

Are We Standing in God's Way?

Acts 10:1-11:18

Today's passage describes how God was at work in the life of a man named Cornelius. And God wanted Peter to have the privilege of leading him to Christ. The problem was that Cornelius was a Gentile (i.e., non-Jewish) and Peter didn't associate with Gentiles. He thought that there was an immovable barrier between Jews and Gentiles. And so before he could be used by God in Cornelius' life, Peter needed a transformation in the way he thought about Gentiles.

The same dynamics are at play in our world. God is at work in the lives of people all around us. And like Peter we might think (consciously or unconsciously) that there are immovable barriers between them and us. Those barriers typically involve differences: differences in ethnicity or religion or morality or politics or a dozen other things. And like Peter, we need a transformation in the way we think about and even feel about whole groups of people. If this transformation doesn't take place, we may just find ourselves standing in God's way. As followers of Christ, that's the ***last*** thing we should want. We should want to participate with God, not stand in his way.

Today we are going to consider a large passage of Scripture: all of Acts 10 and half of Acts 11. The sheer amount of space given to this story tells us how significant it is in the flow of book of Acts. This passage three very foundational things. First:

God has removed all barriers between peoples. (*Acts 10:1-29*) As we'll see, the barriers God removes in this passage were barriers he himself had originally put in place, and for good reason.

We are first introduced to a man living in Caesarea named Cornelius. He was a centurion, meaning he was a Roman officer in charge of about a hundred troops. Centurions were known as the backbone of the Roman army. What Luke emphasizes about Cornelius is his piety. He was a devout, God-fearing Gentile along with the members of his household; he had not become fully Jewish, but he had an affinity for the Jewish faith and had a devotion to the God of the Jews. Luke specifically mentions in verse 2 that he "gave alms generously to the people and prayed continually to God." These are two things mentioned throughout the Bible as virtuous: giving to the poor and praying to God. This was good-hearted man.

An angel appeared to him in a vision (terrifying him), and told him that the way he had been living his life was an acceptable offering to God. The angel tells him to send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Peter who would have a message for him. Cornelius sent two servants and a soldier on that mission.

Meanwhile, in Joppa, Peter is on the roof of the house praying at noontime. Luke tells us that he gets hungry and sees a vision about eating food (which is not a coincidence). In this vision he sees a great sheet (maybe like the sail on a sailboat) being let down from heaven by its four corners. Inside the sheet were all sorts of animals and reptiles and birds.

13 And there came a voice to him: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." 14 But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean."

Let me set the context for what's happening here. God had made a covenant with the Jewish people that contained commands in virtually every area of life. Some of those commands involved morality, such as "do not kill," and "do not steal." But other commands were **simply prohibitions that served as reminders** that they were a chosen people and that they were set apart from the surrounding nations. The Law created barriers between the Jewish people and everybody else. These barriers kept his people from developing close relationships with other peoples and end up worshipping their gods.

One set of those commandments prohibited them from eating certain animals (like snakes and catfish and pigs). Those foods God declared unclean/common. There's no indication in Scripture that God was saying, "Don't eat these foods because they are bad for your health." If that were the case, it would be pretty unkind of God to ever remove those prohibitions (as if he no longer cared whether or not people poisoned themselves with these foods). Rather, **the food laws created barriers** between the people of God and the nations. If you can't eat their food, you won't develop close relationships and be drawn away from the one true, living God.

So when the voice from heaven told Peter, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat," Peter refused: "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." As a devout Jew, Peter couldn't imagine violating the laws God had given. Notice that God doesn't tell Peter, "Stop being so legalistic. . ." Rather, he tells Peter this:

15 And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has made clean, do not call common."

The same God who had declared some foods unclean in the old covenant had every right to declare those same foods clean in the new covenant in Christ's blood. It's akin to the speed limit on I-70 being changed to 75 mph; the authorities who had set the speed limit at 70 had every right to change it to 75. It wasn't an issue of absolute right and wrong. This vision made explicit that since God had "declared all foods clean" (see Mark 7:17), Peter shouldn't call them unclean/common.

16 This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.

This vision and exchange with God happened three times, which was a way of saying that it was certain, not to be doubted. As we'll see, this vision was about much more than food.

Verses 17 through 23 describe how the men sent by Cornelius arrived at the house where Peter was staying. And verse 19 records that "the Spirit said to [Peter]" that he should go with these men without hesitation. Again, God is driving the action here. The

next day he (along with six other believers) start the journey (31 miles) back to Caesarea with the men whom Cornelius had sent.

Let's pick up the narrative in verse 24.

24 And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. 25 When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him.

This happened to Jesus on occasion when people realized who he was; but worshipping Peter was fully inappropriate.

26 But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am a man."

We see Peter's change of mind/heart in his spur-of-the-moment response to Cornelius. He lifted him up (he touched him, a Gentile) and said, "I too am a man" (I'm just like you, a man created in the image of God; there's no difference between us).

27 And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered. 28 And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful [i.e., taboo] it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any **person** common or unclean.

He understood that his vision wasn't just about **food**; it was ultimately about **people**. Because God had declared all foods clean, the barrier between Jews and Gentiles had been removed. Peter had no reason not to associate with or visit Cornelius.

29 So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me."

By God's design, in the old covenant his people were separate **from the nations** geographically and culturally. But in the new covenant God's people were to go and make disciples **of the nations**; they couldn't do that if these cultural barriers were still in place. With these barriers gone, Peter now understood that there are no second class people or second class nations. If Peter didn't understand this, Cornelius would have remained a God-fearing Gentile, but without access to the gospel.

And so for the sake of the gospel, **God has removed all barriers between peoples**. Just like Peter needed to be convinced of this, it's VERY likely that there are ways in which we (myself included) still need to be convinced of this. I want to challenge us to do something this week: As you go through your week, pay attention to your thoughts and attitudes toward people and groups of people who are different from you. Do you have attitudes that have created barriers between you and them?

When it comes to "groups of people," think about people who are different from you in terms of ethnicity, religion, politics, or even morality. This week notice your thoughts and attitudes (and even feelings) toward people different from you.

Pray what David prayed at the end of Psalm 139 where he basically invited God to show him what is in his heart: “Search me, O God, and know my heart. . .and see if there is any hurtful way in me. . .” That’s a wise prayer because we often don’t really know our own heart.

When it comes to people of other ethnicities, I don’t know **anybody** who would raise their hand and say, “Yes, I’m very racist; I look down on people who don’t have the same color skin and nationality as me.” But God might show you that you entertain stereotypes about other ethnicities, or that you view them with suspicion, or that deep down you think you are superior to them.

To clarify, when it comes to religion and morality and politics, I’m not asking whether or not you disagree with other groups of people; if you have any depth of conviction at all you disagree with tons of people and whole groups of people. That’s not the issue here today. The issue is whether or not those disagreements create barriers between you and them to the point where they are “dead” to you; you will never be in relationship with them. The issue is whether you are basically like the old Peter who would never “associate or visit with” Gentiles.

As you go through your week, be curious about your own thoughts and attitudes toward people who are different from you. Why? Because ***For the sake of the gospel, God has removed all barriers between peoples.*** Second:

God pours out his Spirit upon anyone who believes in Jesus. (Acts 10:30-48)

In the second half of Acts 10, Luke tells us how God went way beyond declaring all foods clean. God did something that changed all of human history. When you think about it, we wouldn’t be here today if that weren’t true.

In verses 30 through 33 Cornelius recalls the vision in which the angel told him that God had heard his prayers and noticed his giving to the poor and that he should send for Peter. Cornelius gives Peter full permission to tell them everything God wanted them to hear. Notice how Peter launches into his message.

34 So Peter opened his mouth and said: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, 35 but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

In this context the fact that “God shows no partiality” simply means that God doesn’t favor Jews over Gentiles. Rather, “in **every** nation **anyone** who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” This is an obvious nod to Cornelius since his piety has already been mentioned three times in this chapter; in verse 2 we were told that he “feared God with all his household.” By saying that people like Cornelius who “fear God and do what is right” are “acceptable” to God doesn’t mean that they have earned salvation or that they don’t need to be saved like everybody else. It means that God

accepted the prayers and good works that Cornelius had offered him. In Romans 2 (verses 6, 9-11) Paul makes the same point.

This means that Cornelius was exactly the type of person who would be responsive to the gospel when and if he had a chance to hear it. Beginning in verse 36 Peter preaches the gospel to Cornelius and the others who were gathered. He tells him how Jesus went throughout Israel doing good and healing people in the power of the Holy Spirit. But “they put him to death.” If you read the gospel of Luke, you will see that it was the Romans put him to death at the urging of the Jewish authorities (both Jews and Gentiles were complicit). But **God** raised him up on the third day and made him appear to his disciples.

42 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. 43 To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Peter now understood that “everyone” included Gentiles (like almost all of us). What happened next mirrors exactly what happened to Jesus’ original, Jewish disciples on the Day of Pentecost.

44 While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word.

Peter didn’t drive the action. He simply told them the message about Jesus and when they believed God gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit.

45 And the believers from among the circumcised (i.e., Jews) who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out **even on the Gentiles**. 46 For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, 47 “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” 48 And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.

Those of us who are followers of Jesus should already “get” this because we are “even the Gentiles.” We’re about as far away from Jesus’ original Jewish disciples geographically and culturally as possible.

If you’re not yet a believer, I hope you internalize what this means for you. It means that there aren’t a bunch of barriers you need to crash through or hurdles you need to jump over; God will give you the gift of the Holy Spirit if you believe in Jesus.

Years ago when I was in my late 30s we had an across-the-street neighbor in his 80s. He had been in the zoology department at K-State before the name was changed to biology. We became pretty good friends. He didn’t really have a faith of his own, but he was fascinated with the Bible. On Saturdays I would often wander over to his house and

tell him what I would be preaching about the next day. Over time he trusted me with more and more of his spiritual story. Basically, he had a hard time believing that God would want anything to do with him because he hadn't gone to church for in almost 70 years. I don't know exactly where he ended up in his faith. But I do think he understood that forgiveness of sins was purely a gift that God gives to **anyone** who believes in Jesus. It's not something you ever deserve or earn.

If you are not yet a follower of Christ, I hope you believe that as well. God does not show partiality; **God pours out his Spirit upon anyone who believes in Jesus**. This leads to the third point (in the first half of Acts 11):

Therefore we must never "stand in God's way"! (Acts 11:1-18)

In chapter 11 Luke records how some of the Jewish believers back in Jerusalem reacted when they heard about Peter's experience in Caesarea. They thought that Peter's association with Gentiles was scandalous. They criticized Peter saying:

3 "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them."

They thought God did show partiality, that Gentiles and the food they ate were unclean and unacceptable to God. Peter explained the vision he saw three times, how the Spirit told him to go to Cornelius' house to preach a message "by which [Cornelius and his household] would be saved" (v. 13).

15 As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning.
16 And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'
17 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?"

The more I study Acts, the more I love Peter. At the first of chapter 10, when God told him, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat," Peter said, "No, I've never eaten anything unclean." But he listened and learned, and let God change his heart and mind. At the Spirit's prompting, he went to Cornelius' house and preached the gospel, and in retrospect he said, "If God gave them the same Holy Spirit we received when we believed in Jesus, ***who was I that I could stand in God's way?***"

18 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."

If God wanted to give the Gentiles the opportunity to repent and to experience eternal life in Christ, they sure didn't want to stand in God's way either.

I long for us as individuals and as a church to experience the same transformation that Peter experienced because he is at work in the lives of people all around us. And we don't want to stand in his way if he wants to use us in the process. And it all starts with

our thoughts and attitudes toward people who are different from us. God, show us, “Are we standing in the way of anything you want to do in the lives of others?”

Psalm 139:23–24 (NASB95)

²³ Search me, O God, and know my heart;

Try me and know my anxious thoughts;

²⁴ And see if there be any hurtful way in me,
And lead me in the everlasting way.