

“Called to Be Inclusive”

Lesson Text: Acts 10:19-33 **Background Scripture:** Acts 10 **Devotional Reading:** Psalm 15

Acts 10:19-33 (NIV)

19 While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Simon, three men are looking for you. **20** So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.”

21 Peter went down and said to the men, “I’m the one you’re looking for. Why have you come?”

22 The men replied, “We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to ask you to come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say.” **23** Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.

The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the believers from Joppa went along. **24** The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. **25** As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. **26** But Peter made him get up. “Stand up,” he said, “I am only a man myself.”

27 While talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. **28** He said to them: “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean. **29** So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?”

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 **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.”

TODAY’S LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Fact:** To evaluate Peter’s reaction to the visions of unclean/forbidden animals.
- **Biblical Principle:** To understand that the Christian faith is intended to be universal.
- **Daily Application:** To pray for opportunities to present the gospel cross-culturally.

INTRODUCTION Steadfast or Stubborn?

What are the non-negotiables of your congregation, spoken or unspoken? A set order of service? A particular style of worship music? A certain Bible translation? A specific time for services? The mode of baptism? Home small groups? Type of clothing? Leadership qualifications?

Non-negotiables that involve Bible doctrines we can call *matters of the faith* (with “the faith” referring to the body of doctrine to be believed; compare Titus 1:13; Jude 3). The things some may consider to be nonnegotiable but which have no basis in Scripture can be called *matters of expediency*. Typically, these are changeable methods of making ministry happen.

The matters-of-the-faith list is, of course, the more important. As we ponder our lists, we should ask this question: *When is “standing firm” valid and when it is merely lifeless legalism?* Being steadfast in following God’s will is one thing; stubbornly insisting on our own will, which we think to be God’s will too, is another. Let’s look at how Peter dealt with this dilemma.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Time: A.D. 35 **Places:** Joppa, Caesarea

Following the account of Saul's conversion, the focus of the book of Acts shifts back to Peter. Persecution had subsided, and Peter enjoyed freedom of movement (Acts 9:31, 32). He healed a bedridden man in Lydda, which resulted in mass conversion to Christianity (9:33-35).

Called hurriedly to nearby Joppa, Peter encountered the grief of those whose friend Tabitha had died. Mass conversion resulted yet again, as God brought the dead woman back to life through Peter's ministry (9:36-42). A welcome reception resulted in a stay of "many days in Joppa with one Simon a tanner" (9:43). The fact that Peter would stay there for any length of time is interesting given that tanners were regularly "unclean" because of contact with animal carcasses (Leviticus 11:26-28).

Joppa is a coastal city of central Palestine, situated on a bluff overlooking a small natural harbor. It is about 35 miles northwest of Jerusalem. A well-traveled thoroughfare connected the two cities, for Joppa effectively had served as the Mediterranean port city for Jerusalem since the time of Solomon (see 2 Chronicles 2:16).

About 30 miles north of Joppa was the newer city of Caesarea Maritima (Caesarea by the sea), rebuilt by Herod the Great and named for his patron and friend Caesar Augustus.

Herod created Caesarea according to the pattern of grand Roman cities, with broad streets, landmark temples, an aqueduct water supply, and a spacious theater. These features made Caesarea Maritima (not to be confused with Caesarea Philippi [Mark 8:27]) the preferred residence for Roman officials stationed in Palestine. When compared with hot, dusty, and trouble-prone Jerusalem, we can see why!

Centurions, one of whom Peter encountered in Caesarea, were professional, career soldiers. A centurion commanded a unit known as a century, which consisted of 100 soldiers and support personnel. There were six centuries in a band (or cohort), and 10 bands in a Roman battle legion.

The centurion Peter encountered in the current lesson is said to have been part of "the Italian Regiment" (Acts 10:1). The designation *Italian* indicates that the unit's constituents were men primarily from Rome and its surrounding regions. The men were not provincial auxiliaries from allies or conquered territories. This was an elite group, as Roman as Roman could be. The word regiment may indicate that the troop strength in Caesarea was at least 600 soldiers.

Acts 10:1 also tells us that the name of the centurion Peter encountered was Cornelius. He seems to have been a most unusual Roman! Rather than despising the Jews of Palestine (as most Romans did; contrast Luke 7:1-5), he was attracted to them and their religion. He is described as devout: one who feared God, gave to the poor, and prayed (Acts 10:2). His lifestyle and attitude had not gone unnoticed either by God (10:4) or by the Jewish people (10:22).

Peter Responds: Acts 10:19-24

Just before the lesson text opens, Peter experiences a three-part vision in which he sees many animals that are "unclean" by Jewish law, and yet he is commanded three times to kill and eat them. Peter protests the directive each time, claiming that he has never violated the law by eating what is considered unclean (Acts 10:10-16).

This is a side of Peter we have not really seen before as recorded by the author Luke (who wrote Luke and Acts). He has been presented as a self-confessed sinful man (Luke 5:8). His sinfulness lies in areas other than keeping the dietary laws, though, and he cannot conceive of eating pork or lizard meat.

Yet the voice in the vision tells him not to call things "impure" that God has made clean (Acts 10:15). This points to a coming need for Peter to move beyond his long-held understanding of Jewish purity and Gentile uncleanness.

A stunned Peter is sorting it out when *the Spirit* interrupts with instructions. The *three men* who are outside looking for Peter consist of two household servants and a trusted soldier sent by Cornelius (Acts 10:7). Peter was to go with them to Caesarea. The ultimate sender though is God, for the Spirit tells Peter, *I have sent them*.

God is orchestrating the meetings of key people according to His plan. What is being arranged is the most startling of divine appointments: a Jewish fisherman with a Gentile army officer!

Peter may be puzzled, but he obeys the urging of the Spirit without delay. Peter immediately identifies himself and asks the visitors to disclose their mission.

1. What happened after Peter's visions of eating forbidden animals? (Acts 10:19-21)

The men informed Peter that Cornelius was a centurion, a God-fearer, a man who was well respected among the Jews.

There were many "God-fearers" like him in the ancient world (Acts 13:16) and they proved to be a ready field for spiritual harvest. It is interesting to see how religious a person can be and still not be saved. Certainly, Cornelius was sincere in his obedience to God's Law, his fasting, and his generosity to the Jewish people (compare this to Luke 7:1-10).

2. What information did Cornelius' men relate to Peter? (Acts 10:22-23)

What Do You Think?

How should Christians respond to those who fear God but have not yielded to Jesus?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ways to respond relationally | <input type="checkbox"/> Ways to respond doctrinally |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ways to respond emotionally | <input type="checkbox"/> Other |

Immediately Peter invited them in, undoubtedly to share the meal for which he had been waiting, and to give them lodging. It was now close to evening and the journey of more than thirty miles back to Caesarea could not have been undertaken immediately. Thus, the next day, Peter, accompanied by other Christians from Joppa, went with the men to Caesarea.

The time required for the envoys of Cornelius to travel to Joppa and back allows the centurion time to assemble *his relatives and close friends*. This gives the impression that he has been stationed in Caesarea for some time, having brought family along on the deployment.

3. What was Cornelius doing while his men were off to find Peter? (Acts 10:24)

What Do You Think?

In what unusual ways have you seen God open doors for the gospel?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Among neighbors | <input type="checkbox"/> Within families |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Among your colleagues at work or school | <input type="checkbox"/> Other |

Peter Clarifies: Acts 10:25-29

Before we consider what Peter has to say to those gathered, we can pause to realize that he has already spent many hours walking and talking with the three men Cornelius sent. The text does not record the content of those conversations, but their substance is easy to imagine!

The surprises continue for Peter as Cornelius falls down in a posture of worship toward the apostle as he was about to enter his home! This is both unexpected and unpleasant for Peter. It is unexpected because if anyone is to show deference (an expression of esteem, or worship) toward another in that culture, it would be Peter's deference toward the Roman centurion. Moreover, Peter knows that worship is to be directed toward God alone (Exodus 20:3; etc.).

Therefore, Peter cannot allow this false worship to continue. In affirming their common humanity, Peter

implies that mortals are not to be worshipped (compare Acts 14:11-18).

A potential surprise for Peter: this is not to be a private discussion. As he entered Cornelius' home, there is a houseful of men and woman, likely all Gentiles, who have assembled to hear what Peter has to say.

4. What potential surprises awaited Peter as he entered Cornelius' house? (Acts 10:25-27)

As Peter sees this large gathering of people, his immediate thought was to justify his presence among them and give adequate explanation for this apparent breach of Jewish law. Jews were to have no contact with any Gentiles. This is what he has been taught from childhood. The Gentiles were considered aliens and strangers as far as the Jewish covenants and promises were concerned (Eph. 2:11-13).

What then was his reason for doing so? "God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean." Hence, Peter immediately began to inquire of Cornelius the reason for which he requested Peter's presence.

Peter had come *without raising any objection*. Even so, Peter has come not knowing exactly why God has put him in this position. Peter is ready to do God's will and assumes that Cornelius can provide details that will help him understand. Peter is already aware that Cornelius also has had a vision from God (Acts 10:3, 22).

5. What conflicting thoughts did Peter acknowledge to the Gentiles gathered in Cornelius' house? (Acts 10:28-29)

What Do You Think?

How might God answer prayers to help us take the gospel across a cultural barrier?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- ☐ Regarding the "internal barriers" of our own viewpoints (example: Jonah 3:10-4:11)
- ☐ Regarding the "external barriers" between cultures themselves (example: Acts 17:16-31)
- ☐ Regarding combinations of the two

Cornelius Explains: Acts 10:30-33

Recalling the information in the Lesson Background enriches our understanding of what happens next as Peter yields the floor to Cornelius. Peter wants to understand why Cornelius sent for him.

Cornelius begins by recounting the facts of the angelic visitation of Acts 10:3-6. *Three* days may seem a long time for us, but it shows the immediacy of the events to first-century readers. Considering the time that it takes to walk to and from Joppa, there is no delay. A clue to the devoutness of Cornelius is seen in the fact that *the ninth hour* (3:00 p.m.) is "the time of prayer" for Jews (Acts 3:1).

6. What explanation did Cornelius give for sending for Peter? (Acts 10:30)

We are not told the exact content of the prayer of Cornelius, but that is not the point here. The angel revealed to him that God had been hearing his prayers and noting his kindness toward the poor. Cornelius's gifts to the poor may refer specifically to monetary gifts (as in Acts 3:1-6) or to acts of compassion in a general sense (as in Matthew 6:1).

7. What did Cornelius recount in his vision for Peter? (Acts 10:31-32)

A very important thing to learn from this verse is that God may indeed hear the prayers of non-Christians. Cornelius is neither a Jew nor a Christian at this point, yet his prayers have been heard. It is God who decides

whose prayers are heard, not we or our doctrinal positions.

The details of Cornelius's vision must startle Peter. The centurion has been made aware of the details of Peter's name and given the apostle's exact location! It is also important that Peter come to Cornelius rather than the other way around, because full acceptance of Gentiles is best brought about in a Gentile home.

By means of the last sentence of this verse, Cornelius yields the floor back to Peter. History is about to be made, and Cornelius seems to know it. The stage is set for a great leap of inclusion, the moment when the church expands beyond its Jewish foundations. The barrier between Jew and Gentile is about to fall.

God does not leave this to chance or accident. He has chosen Cornelius to be the launching point for Gentile inclusion in the church because that man's heart is receptive to God's leading. God knows he is the right person at this pivotal moment in history. For the first time Jew and Gentile could sit down with some measure of commonality.

8. What was significant about the encounter between Peter and Cornelius? (Acts 10:33)

What Do You Think?

What can your church do to make its outreach more inclusive? What limits to inclusiveness, if any, should be maintained in the process?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> In reaching across racial divides | <input type="checkbox"/> In reaching across generational divides |
| <input type="checkbox"/> In reaching across doctrinal divides | <input type="checkbox"/> Other |

POINTS TO PONDER

1. Divine appointments are orchestrated by God to fulfill His plans (Acts 10:19-20).
2. We should obey the urgings of the Holy Spirit as God opens doors for the gospel (vs. 21-24).
3. Let the Lord's leading overcome any long-held beliefs that let differences divide us (vs. 25-29).
4. Be available to share the gospel with those who need to hear it (vs. 30-33a).
5. God is also listening when we share the Good News of Jesus with others! (v. 33b).

CONCLUSION Just for You

The spokesperson in an insurance company commercial offers an excellent deal to a customer. The grateful response is, "You'd do that just for me?" The spokesperson replies, "Just for you ... and everyone else." A turning point in history occurred when God revealed to Peter that Jesus was just for him ... and everyone else.

The Christian faith is intended to be universal. The church Jesus established is to stand apart from the ethnic or national ties that characterize so many other religions, whether in the first century or in the twenty-first. The church is not just for those who dress as we do or share our taste in worship music. The church has no second-class citizens. The church is not just for those of a "targeted demographic." Jesus expects us to invite everyone from everywhere. See Matthew 28:19, 20.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father of all, we thank You for including us in the church Your Son established. May the Holy Spirit empower us to ensure that others are included as well. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

May we heed God as He teaches us where to stand and where to stretch.