

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, October 31, 2010**

MEANT FOR EVERYONE

Acts 11:1-18

INTRODUCTION TO SCRIPTURE READING

Before we turn to God's Word, allow me to reflect for a few moments on our Missions Conference last weekend. It was a rich blessing to have several of our missionaries here with us. I hope you made the most of the opportunity to hear each of them speak, and to talk with them personally. It was a blessing to have both Dan Painter and Basim Aziz (pseudonym) speak to us from God's Word in our worship services last Sunday morning. We are blessed as a church family – as a local expression of the body of Christ here in northern Virginia – to be able to partner with each of the missionaries who joined us last weekend, and with many others serving the Lord Jesus Christ in different parts of the world.

As our EPC Essentials of the Faith remind us, the Great Commission to take the message of the gospel to all people everywhere and to make disciples in all nations (Matthew 28:19) isn't meant just for missionaries who go to other nations. The Great Commission is *the church's* commission. It is *our* commission. God may call some of us to go out in His name and serve as missionaries among people in other lands (like Krista Barnett in Lebanon and Lacey Mackey in Togo). In fact, right now God may be calling some of us to say "yes" to His call to go out to some mission field in His name. It might be for a short term. It might be for a long term. It might even be for the rest of your life. Is God perhaps calling you?

Even if you never serve on a summer mission team or go to a foreign mission field, the Great Commission still belongs to you. It belongs to all of us. We can participate in the Great Commission by praying for those who serve on mission fields around the world. We can participate in the Great Commission by praying for the people and people groups among whom our missionaries sow the seed of the gospel, among whom they incarnate the love and saving power of the Lord Jesus, among whom they teach and model the truth of God's Word. We can participate in the Great Commission by giving financially – freely, cheerfully, generously – to support our missionaries in their labors and to provide resources for their ministries.

We can also participate in the Great Commission by recognizing the truth that right where we are, right here in northern Virginia, right here in America, this is a mission field. We are all on the mission field. God is calling you to be a missionary right where He has placed you – in your neighborhood, in your community, in your school, in your workplace, in your sphere of influence, and in the culture in which we all live. You don't have to travel overseas to go to the mission field. The mission field has come to us. It is right here. God may or may not call you to go as a missionary to France or Germany or North Africa or Lebanon or some other country. But I believe God *is* calling *each of us* to be *missional Christians*, followers of Christ who understand and embrace our identity as men and women who have been given a mission by God in our daily life. And I believe God is calling us *as a church* – as *His* church

– to think and act and speak and serve strategically, in the conviction that together we are on a mission from God.

What kind of mission? To be salt and light in a world that seems to be increasingly dark and decaying. To tell others how great and gracious God really is, and to give God the glory and honor He deserves in everything we do. To point people to Jesus, the Son of God and Savior of sinners. To encourage and equip others to grow, as we grow ourselves, in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. To extend grace to people with all kinds of hurts or problems or needs. To love God in every way we can with everything we have. And to love, serve, and care for others with the kind of love with which Jesus loves us. That is our mission as a church. Right where we are. That is *your* mission.

That was a bit longer than I intended. But I think the Lord wanted me to share it with you. Our Scripture focus today is actually missional, too, as we find Peter on yet another mission from God. Turn in your Bible to Acts 11. Since way back in April, we have been looking at the truly remarkable life and times of Simon Peter, this rugged, unschooled fisherman who answered the call to follow Jesus and became, through the grace and power of God, one of the greatest leaders in the history of the Christian church. Two weeks ago, in Acts 9, we saw how the Lord Jesus used Peter to miraculously heal a man named Aeneas in the town of Lydda (9:32-35), and then, in Joppa, to bring back to life a much-loved saint named Tabitha (Dorcas) after she had died (9:36-42). We read at the end of Acts 9 that “Peter stayed in Joppa for some time” (9:43). We are not told exactly how long Peter stayed there, but it was long enough for God to prepare Peter for what God wanted him to do next – for the next watershed moment in the spread of the gospel and the worldwide expansion of the church.

This event was of such great importance that Luke, the author of Acts, actually tells the story twice: first, in Acts 10, and then again in Acts 11:1-18, where Peter, after the fact, tells the church leaders and others in the church at Jerusalem why he went to Caesarea, what happened there, and how he himself responded to what God did.

I encourage you to take some time today to read for yourself the entire story in Acts 10 and 11. Right now, let’s look together at Peter’s own description of this historic event in Acts 11:1-18. Let’s give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God’s holy Word.

THE CONVERSION OF CORNELIUS

If you’re not familiar with all the details of the story, it may not be immediately apparent why it is a big deal, or why Luke devotes so much space and attention to it. What happened in Caesarea really *is* a big deal, and we continue to be affected by its ripples two thousand years later.

The two main characters in this story – human characters, I mean – are Peter and a man from Caesarea named Cornelius, each of whom had a vision from God (Acts 10:1-16), which God used to prepare them for what He was preparing for them. This is the way God works. Not always through visions, of course. We may not even be aware of what He is doing when He

is doing it, but God, in His sovereign wisdom, takes the initiative to prepare us for what He is preparing for us, so that we can be useful to Him and serve His purposes.

Peter doesn't even mention the name Cornelius when he gives his report to the church in Acts 11, so you have to read Acts 10 to know his name. What we learn there is that Cornelius was a soldier in the Roman army, stationed in Caesarea, the Roman capital of the province of Judea. Caesarea was a seaport on the Mediterranean coast about 65 miles northwest of Jerusalem. Cornelius was a centurion, which means he had around a hundred soldiers under his command.

The Bible says that both Cornelius and his family were "devout and God-fearing" (Acts 10:2). He was a deeply religious man who had embraced monotheism (a belief in just one God). He was compassionate. He gave generously to people in need. Prayer was an important and consistent part of his life. He was a man of strong moral character. In many ways, he was the kind of man most churches would love to have in their fellowship. Except that he was not yet a believer in Christ. He had not yet come to know Jesus as Savior and Lord in his life.

There was another issue with Cornelius, too. Though he was deeply religious and highly respected by the Jewish community in Caesarea, he was not a Jew. He was a Gentile. Though he worshiped the same God as the Jews, he had not converted to Judaism. He had not undergone circumcision, the sign of God's covenant with His people Israel.

The fact of Cornelius' "gentile-ness" was a huge stumbling block for many of the first Christians, who were all from Jewish backgrounds. In their thinking, someone like Cornelius was ineligible to receive the gift of salvation because of his Gentile heritage and his uncircumcised state. They thought the only way a Gentile (or non-Jew) could receive salvation and be accepted by God, was by converting to Judaism first. The idea of a Gentile believer being accepted as a member of the church on the same footing as a Jewish believer was inconceivable to them. And it was not something they were in favor of, either. But, as a friend of mine likes to point out, sometimes the Lord does things we don't necessarily approve of. We don't always approve of the way God works. Sometimes He does things that surprise us. Or moves us out of our comfort zone.

For a lot of the "circumcised believers," as Luke refers to them in both Acts 10:45 and 11:2, the conversion of Cornelius and his household to the Christian faith was one of those occasions. They didn't see it coming. In fact, when the Holy Spirit was poured out on Cornelius and the other members of his household – on these Gentile "outsiders" – the Jewish believers who had come to Caesarea with Peter were astonished (10:45). It took them completely by surprise. But they couldn't deny it. They knew it was a God-thing. They knew God had done it. There was no other way to explain it.

It was an occasion of monumental significance because, for the first time, an individual who was completely outside the Jewish race embraced the Christian faith. Cornelius was the first in a long line of non-Jews down through the centuries to trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. The conversion of Cornelius is of particular significance and relevance to us today because, for all of us who are not from a Jewish background (which is most of us), Cornelius

is our spiritual ancestor. We can trace our spiritual ancestry back to him. The salvation of Cornelius opened the door for people like us to receive the gift of salvation and to be included in the fellowship of Christ's church on the same basis as everyone else, including the Jewish Christians who were the first to believe in Christ – on the basis of repentance and faith in the person and work of Christ alone. If you are like me – if you don't have any Jewish genes as far as you know, but you have embraced the gospel and put your trust in the saving work of Christ – you have descended, spiritually, from the line of Cornelius.

That is why the conversion of Cornelius and the members of his household is such a big deal. We aren't saved by circumcision. We aren't saved by our adherence to the rules and regulations of the Jewish faith or any other religion. We aren't saved by being religious. We aren't saved by coming to church every Sunday. We aren't saved by giving generously to the poor or praying several times a day. We aren't saved by the faith of our parents or our family heritage. Cornelius, a non-Jew, was saved exactly the same way Peter, a Jew, was saved: by trusting faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is the only way to have your sins forgiven, the only way to become a part of God's family, the only way to receive the gift of life in God's eternal kingdom.

If you have received this gift of salvation through faith in Christ, if you know Him as Savior and Lord in your life, if you are walking in fellowship with the Lord Jesus, thank God for what He has done (and is doing) in your life. If you do not yet know the Lord Jesus in His saving power and love, do what Cornelius did. Seek God earnestly. Ask Him to reveal Himself more fully to you. And open your heart – today – in a spirit of sincere repentance and simple faith, to embrace the message of the gospel, and put your trust in Christ and Christ alone.

The conversion of Cornelius was a defining moment not only in his life, but in the unfolding history of the church. Today can be a defining moment in your life, if you will follow his example and give your heart and life to the Lord Jesus. Let today be the day.

There are two other points I want to bring to your attention today.

1. "WHAT HAPPENED IN CAESAREA"

This first point may not be one of the main points of this passage, but did you notice that when Peter went to the home of Cornelius and preached the gospel to everyone gathered there, what happened in Caesarea didn't stay in Caesarea? Even though there was no radio or TV coverage, no internet, no Facebook, no twitter, and no cell phones, news still traveled fast. Word about what happened in Caesarea got back to Jerusalem before Peter did. The folks back in Jerusalem had already heard about it and were discussing it among themselves before Peter ever had a chance to tell them what God had done.

I'm sure you know what they say about Las Vegas: "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas." In one sense, I suppose that is a good thing, because in many cases, I'd rather *not* know what happens in Vegas. Too much of what happens there, I'm afraid, is not edifying or pleasing to

God. It is not conduct to imitate or emulate. So, in a sense, it is good that what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.

In another sense, though, it is not a good thing, because if people knew their actions or exploits in Vegas (or anywhere we go) wouldn't stay in the dark but would come out into the light, we might be less likely to go to certain places, to do certain things, to give in to certain temptations. If what we did were ever to get out, we would be embarrassed or even humiliated, not to mention the pain it might bring to others, or the damage it might do to our relationships, as well as our reputation or witness. In the sense that it entices people to leave their moral sensibilities behind and indulge in activities they wouldn't want other people to know about, the idea that what happens in Vegas (or anywhere we go) stays there is not a good thing.

But there is another way to think about it: Even if what happens in Vegas (or wherever) stays there and no one ever finds out, God still knows about it. God knows everything there is to know about you and me. He knows where you've gone. He knows what you've done. He knows what you do and where you go on your computer, and what you watch on TV, whether you're at home or on the road. God knows the ethical shortcuts you take in life, even if no one else does. God knows when you and I do something we shouldn't do, and when we fail to do something we ought to do. God knows your sin and mine, even if it is hidden from everyone else. God knows. And He doesn't wink at it. He doesn't pretend it didn't happen. He doesn't sweep our sins under the rug.

God takes sin – your sin and mine – seriously. So seriously that He sent His Son into the world to pay for our sin with His life on the cross. In His great mercy and grace, God has provided forgiveness of sins – every last one of them, including the sins we think nobody knows about. This forgiveness, as Peter said to Cornelius and his household in Acts 10:43, is for “everyone who believes in” the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the true Son of God and only Savior of sinners.

We may think that what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas, or wish it were the case, but it is not. God knows what happens in Vegas. He knows what happens wherever you are and wherever you go. Don't make the mistake of thinking that any part of your life is hidden from Him. But never forget that there is forgiveness with God (Psalm 130:4). Never forget that there is forgiveness for everyone who comes to Him in faith. The source of forgiveness is Jesus. And the promise of forgiveness, the promise of the gospel, is for everyone who believes in Him. Including you and me. It is a gift of His sovereign and all-sufficient grace.

What happened in Caesarea didn't stay in Caesarea (not that there was any reason to keep it a secret). But, as we have already said, not everybody approved of what happened there. When Peter got back to Jerusalem, he was “called on the carpet” (Acts 11:2, *The Message*) by some of the Jewish believers, and he had to explain it all from his perspective. The beautiful thing is that, as Peter spoke, God changed the minds and hearts of Peter's critics, so that instead of objecting to what had happened, they praised God that even Gentiles are included in the saving work of Christ. That really is a reason to praise God, don't you think?

2. THE GOSPEL IS MEANT FOR EVERYONE

Here is the second point: Through the conversion of this Gentile outsider, Cornelius, and his family, God was showing Peter and his posse (the six Jewish believers who went with him to Caesarea) that the gospel is not just for Jews. It is not just for those who can trace their lineage back to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. It is not just for people who adhere to the Jewish religion. Not just for people who meet our criteria. The gospel is meant for everyone. As Paul says in Romans 1:16 (which is a great verse to have in the arsenal of your memory), the gospel is “the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” – Jews first, because the message of salvation came first to them and through them, and then Gentiles. It is for *everyone* who believes in Jesus.

It may not seem like a big deal to us today, but this was a revolutionary thing for those 1st-century Jewish believers to accept. They had a huge problem with religious and racial prejudice. They were convinced they were superior to everybody else because, after all, they were God’s chosen people. This is one reason why the conversion of Cornelius, with the accompanying gifts and signs of the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:44-45; 11:16) was so significant. Through Peter’s ministry in Caesarea, God showed that the door of salvation is open not just to Jews, but to sinners of every race, every color, every language, every nationality, every ethnic background, every culture, and every socio-economic status. The door of salvation is open to Republican sinners, to Democrat sinners, to independent sinners, to Tea Party sinners, to Comedy Central sinners, to sinners from both Fox News and MSNBC. The door of salvation is open to conservatives, to liberals, to moderates. It is open to women as well as men, to children and youths as well as grown-ups. It is even open to sinners from Muslim backgrounds. Not that salvation is found in Islam, or through belief in Allah. It is not. But the door to salvation is open to anyone of Muslim background who comes to the Lord Jesus Christ in true repentance and places his or her faith in Jesus Christ alone for salvation and life.

The gospel was meant for Cornelius. It is meant for you. It is meant for everyone. This is one huge reason why the Great Commission remains so important today. It is a huge reason why it is so important for us to support the worldwide mission of the church in every way we can. It is a huge reason why it is so critically important for us to understand that right where we are is a mission field. And we are on a mission from God. Just like Peter was.

Ask God to use you in some way, in someone’s life, on the mission field where He has placed you this week. Praise God for the gospel, which truly is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. It is meant for everyone.

What John Newton said of himself is true of us all: We are all great sinners, but Christ is a great Savior. The only Savior. Amen? Amen.