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*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. Acts 10:34-48*

History tells us that General Robert E. Lee, the Commander of the armies of Southern Confederation during the American Civil War, was a devout follower of Jesus Christ. It is said that soon after the war, he visited a church in Washington, D.C. During the communion service he knelt beside a black man. An onlooker said to him later, "How could you do that?" General Lee replied, "My friend, all ground is level beneath the cross." The Word of God tells us that is true. Roman 3:23-24 says: *“There is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”* None of us stands above any other before God. But while that is also true, that’s not how we behave. This all started in the beginning when we questioned God’s authority to stand above us – and we’ve continued to do the same to humanity ever since.

This is true of all of us. We all have our prejudices and pretensions that somehow we are superior to other people in terms of physical appearance, color, nationality, intelligence, sex, social rank, skills or wealth. We all are afflicted by sinful prejudices and discriminations because we all are fallen human beings who live in a fallen world. Prejudice is a disease of the mind that affects the heart. Prejudice is, literally, a pre-formed opinion, usually unfavorable, based on insufficient knowledge, irrational feelings or inaccurate stereotypes. We are all familiar with what is called racial prejudice. More accurately, it should be called “ethnic” prejudice, since there is only one race, and that is the human race.

In his autobiography, Mahatma Gandhi as a young man he was sent to England from India to study law, and there he read the New Testament gospels, which caused him to seriously considered converting to Christianity. He believed that in the teachings of Jesus he could find the solution to the caste system that was dividing the people of India. So one Sunday he decided to attend services at a nearby Anglican church and talk to the pastor about becoming a Christian. But that changed when he entered the sanctuary when an usher refused to give him a seat and suggested he go worship with his own people. At that point, Gandhi realized that some Christians practice the same type of caste system in which he was brought up as a Hindu. Gandhi left the church and never returned. "If Christians have caste differences also," he said, "I might as well remain a Hindu." That usher's prejudice not only betrayed Jesus but also turned a person away from trusting Him as Savior. The tenth chapter of the book of Acts addresses the critical issue of prejudice in the church of Jesus Christ. We know this subject is important to God because it is dealt with at such length in the book of Acts. Luke, the author of Acts, does so throughout Acts 10, and repeats again in Acts 11 and 15. Prejudice is not acceptable in God’s church.

In last week's message Pastor Eric led us through how God began to tackle the issue of ethnic and spiritual prejudice within the family of God. In biblical times there were great distinctions made between Jews and Gentiles. The Jews considered Gentiles as fuel for hell, people who were to be treated as slaves and thought to be outside of God's mercy. In fact, a Jew was never supposed to help a Gentile woman in labor. Why bring another Gentile child into the world? The Jews were God's chosen people, but they twisted that doctrine of God's election. According to the Jews, salvation was only for the physical descendants of Abraham. So the Jews became extremely proud and developed traditions which kept them apart from the Gentiles. To them any non-Jews were dogs, perpetually and permanently unclean people who didn't eat kosher food or observe ceremonial traditions. But this was not God's intent. God chose Abraham so that all the families of the earth would be blessed through the gospel of Jesus Christ. We read this in Genesis 12:1-3: *"Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'"*

In Acts 10 we see God was preparing Peter - and preparing the body of Christ at Arrowsmith Baptist Church - to fully obey the great commission by eliminating Peter's and our prejudice. It was to Peter that God had given the keys of the kingdom of God, and it was through Peter's preaching of the gospel that the doors of the kingdom of God would be opened, not only to the Jews, but also to the Gentiles. The apostle Paul spoke of this in Romans 1:16 when he declared: *"I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."* The immediate context for our text today is Acts:1-33 where last week we read that God gave a Gentile centurion named Cornelius a vision to go to the apostle Peter - to clarify the meaning of a vision that God had given to Peter, regarding that non-Jews should be included in the Great Commission.

This was a radical turning point in God's economy of salvation. For almost 2,000 years since Abraham, salvation had been from the Jews and through the Jews. A Gentile had to become a Jewish proselyte in order to know and worship God in the way that God ordained. Even though God had promised that all the nations would be blessed through Abraham's descendants - up until now, the blessing of salvation was pretty much bottled up with the Jews. But now a radical shift takes place; the door of salvation swings wide open to the Gentiles, and it does not require them first to become Jews. In verse 43 Peter proclaims that everyone who *"believes"* in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins *"through Jesus name."* We need to remind ourselves that when we read the word *"believe"* - that word means much more than "to accept as true, be convinced by, trust, put confidence in." The original Greek word is *pisteuō* - which literally means "to have faith, with respect to a person or thing, that is, by implication to sacrificially entrust and totally commit oneself to that person or thing." Jesus would define it this way: *"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me"* (Luke 9:23). Peter proclaimed: *"To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."* Jesus Christ is an equal opportunity Savior. In our text for this morning the Word of God tells us why *everyone who believes in Jesus Christ will receive God's salvation.*

1. *Everyone who believes in Jesus Christ will receive God's salvation because salvation is not based on who we are or what we do. "So Peter opened his mouth and said: 'Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him'" (10:34-35).* The first part of that statement is easy to understand; the second part, not so easy. By the first part - *"that God shows no partiality"* - means God does not show favor to anyone based on their nationality. But that was not always the case. That God was not partial was taught in the OT, but it was heard in a Jewish context. But Moses pointed out how God had chosen the Jews above all other peoples. In that context, he used God's impartiality to encourage Israel not to accept bribes, to show equal justice to everyone, and even to treat aliens with love by meeting their basic needs. But the OT clearly shows God's favoritism for the Jews above other nations during the 2,000 years from Abraham to Christ.

But now God was doing a new thing. Through his vision of the sheet being let down from heaven and the subsequent events, Peter has come to this radical conclusion, that God is not partial to anyone on the basis of ethnicity or nationality. Now God could bring Gentiles directly into a relationship with Him apart from their becoming Jews. This insight would change the history of the world. The application for us is that people from every racial and national background are on equal footing when it comes to receiving the gospel. They don't have to become "like us" to become Christians. They can keep cultural traditions that do not violate Scripture. They can sing songs that fit with their culture, even if they don't sound like our hymns. They can dress in their native styles, as long as they are modest.

The second part of Peter's statement is more difficult to understand: *"In every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."* At first glance, it seems to contradict the first part, that God does not show partiality. It sounds like God is partial to those who fear Him and do what is right. And it seems to imply that God accepts people based on good character and good works, which goes against salvation by grace through faith apart from works. We need to interpret this in the context of this chapter. Cornelius was a God-fearing man who did many good things. In his introduction, Peter seems to acknowledge this, but we need to understand that although Cornelius was a good man, his goodness had not saved him. Peter came to explain the way of salvation to him - because he still needed to be saved. He still needed to receive forgiveness for his sins. The whole point of the narrative is to show how this man came to salvation. God had not yet done a work in his heart. Jesus said: *"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him . . . no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father"* (John 6:44,65). Cornelius has not yet come across the line of salvation, but his fear of God and his good deeds show God was drawing him toward that point. He gets saved after Peter's sermon.

God works differently with different people. He saves some right out of the cesspool of sin. They are wallowing in it, not seeking after God, when God dramatically enters their lives and rescues them. At that moment, they turn from their sins to follow Christ. But with others, like Cornelius, God puts the hunger in their hearts to know Him. They begin to seek Him and they try to please Him with their lives. But they're still sinners and they do not get saved until they hear the gospel and believe in Jesus Christ.

Everyone who believes in Jesus Christ will be saved because salvation is not based on who we are or what we do. Ephesians 2:8-10 says: *"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."*

2. *Everyone who believes in Jesus Christ will receive God's salvation when the gospel is centered on the person and work of Jesus Christ. "As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name"* (Acts 10:36-43). Peter's sermon begins with God taking the initiative in sending the gospel. He sent the Word of God to the sons of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ. We may come up with various ways to approach or appease God, but they all fall short. Only God could initiate the way of peace by sending His Son to earth as the One who would bear our sins. The fact that Jesus preached peace implies that there is hostility and alienation between sinful men and the holy God. Many people are oblivious to this hostility. They do not understand God's absolute holiness and His hatred of all sin. While they admit they aren't perfect, they see themselves as basically good and conclude that God will let them into heaven because they are not like overtly wicked people.

But the Bible plainly declares that we all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. James 2:10 tells us that if we have broken only one of God's commandments, we are guilty of breaking them all. Those who think that they are righteous enough to enter God's holy presence are guilty of pride of the worst sort. Thus there is hostility between them and God, even if they do not realize it. Jesus Christ is God's only means of peace. Also, notice that Peter states plainly that Jesus is Lord of all, meaning, not only Lord of the Jews, but also of the Gentiles. This emphasizes both Jesus' deity, since the Lord is God, and His absolute authority. This ties into the end of his sermon, where Peter states that God has appointed the risen Lord Jesus to be the Judge of the living and the dead. Everyone who has ever lived will stand trial before the Lord Jesus, who will judge every act and thought and intent of the heart. This risen Lord Jesus is the One whom God appointed to be the Judge of everyone who has ever lived.

Peter emphasizes how God anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and with power of God. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. The word Christ (or Messiah) means anointed one. In His humanity, Jesus showed us how we as humans should live - in desperate dependence upon God, doing good to others, and overcoming sin and evil and the world. This also shows the cosmic battle that rages between God and Satan. To preach the gospel is to engage in combat with this evil enemy. Jesus' death on the cross ("*tree*") was God's means of making peace between Himself and sinners. Jesus paid the debt that we deserve. God took our sin and laid it on Jesus, the sacrificial Lamb, who had no sin of His own. Because He is God, His death has infinite value - and because He is man, His death is the perfect substitute for the sins of humans.

But had Jesus died and remained in the grave, His death would not have been sufficient. God raised Him up on the third day and substantiated His resurrection by making Him visible to many witnesses. Peter mentions that they ate and drank with Him to underscore the reality of Jesus' resurrection, and to show that it was physical as well as spiritual resurrection. Peter concludes with the good news, that all the prophets bear witness that "*everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.*" The "*name*" of Jesus refers to all that Jesus is and all that Jesus did and all that Jesus is doing and all that Jesus will do. Even though Cornelius was a good man, he still needed to hear about the name of Jesus and to put his trust in Him. As Peter proclaimed in Acts 4:12: "*There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*" This means that there is no salvation for good Christians apart from believing in Jesus Christ. Again, this is not a believing in the name of Jesus in a general, vague belief. Rather, it is a believing of surrender that is specific and personal. To believe in Jesus means that we believe He is the Lord who gave Himself on the cross for our sins. This is a believing on the promise of God for eternal life as a gift, not based on our merit, but only on God - as we humbly no longer rely on anything to commend ourselves to God.

This is the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. When we proclaim the gospel we need to stay focused on the person and work of Jesus Christ. It's easy to get distracted and talk about evolution or theology or some moral or social issue. Keep bringing the conversation back to who Jesus is and what He did on the cross. Whatever the issue, Jesus should be the focus. And again, whenever we share and proclaim the good news of the gospel - we must not leave out the Lordship of Jesus and the solemn fact of the coming judgment. Peter lets his audience know that Jesus is Lord whether they acknowledge him or not, and that He is the coming Judge of everyone. Unless people realize that they have been in rebellion against the God of the universe and someday they will stand before him as guilty - they have no reason to repent and flee to the cross for forgiveness. If we skim over the bad news in an attempt not to offend someone, they might "try" Jesus to see if He makes them happier. But if that "doesn't work," they'll turn to something else - and they won't have what it takes to follow Jesus. Everyone who believes in Jesus Christ will receive God's salvation when the gospel is centered on the person and work of Jesus Christ. "*Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen*" (Jude 24-25).

3). *Everyone who believes in Jesus Christ will receive God's salvation because salvation results in obvious evidence in those who receive it. "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"* (Acts 44-48). In the midst of Peter proclaiming the gospel, God once again takes the initiative of destroying prejudice in the church - by pouring out the Holy Spirit upon all who were listening to Peter's message. God did this because He wanted show Peter that He does not discriminate, and Peter shouldn't discriminate either. Our God is the God of the world who saves Jews and Gentiles, poor and rich, men and women, without regard to their appearance, sex, birth, nationality or position in life. This was a Gentile Pentecost that signified there is no difference between anyone in the kingdom of God. God gave these Gentiles who believed in Jesus his personal seal. To everyone who repents and believes on the Lord Jesus Christ, God will pour out his Holy Spirit.

Take note the Jewish Christians who had come with Peter were greatly astonished when they saw what God was doing to these Gentiles. In fact, the text says they were "*amazed*" (literally "stood out of their bodies") when they saw that the Holy Spirit had come upon Cornelius and his guests. These Jews had been so filled with prejudice that they could not believe God would pour out his Holy Spirit upon these uncircumcised Gentiles as He had done for them. But He did. God destroyed all their human prejudices instantly by pouring out the Holy Spirit and then baptizing them. God does not make distinctions.

What that means for us is that is whomever God accepts, we must accept. In Acts 11 we read that as a result of the salvation of Cornelius' household and friends, the Pharisaic believers in the Jerusalem church brought a case against the apostle Peter. They brought him to trial, accusing him of going into a Gentile's home and eating and fellowshiping with Gentiles. What was Peter's response? "*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?*" (Acts 11:17). Pharisaic believers are always opposing God. We see that even in the church today. When we do not accept those whom God has accepted, we are opposing God. Forced by the Spirit of the living God, Peter ordered that all who had believed be baptized. Cornelius and his family and friends were baptized and became members of the church in Caesarea. *Everyone who believes in Jesus will receive God's salvation when it results in obvious evidence in those who receive it.*

*Everyone who believes in Jesus Christ will receive God's salvation because salvation results in obvious evidence in those who receive it. The ultimate test of whether or not our salvation is real, is in how we live together as the body of Christ. Born-again followers of Jesus Christ should not give any evidence of prejudice in any form. But the truth is, because we all still have residual sin in our fallen nature, we all still have some prejudices. We usually try to dodge the issue by redefining our prejudices by calling them preferences or differences. That dodge disappears when we know that Jesus would redefine the phrase "whomever God accepts, we must accept" to be "whomever God loves, we must love." Jesus calls us to love God and love our families and love our neighbors and love one another and love the lost and love our enemies. Sounds like we are to love everybody. Yes, we are. What does that love and acceptance look like in the church?*

*And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. Acts 2:42-47*

In 1997 I met a man who was a violent convicted murderer serving a life sentence without parole; he was also a high priest in the Wiccan church of Satan. The man's name is Wayne Woods and he attended a two-day seminar I was leading in a maximum-security prison in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Wayne attended the seminar for the sole purpose of disrupting our meetings. But he was strangely quiet as I lead the group through a through an evening of worship, teaching and preaching and small group prayer. Wayne returned the next day, and I will now read his written words:

The next day I returned and spoke with Pastor Lee at length about who I was. He listened to me and showed understanding but was truthful about what I needed to do – let go of my past and surrender my life to Jesus Christ. Pastor Lee came to the prison every month and always listened to me and loved me and prayed for me. After eight months he came for another two-day seminar. On the first evening he spoke again of God's love and God's grace and God's forgiveness. All that night in my cell my heart screamed out to God for help. The next morning I told Pastor Lee I was ready; he took me aside, prayed for me and prayed with me. I asked Jesus to forgive me of all of my sins, and on October 17, 1998 I received Jesus Christ as my Lord and Saviour. I was finally free! On that day God reached down and lifted me up, changed me and took hold of my life."

Jesus Christ is an equal opportunity Savior. Everyone who believes in Jesus Christ will receive God's salvation because salvation is not based on who we are or what we do. Everyone who believes in Jesus Christ will receive God's salvation when the gospel is centered on the person and work of Jesus Christ. And everyone who believes in Jesus Christ will receive God's salvation because salvation results in obvious evidence in those who receive it. In John 15:9-13 Jesus said: *"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends."* Praise God that salvation is for everyone who believes! Amen!

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