

³⁴Then Peter began to speak: “Now I really am beginning to understand that God does not show favoritism,
³⁵but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶He sent his word to the
people of Israel, proclaiming the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.

³⁷“You know what happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached.
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all who were oppressed by the Devil, because God was with him.

It was about noon. Peter sat on the rooftop, waiting for lunch to be prepared. But while he sat there, he fell into a trance. In this vision, he saw something like a sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners. Inside the sheet were all kinds of ceremonially unclean animals. Then the voice of the Lord spoke. He said, “Get up, Peter, kill and eat!” Peter was hesitant. He argued with the Lord, since eating these animals would be breaking God’s laws regarding food. But the Lord replied, “What God has made clean, you must not continue to call unclean.” Three times this happened.

As Peter snapped out of the vision, three men from Cornelius the centurion arrived at the house. As a centurion, Cornelius was a powerful military leader, commanding approximately one hundred men. An angel had gone to Cornelius before this and told him to send for Peter. Peter agreed to go with the men, but arriving at Cornelius’ house, the centurion bowed to worship him. Peter told him to stand, then explained to Cornelius and all his family he had gathered there what God wanted them to know.

Peter starts out by saying, “Now I really am beginning to understand that God does not show favoritism, but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” There’s good news! God does not show favoritism. But there’s bad news too. Only those who fear him and do right are acceptable to him.

Do we fear God? Fearing God isn’t necessarily being afraid of him but having that deep and abiding respect toward him and his power. Maybe the earthly comparison we can make is our relationship to our parents as kids. We knew they had a lot of authority over us, so while we were not afraid, we also knew what would happen if we talked to them the same way we talked to our friends. So do we have this fear for God? The answer is: sometimes. God tells us to love our neighbors as ourselves, but we care much more about the things going on in our lives than we do the things going on in anyone else’s life. He tells us to put him first, then we make a bunch of crummy excuses why we haven’t been to church or can’t make it to Bible study. All the while, we’ll drop everything else on our schedules if there’s something we really want to do. Is that fearing the Lord?

And do we do what is right? The answer to this question is maybe even more obvious. Sit down and read the Ten Commandments, a snapshot of God’s moral law for all people of all time. Maybe you’ve never killed, but you hated. Maybe you’ve never cheated, but you lusted. Maybe you’ve never lied in court, but you have let information slip about a person you knew would damage their reputation. Do we do what is right? Absolutely not!

So why is Peter saying this as a good thing? Read what he’s saying again. He’s speaking like we actually do fear the Lord and do what is right. If we know that that is untrue for us, how can he speak with such confidence. Listen to Peter, because he explains it: “He sent his word to the people of Israel, proclaiming the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.” This peace with God does actually come from fearing the Lord and doing what’s right. It’s just not us who are doing it.

Listen to Peter again: “You know what happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached. God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the Devil, because God was with him.” Jesus had that perfect respect for his Father’s glory. Jesus always did what was right. And at Jesus’ baptism that we read about in the Gospel today, he is anointed as God’s Son, to carry out the plan to save lost sinners like you and me. This word anoint means to be set apart or marked as something special. The names Christ and Messiah come from the same word, both meaning “anointed one.” This anointing at Jesus’ baptism would mark the beginning of his earthly ministry, much like a king’s anointing would mark the beginning of his reign. But Jesus was anointed for a task more important than overseeing a worldly kingdom.

He was anointed to live the kind of life that made him acceptable to God. The bar God sets is perfection, and Jesus did not fail to leap right over that bar. He put the Father’s will first, wrestling with having to pay the price of sin in the Garden of Gethsemane. And he put the needs of his fellow man first too. One thing that stands out in Jesus’ ministry is how little sleep he got at times. There were times when Jesus was healing all night until daybreak and he needed to escape the crowds because his body could not hold up any longer. When a storm rocked a boat carrying him and his disciples, Jesus was fast asleep as these fishermen were certain they faced death. As humans with only so much energy, we value our sleep. Jesus needed rest too, but often was willing to sacrifice his rest for the good of others.

His sacrifices were not only for the physical needs of others though. They were also for their spiritual needs. And what sacrifice he made for them! It’s one thing to give up sleep for another person. It’s another thing to give up a life of perfection.

Imagine you bowl a perfect game, three hundred. You had been playing all your life, but this was the first time you reached that achievement. The local bowling alley starts filling out the paperwork so that they can put a plaque on the wall with your name on it. You’re thrilled. You’re so excited to get that long-earned recognition. Then someone comes up to you and says, “There’s this guy who just started playing last week, and he really wants to be known as a great bowler. You mind if we replace your name on the plaque with his?” There’s no way you’re doing that, right? You earned it. You practiced and improved for decades. This person who just showed up and is guttering every other ball doesn’t deserve it.

Look at Peter’s words. When it comes to the plaque of fearing God and doing what’s right, whose name is on it? It’s yours. But how can it be? Because Jesus bowled the perfect game and then gave you credit for it. We are those who fear the Lord and do what is right, acceptable to God, not because we actually did it, but because Jesus did it for us. And there’s a peace that comes with that. All of us, from the youngest to the oldest, from the retired to the overworked, deal with a lot of stresses in our lives. But God gives us the assurance that we belong to him and he belongs to us. And he gives us that assurance in our being anointed by God in baptism. Certainly, our baptism is different than Jesus’. He had no sin to wash away. He did not need to be saved from destruction and hell. It made the status of Jesus as God’s Son known to the world. Our baptisms also mark us as sons and daughters of God, joining us to Jesus and what he’s done for us. This is why Peter can speak with such certainty that we are acceptable to God through Jesus. What peace, that as we go through our messy lives, we know who we belong to and we know what he promises to do for us.

But there’s something deeper in this section that stands out. Peter is a Jew talking to a room full of Gentiles. This is abnormal, illegal even. Peter says as much earlier in the chapter: “You understand how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to associate with or visit anyone who is not a Jew. But God showed me that I should no longer continue to call anyone impure or unclean.” The Jews were the people God had chosen since the days of

Abraham. Think about what they had gone through throughout the Old Testament. They were slaves in Egypt, wanderers for forty years in the wilderness, captives under the Assyrians and the Babylonians. Even as Peter's speaking, the Jews were under the dehumanizing governance of the ruthless Roman Empire. If you were a Jew, your people would have been abused for millennia. This animosity toward your captors was not going to die easily.

If you can put yourself in Peter's shoes, you can understand how he was struggling to stand in a room full of Gentiles and preach that salvation was theirs. Because the truth was, he did not really believe that Jesus was for them. But this vision of the sheet and the animals had made a change in Peter. He's recognizing it himself as he says: "Now I really am beginning to understand that God does not show favoritism, but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

That phrase "in every nation" really stands out. Peter's eyes were being opened that the Lord was not just a god for some. He was the God for all. Even though Cornelius and his family would have ancestors who mistreated the Jews and hated their God (and maybe even Cornelius did the very same thing), God wanted them to be part of his family. He wanted the anointed as his. And as you read on, that's exactly what happens. They get baptized into God's family.

I'm not sure we're affected as much as Peter as we realize the Savior is for all, but there may be times when we don't want to share with others that salvation is theirs. There's always somebody to not like, always someone to exclude. Would you call a relative you had it out with a few years ago and have not spoken to since to share the good news of peace that comes from Jesus? Would you go help a mission church down in Milwaukee walk neighborhoods where the people don't look like you to invite them to church? Would you sit in a jail across from a murderer or someone who committed crimes against kids and tell them that even those sins were forgiven by Jesus? Is the gospel for all, or are there some who are just too unlikable, too unworthy to be included in God's family? We have to wrestle with this question of who Jesus is for. It's our prayer that we come out the other side, saying the same thing Peter did: "Now I really am beginning to understand that God does not show favoritism, but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."