Hebrews 1:1–2 inform your
response?

31. “and said, ‘Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor.

Cornelius doesn’t share his prayer request. Whatever his *prayer*, the angel tells him it was *heard*. That is, the Lord acknowledged *Cornelius’* words and was ready to give him an answer (compare Luke 1:13).

Gifts refers to money given for the relief of those experiencing poverty. The angel tells *Cornelius* that God sees and remembers the care he’s given the needy. God calls his people to hold concern for the poor and to give generously (Deuteronomy 15:11; see lesson 2).

32. “ ‘Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.’

The angel gives instructions: *Cornelius* is to *send* for *Peter*. Then he provides the ancient equivalent of an address. *Simon* is a *tanner*. Tanners made their living by curing animal skins in stinky liquid to turn them into leather. We can, therefore, deduce that *Simon’s* family lived on the outskirts of town, where *sea* breezes might carry the smells away. Presumably, *Peter* would be easy to find. The angel implies that *Peter* has an essential message for *Cornelius*.

33. “So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.”

Cornelius, a Roman centurion, was a man of action and authority (compare Luke 7:8). He wasted no time in sending for *Peter*. In the meantime, he gathered the members of his household, who were also God-fearing Gentiles (Acts 10:2), to hear what the man of God had to say (10:24).

What Do You Think?

Have you ever purposefully gathered a group in your home to hear a traveling teacher or missionary?

Digging Deeper

How might you increase your enthusiasm toward sharing the good news with your community?

B. The Preaching Apostle (vv. 34–35)

34. Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism

Although Peter initially struggles to understand the vision he saw (Acts 10:11–15, 17), Cornelius’s story helps him grasp its significance. God’s command to not call anything “impure” is not about unclean food (10:15), but about people—specifically the Gentiles. Peter’s resulting conclusion, which he shares with Cornelius, changes the course of the church forever.

Firstly, Peter declares that *God does not show favoritism*. This saying means that God does not hold preference toward or partiality for any one people group over any others. While such words surprised a first-century Jewish audience, this theme runs throughout the Old Testament (Exodus 12:49; Numbers 15:15–16). It continues into the New Testament (Romans 2:11; Ephesians 6:9).

35. “but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.”

Secondly, Peter concludes that membership in the people of God is not limited to any one *nation* or ethnicity. Instead, every person who reveres the Lord and lives by faith, doing *what is right*, finds acceptance as one of his people. Acceptance was joyous news for Cornelius and his family. Peter boldly declares God’s inclusion of them in God’s plan for repentance and salvation (compare Acts 11:18)!

III. Equal Value

(Galatians 3:28–29)

A. All Are One (v. 28)

28. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither

slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Roughly 20 years after Peter met Cornelius, the apostle Paul revisits the theme of Gentile inclusion in his letter to the Galatians. Some members of the Galatian church taught that Gentiles had to be circumcised to receive salvation (Galatians 5:2–4; 6:12; compare Acts 15:1–11). Paul, however, argues that faith in Jesus grants full status as a member of God’s family (Galatians 3:26–4:7). In the above verse, he teaches that all distinctions between people groups disappear when viewed through the lens of salvation *in Christ Jesus*.

The verse considers three specific contrasts: ethnicity, social status, and gender. These categories broadly sum up the way first-century Roman society classified people. They may also reflect the structure of a typical daily prayer that an observant Jewish man might recite. During the prayer, the man would thank God that he was not a Gentile, slave, or woman since tradition limited each of those groups from full participation in temple worship.

In contrast, Paul reminds the Galatians that faith in Christ does not hinge on a person’s heritage. Although they may begin as a *Jew* or a *Greek*, their ultimate, unified identity ends as *one*. The Jew/Greek comparison may be first in Paul’s list because it was the most controversial at the time (compare Acts 11:1–3; 15:11–12).

The following comparison is one of social status: there is *neither slave nor free*. Slavery was widespread in the Roman Empire, and if someone was not *free*, it affected nearly every aspect of their life. Even so, Paul teaches that this earthly standing does not affect a person’s status in Christ.

The third comparison is that of gender. Even though gender was instituted at creation and called “good” (Genesis 1:27; 5:2), the distinctions of *male* and *female* are also irrelevant when it comes to being children of God (Galatians 3:26).

Though Paul does not address every possible category of difference, his point is clear: salvation through faith in Jesus is equally accessible to all people groups. Every believer is as “Christian” as any other: *[we] are all one* when we clothe ourselves

with Christ (Galatians 3:27). There is one Lord for all humankind (Romans 10:12).

What Do You Think?

List modern-day classifications in the categories of ethnicity, social status, and gender.

Digging Deeper

Who do you struggle to welcome into God's family by faith? How might you overcome your prejudice?

Nursing Qualifications

My grandmother was a nurse in the 1940s. In those days, nursing was a woman's job. The pressed and starched uniform, replete with a cap and apron, was made exclusively for women. There may be many reasons why this was the mindset of the day. Still, time and experience have taught modern society that men are just as capable of being compassionate nurses as their female counterparts. One of the kindest nursing aids my grandmother ever had was a young man in his early twenties who gently carried her fragile body to bed after a bad fall.

Just as nursing no longer sees a gendered distinction in professional capabilities, Paul reminds his readers that God makes no distinction between people who may join his family. All sizes, shapes, socioeconomic classes, genders, and ethnicities become one in Jesus. God breaks down the barriers we often put up to separate and segregate. Are there assumptions you make about who belongs in the family of God? How might you erase lines God never intended for you to draw? —B. R.

B. All Are Heirs (v. 29)

29. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Being a descendant of Abraham, or of *Abraham's seed*, was a vital self-identifier for Jews in the first century (Luke 1:55, 73; 3:8; John 8:37, 39). Paul accepts this identification and then includes Gentiles in it. They, too, are *heirs* of the promise given to the patriarch (Ephesians 3:6). This status comes through *Christ* as the "seed" (Galatians

3:16) and our "adoption to sonship" (Galatians 4:5; Romans 8:15–17). As children of God, we inherit all of God's promises. While Paul's opponents thought of Abrahamic heritage in a biological sense, Paul speaks of it spiritually. Through faith in Jesus, Abraham's blessing includes people of all backgrounds (Galatians 3:9).

Conclusion

A. Breaking Down Walls

The account of Peter and Cornelius is the longest single narrative in the book of Acts. The length of the account highlights the importance of what their experiences represent: the acceptance of Gentiles into the new covenant.

While the Bible teaches that Jesus meant for the gospel to be shared with all people (Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8), the first-century church struggled to overcome divisions. They needed a reminder that anyone, through faith in Christ, could become a full member of God's people. Today, new sources of division rear their ugly heads in the church. Christians argue and divide over politics, worship styles, and preaching preferences.

The events of Acts 10 show how Peter and Cornelius shifted their understanding and widened their acceptance of each other to achieve unity in Christ. God did not impose their cooperation but led them to conclusions that broke the cultural walls between them. Paul's words in Galatians 3 emphasize the stripping away of divisive categories and focus on the commonality that comes from faith in Christ Jesus. If we fix our eyes on Jesus and recognize that he alone is the Lord of the church, our divisions may melt away.

B. Prayer

Lord God, forgive us for the times we've failed to consider every believer in Christ as an equal member of your family. Unite us to see no distinctions in your salvation. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Christ's salvation is available to all people without distinction.