

Every One Who Believes

Acts 10:1–11:18

September 30, 2001

“Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the word which he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace by Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), the word which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism which John preached: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we are witnesses to 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 manifest; not to all the people but to us who were 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 ordained by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that every one who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:34-43).

This passage is breathtaking in both its scope and its precision. It cuts two directions at the same time. On the one hand, it contains the then fresh and startling realization that the grace of God, the forgiveness of sin, and the promise of eternal life reach across all racial, ethnic, gender, national, social, and economic barriers. This was unheard of then. We take it for granted now.

On the other hand, this passage points out the one remaining division that matters for all of humanity, manifestly obvious then, but hidden in our own day under the secular ideologies of religious tolerance, pluralism, and diversity. Though the grace of God reaches across all other barriers, it creates and has retained this one division: some people believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and some do not. We do not talk about this very much. But this religious reality has profound and far reaching consequences in every area of our lives. In case we have not learned that lesson well in the past, it appears likely that the events of the near future in this very nation will force it upon us with great clarity and great terror. Some people believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and some do not. Therein lies all the difference. This is the only distinction that matters. This puts before us the important question, Do you believe in Jesus Christ? Where do you stand in the great divide of humanity? At the same time, it raises and forces upon us the equally important question, Where does every one else stand?

Let us start with the far reaching scope of God’s grace. “Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the word which he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace by Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all). . . . To him all the prophets bear witness that every one who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:34-35, 43). He is Lord of all! Alleluia! The grace of God in Jesus Christ extends to every nation. We gathered here today are the beneficiaries of that far flung grace and the work of Jesus Christ. Black and white, Asian and Hispanic, Indian and American Indian, male and female, young and old, rich and poor, Gentile every one: we are the beneficiaries of the grace of God that came first to the people of Israel, worked in and through a Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, and then welled up, spilled over, poured out, and ran beyond the boundaries of Israel to all the world. Finally, it has reached even us, poor lost

sinners though we are. Across the oceans, through many languages, down through the centuries, the grace of God has come even to us. Thanks be to God!

What is this grace of God? According to this passage, it includes the gift of peace with God. It includes the gift of the Holy Spirit, which is marked by the outward sign of baptism. It includes the gift of the forgiveness of sin. It includes the gift of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. It includes the gift of repentance, the turning away from the past and the turning toward God. It includes even the gift of the hope for final justice, when Jesus Christ shall be the righteous judge on judgment day, and the gift of the hope for eternal life, based on the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. These are blessings more than we can count or comprehend, mercies beyond our deserving or our wildest imagining, goodnesses for which we fall on our knees and even on our faces pouring out praise and thanksgiving to the God and Father of Jesus Christ. Is any of this of interest to you? Is it attractive to you? Would you like to receive this grace and mercy? If so, cry out to God in prayer for faith and forgiveness, and realize that even your crying out is already an act of faith which is to say it is already a gift from God. And if you have already received the grace of God, would you like to grow in grace, faith, hope, and love? “Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Luke 11:9).

The main point of this passage has to do with the extraordinary uncontainability of the gospel. Just as it spilled out beyond the people of Israel, so has it continued to march forth throughout the earth. This is exciting and challenging. It has created the church, and it continues to do so. It has given the church its mission, and it continues to do so. It has given the church both the graciousness and the urgency of its life and work, and it continues to do so. It is our privilege and our responsibility to preach the gospel to all people. We proclaim the grace of God in Jesus Christ for all people to hear. We need to put it into their language, and we need to do it better than we have ever done it before. It is not our place to put limits on the grace of God.

This, of course, moves us to our second point. It is God’s plan to do so. While we rejoice in the breadth of the scope of God’s grace, we cannot ignore the precision of its application, the limits which God himself places upon his grace. At the same time that this passage expands the extent of the grace of God, it draws a very sharp line. This was obvious then. It was understood in that day. But in our own day, the line has been obscured, hidden, and even denied. What is the line? After all, “What God has cleansed, you must not call common.” But this raises the question, What has God cleansed? And this, in turn, raises the question, What has God not cleansed? At one point, Peter said, “God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean.” That makes it seem that there is no line. But what did Peter mean by that? At other points, Peter defines this cleansing by God to mean any one who fears God, who does what is right, and upon whom the Holy Spirit had fallen. The resurrected Christ appeared not to all people but only to those whom God had chosen. “To him all the prophets bear witness that every one who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” This does not say that every one in the world is forgiven. It says that every one who believes in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior receives forgiveness of sins. There is a big difference. The reading ends by acknowledging that “to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life.” This clearly does not mean all Gentiles. It does mean all Gentiles to whom God has granted repentance. Therein lies the difference. What do we do with this?

First, we acknowledge and rejoice that both the initiative and the accomplishment of salvation rest with God. Thanks be to God! If it depended upon us, at all, we would never be saved.

Second, we urge all who do believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior to give thanks to God for the gift of faith. Faith is not a good work of which we are capable or for which we are responsible. It is a gift for which we are grateful.

Third, we preach the gospel to all people, passionately and earnestly, especially to those who do not yet believe in Jesus Christ, and we pray for God's mercy on them all. It is not enough to leave people to languish in their unbelief in Jesus Christ. It is not loving to fail to share the gospel. Nowhere does the Bible direct us to interfaith dialog. Nowhere does the Bible direct us to the secular ideology of religious tolerance, pluralism, and diversity. Nowhere does the Bible direct us to bury our heads in the sand and act as if everything is okay when it is not.

We live in a world today of international communication and travel such that we are faced in a new and fresh way by a world full of people who do not believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Now is not a time to be stupid or naive about that. These people are committed, absolutely, to their faith that Allah alone is God, and that Mohammed is his prophet, and they regard the rest of the world as infidels to be conquered and destroyed.

It is our responsibility as the church of Jesus Christ to bear witness to them about Jesus Christ. It is our responsibility as the United States of America to realize that we are under religious attack by a people who intend to establish Islamic nations. If we do not understand this, we will not know what we are up against.

The single important division remaining among humanity is that between those who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and those who do not. It depends upon the choice, initiative, and accomplishment of God. This has a profound religious significance. We have ignored this for far too long. Now we are learning that this division has also a profound practical, national, political, economic, social, and military significance. We can ignore it no longer.

“Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the word which he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace by Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all). . . . To him all the prophets bear witness that every one who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:34–35, 43).

To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.

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