

Reflective questions #177 for the pulpit message's Text 31 July 2022. 'Clean and Unclean' Acts 11:1-18

¹The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. ²So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him ³and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them." ⁴Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story: ⁵"I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. ⁶I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles and birds. ⁷Then I heard a voice telling me, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.' ⁸"I replied, 'Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' ⁹"The voice spoke from heaven a second time, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.' ¹⁰This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again. ¹¹"Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. ¹²The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man's house. ¹³He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. ¹⁴He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.' ¹⁵"As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. ¹⁶Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with^[a] water, but you will be baptized with^[b] the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁷So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?" ¹⁸When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life."

Background

Acts 10 [*read it*] showed the high point in the church's expanding mission---God led the Apostle Peter to witness to Cornelius, a Gentile. As a result of this experience Peter was convinced that it was God's purpose to reach all peoples beyond the Jews. Peter then became a leading advocate of the mission to the Gentiles. The conversion of Cornelius is the focal point of the narrative. Cornelius was, a Roman officer who was a centurion---a commander of 100 soldiers. Caesarea is 32 miles north of Joppa, where Peter was. At this point of the narrative. Cornelius was not a believer in Christ. But he was seeking God. He was reverent and generous. Thus God, in His grace reached out to Cornelius [cf. Heb. 11:6]. Cornelius had a vision of an angel who appeared to him. He was instructed to send a message to Peter in Joppa, to come to Caesarea [10:3-8]. At noon, the next day, when Peter was praying on the roof of the house, he fell into a trance: He saw the heavens opened and "*something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners*" [10:11]. A voice from heaven commanded Peter to rise and kill from among the animals to satisfy his hunger. Peter protested to the Lord because what was commanded was strictly against the Jewish law, forbid eating certain food [see Leviticus 11]. Jews risk defilement eating with Gentiles, avoiding table fellowship. God said to Peter: "*Do not call anything impure that God has made clean*" [10:15]. Peter was given the vision 3 times---to break down his prejudices to the Gentiles. When Peter awakened from his vision, Cornelius's messengers arrived to invite Peter to visit Cornelius [10:17-23]. The next day Peter, the messengers from Cornelius, and several Jewish believers from Joppa set out from Joppa and arrived the following day at Caesarea. Cornelius had assembled his relatives and close friends. After telling his side of the vision, he requested Peter to bear witness to the gospel to all the Gentiles gathered [Acts 10:33]. Peter declared that he realized "that God does not show favoritism. That God offers Himself to all men who will fear God and do what is right [10:34-35]. Peter told his Gentile congregation that even though Jesus did good and was well beloved, the Jewish leaders killed Him by hanging Him on a tree. But God raised Him from death. As they listened to Peter's words about forgiveness for everyone who believes in Christ, the Holy Spirit suddenly descended upon all the Gentiles assembled [10:44]. It was an audible, visible, objective demonstration of the Spirit's coming upon them [10:44-45]. The Jewish Christians were amazed to see the manifestation of the Spirit among these Romans [10:44-48]. The gift of the Spirit had now been given to the Gentiles. This was a revelation to Peter, who now accepted Gentiles as part of the Christian community.

In Acts 11:1-18 The events surrounding the conversion of Cornelius and his household are restated and repeated as Peter defended having table fellowship with uncircumcised gentiles in Caesarea. In Acts, not all Jewish believers object to Peter's intermingling with gentiles. But it provoked a controversy among some that must be resolved if the church is to remain unified and the witness to the gentiles is to move ahead.

1. The opposition/criticism Peter faces because of his mission to the Gentiles

- a) The Holy Spirit creates a church dedicated to spread the gospel to all people, without exception. But Peter's Gentile mission faced opposition from the "circumcision group". This group of Jewish Christians did not expect the Gentile conversion to happen. So they confronted Peter. They were dedicated to protect a Jewish perspective of Christianity. They believed that Gentiles could be saved only if they followed all the Jewish laws and traditions— in essence, they must first become Jews before becoming Christians.
- b) This group was all prepared to deal with Peter. What issue did they raise? They overlooked the giving of the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles. Nor did they highlight the baptism in the name of Jesus. They just homed in on "why did Peter go to the house of the Gentiles [the uncircumcised] and eat with them"?

2. A Spirit-filled Peter handled the criticisms well [Acts 11:4-14]

- a) First of all, Peter, knows that the mission to the gentiles is not a human initiative. Certainly, not his own. As the events in Chapter 10 clearly unfold. He and Cornelius separately received visions from God. It was certainly generated by God and certified by the Holy Spirit. The old impulsive Peter is now gone. He understood why these brothers struggled with the same "clean and unclean" issues. He had had earlier struggled with---until the Lord removed the "scales from his eyes" [Acts 10].
- b) Then Peter explained everything to them precisely as it had happened. Peter and the six brothers were led by the Holy Spirit [Acts 11:11-14]. The Holy Spirit told Peter, "*not to let anything keep (him) from going with them*" [11:12]. And he and the six brothers went into Cornelius house. They were told by Cornelius the message of the angel who appeared to Cornelius: "*Send to Joppa for Simon Peter. ¹⁴He has a message to bring to you. You and your whole family will be saved through it.*"
- c) Peter dealt with criticism when he didn't deserve it. But Peter demonstrated a wonderful openness and vulnerability in simply stating what had happened without being defensive at all. His basic position rests in the clarity of God's will and the purity of his own motives—he acted only out of concern for the gospel and the church, and only in direct obedience to what God told him to do.

3. The circumcision party accepted Paul's explanation [Acts 11:15-18]

- a) The reception by the Gentiles of the Holy Spirit is a sign of salvation. As the gentiles were hearing the gospel message, they received the Holy Spirit. This shocked those Jews who accompanied Peter [10:45]. The narrative shows that this event was not an aberration. God intends for gentiles to be incorporated in the people of Israel through their conversion to Christ. The Jewish Christians are not to be the gatekeepers to decide when, where, and to whom the Holy Spirit speaks. The coming of the Holy Spirit, like the blowing of wind, is apparent only from its discernible effects. It cannot be compelled, manipulated, or regulated. In this case, it is evident that the only precondition for receiving the gift of the Spirit is the readiness to hear and accept God's words [10:44]. And God has worked behind the scenes in preparing hearts to respond in faith [Bock].
- b) In verse 15, when Peter described how the Holy Spirit came on the household of Cornelius---it was for Peter a "Gentile Pentecost" [Polhill]. Peter reflected what he felt when he saw the Holy Spirit comes in Caesarea: "Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' [11:16]. Then comes the clinching argument: since God gave them the same gift as He gave the Jewish Christians who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ---who was he to think that he could oppose God. In other words: to oppose Gentile baptism---is opposing God!
- c) The result? ---An immediate response of acceptance. These conservative bothers who heard the evidence presented by Peter, offered no more objection. They not only went away silenced---they praised God, saying, "*So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life*" [11:18]. So, for the moment the issue is settled. What do Gentiles have to do to become Christians? Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ—and nothing more. We know, however, that the problem is not solved. Three nagging questions continued to plague the church for years, until it was brought to the Council of Jerusalem: 1) What lifestyle was appropriate for Gentiles coming to Christ out of raw paganism? 2) How do these Gentile believers relate to Jewish Christians? 3) How should the Jerusalem church handle people like this?

Bible Discussion Questions

Q1	<p>a) In Acts 10/11, God directed Peter to preach to the Gentiles and to baptize them. This was objected by the “circumcision group” [= “circumcised believers”] ---the Jewish Christians. This group of Christians accepted Peter’s explanation, for now, that it was God’s work and intention to bring in the Gentiles into the Kingdom of God. The lesson of Acts 10/11 to the church is that: “the community of believers must submit to God’s will and not erect artificial barriers that exclude others who are different from them”.</p> <p>i) What barriers do you observe exists in churches that keep others different from themselves to be part of the community?</p> <p>ii) What difficulties do you have in accepting persons who have been in jail before, or who were drug addicts before--- to join your cell? What if the person is still struggling with drug addictions?</p> <p>iii) Would you accept a person into your cell if he/she tells you he/she has same sex attraction issues? Would it be different if they tell you that they are living openly with a person of the same sex?</p> <p>b) “The church’s mission is to be the voice and action of Christ so that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations and to anybody. Our prejudices can prevent us from fulfilling the great commission”.</p> <p>In what ways do you see it happening in your life, and in churches?</p>
Q2	<p>Is Acts 10:14--- a promise that all in our family will receive salvation? [<i>“He will bring you a message <u>through which</u> you and all your household will be saved”</i>]. Discuss</p>

Notes for Leaders/Those leading the Word

Background

Acts 10 [*read it*] showed the high point in the church's expanding mission---God led the Apostle Peter to witness to Cornelius, a Gentile. As a result of this experience Peter was convinced that it was God's purpose to reach all peoples beyond the Jews. Peter then became a leading advocate of the mission to the Gentiles. The focus account, is the conversion of Cornelius, a Roman officer who was a centurion---a commander of 100 soldiers. He lived at Caesarea, sometimes referred to as Palestinian Caesarea, on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. It served as the capital of the Roman province of Judea. Following Peter's visit, it was the first city to have Gentile Christians and a non-Jewish church. Caesarea is 32 miles north of Joppa, where Peter was--- at this point of the narrative. Cornelius was not a believer in Christ then. But he was seeking God. He was reverent and generous. Thus God, in His grace reached out to Cornelius [cf. Heb. 11:6: God "rewards those who earnestly seek him"]. Cornelius had a vision [at 3pm], of an angel who appeared to him. His initial fear was calmed when the angel called him by name. He was instructed to send a message to Peter in Joppa, to come to Caesarea [10:3-8]. At noon, the next day, Peter was praying on the roof of the house, while the meal was being prepared. He fell into a trance: He saw the heavens opened and "*something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners*" [10:11]. A voice from heaven commanded Peter to rise and kill from among the animals to satisfy his hunger. Peter protested to the Lord as what was commanded was strictly against the Law. According to Jewish law, certain foods were forbidden to be eaten [see Leviticus 11]. Thus, it was hard for the Jews to eat with Gentiles without risking defilement. To Peter's protests, God said: "*Do not call anything impure that God has made clean*" [10:15]. **Peter was given the vision 3 times---to break down his prejudices to the Gentiles**. Peter's vision meant that he should not look upon the Gentiles as inferior whom God would not redeem. "Before this vision, Peter would have thought that a Gentile Roman officer could not become a follower of Christ. Afterward, he understood that it was his responsibility to go with the messengers into a Gentile home and tell Cornelius the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ [10:9-16]. When Peter awakened from his vision, Cornelius's messengers arrived to invite Peter to visit Cornelius [10:17-23]. The next day Peter, the messenger from Cornelius, and several Jewish believers from Joppa set out from, Joppa and arrived the next day at Caesarea. Cornelius had called together his relatives and close friends. After telling his side of the vision, he requested Peter bear witness to the gospel to all the Gentiles gathered [*"Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us."* Acts 10:33]. Peter declared that he realized "that God does not show favoritism. That God offers Himself to all men who will fear God and do what is right [10:34-35]. Peter told his Gentile congregation that even though Jesus did good and was well beloved, the Jewish leaders killed Him by hanging Him on the cross. But He did not stay dead because God raised Him from death. Peter closed with his personal affirmation of Jesus as judge of the living and the dead and He is the One about whom all the prophets had been speaking for centuries [Gould]. Peter's preaching, coupled with the willingness of the Gentiles, opened the way for the Spirit of God to come to Cornelius and those assembled. As they listened to Peter's words about forgiveness for everyone who believes in Christ, **the Holy Spirit suddenly descended upon all the Gentiles assembled in Cornelius's house** [10:44]. It was an audible, visible, objective demonstration of the Spirit's coming upon them [10:44-45]. The Jewish Christians who had come from Joppa to witness the encounter were amazed to see the manifestation of the Spirit among these Romans [10:44-48]. The gift of the Spirit had now been given to the Gentiles in what has often been described as the "Gentile Pentecost. **This was a revelation to Peter, who now accepted Gentiles as part of the Christian community** [Gould].

In Acts 11:1-18 The events surrounding the conversion of Cornelius and his household are restated and repeated when some criticized Peter for having table fellowship with uncircumcised gentiles in Caesarea. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus faced similar criticism from the Pharisees for eating with Jewish tax collectors and sinners [Luke 5:30; 7:34; 15:1-2; 19:7]. In Acts, not all Jewish believers object to Peter's intermingling with gentiles. But it provoked a controversy among some that must be resolved if the church is to remain unified and the witness to the gentiles is to move forward [David Garland]. It is noteworthy that conversion of Cornelius is important. Sixty-six verses cover his conversion. Compared to thirty-one for the conversion of Saul. And only thirteen verses for the events at Pentecost. The conversion of Cornelius represents a breakthrough of the gospel to the Gentiles.

1. The opposition/criticism Peter faces because of his mission to the Gentiles

- a) The Holy Spirit creates a church much dedicated to spread the gospel to all people, without exception. The Holy Spirit enables the Jewish believers to see that Israel is chosen to be a light to the Gentiles. God had promised throughout Scripture that he would reach the nations. This began with His general promise to Abraham [Gen. 12: 3; 18: 18] and became very specific in Malachi's statement: "*From the rising of the sun even to its setting, My name will be great among the nations*" [Malachi 1: 11]. But this was an extremely difficult truth for Jews, even Jewish believers, to accept. But, they are not to act like guards to keep the Gentiles out of the kingdom of God. But Peter's Gentile mission faced opposition from the "circumcision group" [= "circumcised believers"]. "*The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God*" [11:1]. But this group of Jewish Christians least expected the Gentile conversion to happen ---confronted Peter. They were a conservative minority within the church, dedicated to protect a Jewish perspective of Christianity. They expected any Gentiles to come to Christianity through Judaism. That would include circumcision. They believed that Gentiles could be saved, but only if they followed all the Jewish laws and traditions— in essence, if they must first become Jews before becoming Christians. But they forgot that God chose the Jews and taught them His laws so they could bring the message of salvation to all people [Gen. 12: 3; Psa. 22: 27; Isa. 42: 4; 49: 6; 56: 3-7; 60: 1-3; Jer.16: 19-21; Zech. 2: 11; Mal. 1: 11; Rom.15: 9-12].
- b) When Peter arrived in Jerusalem, this group was all prepared to deal with him. What issue did they raise? They overlooked the giving of the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles. Nor did they highlight the baptism in the name of Jesus. They homed in on "*why did Peter go to the house of the Gentiles [uncircumcised] and eat with them*". Peter, a prominent leader had offended them and broke with the traditions. This group persisted in the church and they will later harass Paul and Barnabas [Acts 15:5].

2. A Spirit-filled Peter handled the criticisms well [Acts 11:4-14]

- a) First of all, Peter, know that the mission to the gentiles is not a human initiative. Certainly, not his own. As the events in Chapter 10 clearly showed. He and Cornelius separately received visions from God. It was certainly generated by God and certified by the Holy Spirit. The old impulsive Peter is gone. He understood why these brothers struggled with the same "clean and unclean" issues that he had earlier struggled with. Until the Lord removed the "scales from his eyes" in Acts 10.
- b) Then Peter explained everything to them precisely as it had happened. Peter and the six brothers were led by the Holy Spirit [Acts 11:11-14]. The Holy Spirit told Peter, "*not to let anything keep [you] from going with them*" [11:12]. And he and the six brothers went into Cornelius house. They were told by Cornelius the message of the angel who appeared to Cornelius to: "*Send to Joppa for Simon Peter. ¹⁴He has a message to bring to you. You and your whole family will be saved through it.*"
- c) Peter dealt with criticism when he didn't deserve it. Well, he might have expected some backlash as he was in the same boat before. But Peter demonstrated a wonderful openness and vulnerability in simply stating what had happened without being defensive at all. His basic position rests in the clarity of God's will and the purity of his own motives—he acted only out of concern for the gospel and the church, and only in direct obedience to what God told him to do [Gangel].

3. The "circumcision party" accepted Paul's explanation [Acts 11:15-18]

- a) The reception of the Holy Spirit is a sign of salvation. As the gentiles were hearing the gospel message, they received the Holy Spirit. It shocked those Jews who accompanied Peter: "*The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles*" [10:45]. This fact they could not deny. The narrative shows that this event was not an aberration. God intends for the Gentiles to be incorporated into the people of Israel through their conversion to Christ. They are not the gatekeepers who decide when, where, and to whom the Holy Spirit speaks. The coming of the Holy Spirit, like the blowing of wind, is apparent only from its discernible effects. It cannot be compelled, manipulated, or regulated. In this case, it is evident that the only

precondition for receiving the gift of the Spirit is the readiness to hear and accept God's words [10:44]. And God has worked behind the scenes in preparing hearts to respond in faith [Bock].

- b) In verse 15, when Peter described how the Holy Spirit came on the household of Cornelius---it was for Peter a "Gentile Pentecost" [Polhill]. Peter reflected what he felt when he saw the Holy Spirit come to the family at Caesarea: *"Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'*" [11:16]. Then the clinching argument---Peter surmised that since God was doing all of this and he has chosen to deal with Gentiles the same way he treated us Jews, who was I to think that I could oppose God [Gangel]. In other words: if we oppose to Gentile baptism---we are opposing God!
- c) The result? ---An immediate response of acceptance. These conservative bothers heard the evidence presented by Peter, offered no more objection. They not only went away silenced---they praised God, saying, *"So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life"* [11:18]. So for the moment the issue is settled. What do Gentiles have to do to become Christians? Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ---and nothing more. But we know that the problem is not solved. Three nagging questions continued to plague the church for years, until it was brought to the Council of Jerusalem: 1) What lifestyle was appropriate for Gentiles coming to Christ out of raw paganism? 2) How do these Gentile believers relate to Jewish Christians? 3) How should the Jerusalem church handle people like this?

Bible Discussion Questions

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| Q1 | <p>a) In Acts 10/11, God directed Peter to preach to the Gentiles and to baptize them. This was objected by the "circumcision group" [= "circumcised believers"] ---the Jewish Christians. This group of Christians accepted Peter's explanation, for now, that it was God's work and intention to bring in the Gentiles into the Kingdom of God. The lesson of Acts 10/11 to the church is that: the community of believers must submit to God's will and not erect artificial barriers that exclude others who are different from them.</p> <p>i) What barriers do you observe exists in churches that keep others different from themselves to be part of the community?</p> <p>ii) What difficulties do you have in accepting persons who have been in jail before, or who were drug addicts before--- to join your cell? What if the person is still struggling with drug addictions?</p> <p>iii) Would you accept a person into your cell if he/she tells you he/she has same sex attraction issues? Would it be different if they tell you that they are living openly with a person of the same sex?</p> <p>b) The church's mission is to be the voice and action of Christ so that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations and to anybody. Our prejudices can prevent us from fulfilling the great commission. In what ways do you see it happening in your life, and in churches?</p> |
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Suggested answers/pointers

- Helen Roseveare. Roseveare was an English medical missionary to Congo. She served the people of Congo from 1953 to 1973. At one point during her time there, she lost her temper and cursed one of the patients in fluent Swahili. One of her first students, a medical assistant, timidly approached and admonished her, “I don’t think the Lord Jesus would have spoken like that.” Due to this incident, she began to struggle about herself and her relationship with God and the people whom she was serving. During her sabbatical, her spiritual mentor, Pastor Ndugu, challenged her, “Helen, why can’t you forget for a moment that you are white? You’ve helped so many Africans to find cleansing and filling and joy in the Holy Spirit through the blood of Jesus Christ. Why don’t you let Him do for you what He has done for so many others?” She was horrified and confessed how **racial prejudice** was a hidden area in her heart, and she repented that her racism hindered others from coming to know God.
- **Jonah**. The Lord came to Jonah with the command to preach to the great city of Nineveh. The city of Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, a long-time enemy of Israel. **Due to a history of animosity and his personal prejudice, Jonah was unwilling to obey God and attempted to flee by ship from Joppa to Tarshish.** He faced a great storm and was trapped within the belly of a huge fish. There Jonah reflected and prayed to God with words of repentance, “What I have vowed I will make good. I will say, **‘Salvation comes from the LORD’**” (Jonah 2:9). The Lord commands the great fish to spew out the slow-to-move and slower-to-understand Jonah, and Jonah successfully preaches to Nineveh, causing everyone, from the least to the greatest, to repent, fast, and pray to the Lord for salvation from their impending destruction. **It’s not up to us to draw lines on where we should or should not preach the gospel or who can or cannot receive it** [Garland]

Q2 **Is Acts 10:14--- a promise that all in our family will receive salvation?** [*“He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved”*]. **Discuss**

Suggested answers/pointers

- It seems apparent that all the members of Cornelius' family and likely his servants as well, were saved that day and trusted Christ Acts 10:44–48; 11:14]. In this case, we have every reason to believe **that Cornelius merely gathered them and they each voluntarily opened their hearts to the gospel and trusted Christ.**
- Of greater difficulty is the passage in Acts 16:31 where Paul promised that if the Philippian jailer believed he would be saved and your household. But, even there, the text mitigates that collective prophecy when Luke tells us that Paul and Silas spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house [16: 32]. On this passage Marshall observes, “The New Testament takes the unity of the family seriously, and when salvation is offered to the head of the household, it is as a matter of course made available to the rest of the family group (including dependents and servants) as well. It is, however, offered to them on the same terms: they too have to hear the Word [16:31], believe, and be baptized; the jailer's own faith does not cover them” [Marshall]