

Doug Serven, RUF Campus Minister¹
RUF Bible Study – The Gospel According to Peter
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The Repenter – Acts 10-11, 15

*Acts 10: 44-46*No sooner were these words out of Peter's mouth than the Holy Spirit came on the listeners. The believing Jews who had come with Peter couldn't believe it, couldn't believe that the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out on "outsider" non-Jews, but there it was—they heard them speaking in tongues, heard them praising God.

Acts 15~ The apostles and leaders called a special meeting to consider the matter. The arguments went on and on, back and forth, getting more and more heated. Then Peter took the floor: "Friends, you well know that from early on God made it quite plain that he wanted the pagans to hear the Message of this good news and embrace it—and not in any secondhand or roundabout way, but firsthand, straight from my mouth. And God, who can't be fooled by any pretense on our part but always knows a person's thoughts, gave them the Holy Spirit exactly as he gave him to us. He treated the outsiders exactly as he treated us, beginning at the very center of who they were and working from that center outward, cleaning up their lives as they trusted and believed him.

10-11"So why are you now trying to out-god God, loading these new believers down with rules that crushed our ancestors and crushed us, too? Don't we believe that we are saved because the Master Jesus amazingly and out of sheer generosity moved to save us just as he did those from beyond our nation? So what are we arguing about?"

Last week on Tuesday afternoon, our family went for a walk. On the way home, Anna (who is five), asked me a question: "Dad, are you a Republican?" I was a little startled and didn't know what to say. I might be a Republican, but I'm not sure. I hemmed and hawed for a bit. "I'm a Republican," Anna told me. Oh. "Everyone in my class is."

So in Anna's preschool, they talked about politics and all of the five-year-olds said they're Republicans. "What is a Republican, Anna?" I asked her. "I don't know," she said. "But you are one?" "Yep."

We all have preconceived ideas. What are they? What are your expectations? What are the cultural norms you're working with? What are your presets? You know the button on your computer or your iPod that says, "Restore to default settings"? What are your default settings? I'm afraid Anna is going to be Republican, whether or not she should be beside the point, solely on the basis of her preschool class discussion, which will be lost to her memory very soon.

You have many ideas you've gotten from somewhere, ideas you just assume as you go throughout the day. What are those? How did you vote last week, if you did? Are you a Republican? Are you a Democrat?

Are you Baptist? Are you Presbyterian? Are you someone who doesn't care about denominations at all and have something like "Follower of Jesus" as your denomination?

Are you a praise-music only person? Do you hate hymnals? Do you only want to hang out with college students?

Are you in a sorority? Are you immersed in the life and gossip of your bigs and littles and pumping and all that goes along with that? Do you hate sororities?

Do you think you deserve to be in college? That it's your right to have a car, cell phone, iPod, laptop and as much free time as you want?

Do you automatically assume you're going to fall in love, get married, have the number of kids you want and get married? Do you think, without thinking about it, that you're going to pursue life, liberty and happiness?

Do you realize that many people don't assume these things at all? That thousands, nay millions of black males assume they'll be shot before they turn 30? That women across the globe assume they'll be raped at some point in their lives? That in many cities, it is assumed that if you're a Christian you will vote for the Democratic ticket? That people think that if you're a Baptist, you just might be crazy? That if you're a Presbyterian, you may not be a Christian because you baptize babies and therefore don't believe the Bible?

So I'm belaboring this point. Perhaps too much. What are your expectations? What if they are wrong? That is the question.

In our passage, God totally smashes Peter's expectations of the way things should go. Let's watch.

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For this series, I used commentaries all throughout the gospels. I also used as my base text Michael Card's book, *The Fragile Stone*. I consulted sermons by Rev. Tim Keller found out www.redeemer.com and RUF Campus Minister Les Newsom in many instances. This message also has gleanings from church planter Rev. David Rea. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

What Defines You?

In essence that's what I've been asking. What defines you? The way you look, the way you think. So many things go into who you are. What if you dyed your hair a different color or cut it off and went bald? What if you went Goth? What if you went preppy? What if you put on as few clothes as possible every day for class? What assumptions would we make about you? What would you be saying about yourself to us?

Let's talk about this with three categories of people: the Jews, Cornelius and Peter.

The Jews had some defining characteristics themselves. Some of these had been given to them by God. He wanted them to view themselves as different, as distinct, as what the Bible calls *holy*. So he told them things they had to do and not do, things like circumcision, purity laws, ceremonial institutions and ways to live life. These were to set them apart and to have them see their need for a redeemer.

But the *Jews*, and especially perhaps the Pharisees went beyond this. These laws, these distinctions, became what they were all about. They debated endlessly the ins and outs of how to obey these laws and rigorously followed everything in every way. The laws defined everything about them. They could only relate to anyone who didn't follow these laws in a way of derision, judgment, disgust and disassociation.

Then we have *Cornelius*. We're told he is Italian (from the Italian Cohort, which sounds like from the mafia to me, but not really), that he's a Roman centurion and that he's a God-fearer. I picture a short man who makes up for his stature by being fierce, tough and mean. This is a man with scars. He's seen death. He's a leader, a survivor. And he's a God-fearer. That means he is really interested in God and Judaism but won't commit. He prays and gives to the poor and associates himself on the outskirts of the temple, but resists taking the plunge.

Now, the Jew would hate Cornelius. Hate. First he is of the broad general category of Gentile. A non-Jew. And that's a pretty broad category to be in. And then, heaven forbid, he's a Roman. The worst of the worst. And this sort of thinking would have been bred into every Jew. It wouldn't have been a conscious choice to hate Romans or Gentiles, but it was a learned thing from birth, from all of time.

I had a similar experience to this growing up in little Ozark, Missouri. In our school district we had one black person from kindergarten to twelfth grade, and he was in second grade when I graduated. So, I wouldn't have called myself racist in any way. But I had never had one conversation that I can remember with anyone of any race beside Caucasian. I was just raised in a white, Protestant world. I've had to think about that.

But let's bring in Peter. What would he be thinking? At this point, I'd say he's an extremely open Jewish Christian. He was raised Jewish, so he brings all of his presets to the table. But Jesus has been messing with those presets, he's been changing and recalibrating them. Jesus hung out with Samaritans. Gasp. He spent time with women. Yikes. He talked with Samaritan women. Holy cow. Prostitutes, poor, lepers, and yes, even Romans.

So Peter is moving towards people, people unlike himself. He's moving away from Jew-only thinking. We see this because he's staying at the house of a tanner (Acts 10:6). Peter is being really open here. He's breaking some of the purity laws just by staying here. He's straining his worldview to go this far, with the stench of the tanner in his nostrils.

But he's not all the way there yet. God has more work to do.

Now how about you? How and where do you think God works? Each of these men or groups is being defined by what they do and don't do. What about you? What do you think of people who smoke? What about people who don't smoke? What about "those people"? What is in that category for you? People who love football – aren't they dumb? People who hate football – don't they get it? People who put cream in their coffee? People who don't like the symphony? People who dress like that? People who sleep around? People who don't live up to their potentials? People who don't shave often enough? People who talk about God too much? People who don't read? People who read? People who aren't from Texas or are from a small town, or a big town or a one-mall medium sized town? People from a public school/private school/home school?

What is it that you use to mark people off? To identify them?

I guarantee you have them. And you want to be around people just like you as much as possible. That's what moving to the suburbs is all about and why they're filling up and building more all the time.

Rocking the Suburbs²

And why Jesus is committed to blowing up the suburbs (metaphorically speaking of course (I think)). One of the defining characteristics of Christianity is the tearing down of dividing walls. This has to happen in our lives and in the world in order for Christianity to be real and valid.

And this is what Peter and the disciples were learning. The disciples did not yet believe that all was being made right, that the Gentiles could be Christians. They had seen Pentecost in Acts 2; they had been around Jesus; they had read the Bible and should have known that God cares about the nations. And yet, it was difficult for them to get it through their thick heads that God could love the Gentiles, that they could become Christians. Such was the preconditions in their minds.

² For those of you in the know about this song reference, I realize it is ironic in the song, but I'm using it "unironically," if there is such a thing.

God took great pains to make this clear. He sent a vision to Cornelius, telling him that he wasn't good enough on his own. That his good works weren't working. This is true for all unbelievers, all people who want to do good things and have God like them, all "seekers." They want to serve God on their terms. It's the religion of the irreligious. Pick and choose faith.

So Cornelius sets out to find this Peter and bring him so he can hear what he has to say. He sends his team out.

And God prepares Peter too. He has a food dream. Do you ever dream about food? But Peter's dream was a food nightmare. God piled up all the foods Peter hated and then told him these were good.

Peter most likely wouldn't have understood this since God didn't give him the key, the meaning of this at first. It would have seemed to him like a test. He saw the unclean foods, was told to "Rise, kill and eat," and he rejected this bad voice. Yay, I passed, he would have thought. The fact that he had the dream three times and that one of the time he heard a voice say, "What God has made clean, do not call common" would have given him pause. What did this mean? The text says that Peter was "inwardly perplexed."

And behold, Cornelius' men show up. Peter is told he should go with them and does so. 32 miles of walking deep into enemy territory. Imagine going to Austin, the University of Texas, to Mack Brown's office. Do you shudder at the thought? Peter is thinking, "I shouldn't be here..." But he keeps going and Cornelius comes out and bows in front of him. Peter goes into Cornelius' house, and even comments on how he's not supposed to do that. He had NEVER been in a Gentile's house before this moment. That may seem crazy to you, but it made perfect sense to Peter.

Cornelius welcomes him and gives a speech recounting how things got to this point. You can almost see Peter looking around, a little scared maybe. Unsure of what to touch, what to think. He looked up and saw – people just like him. People who needed to hear the good news. Then Peter speaks and the first words out of his mouth are: "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." He preaches to them about the good news of Jesus Christ, who came to die for every kind of sinner. And while he was talking, the Holy Spirit came on them. People were amazed. People spoke in tongues.

Peter summarizes his experience later when there was some controversy in Acts 15: *"Friends, you well know that from early on God made it quite plain that he wanted the pagans to hear the Message of this good news and embrace it—and not in any secondhand or roundabout way, but firsthand, straight from my mouth. And God, who can't be fooled by any pretense on our part but always knows a person's thoughts, gave them the Holy Spirit exactly as he gave him to us. He treated the outsiders exactly as he treated us, beginning at the very center of who they were and working from that center outward, cleaning up their lives as they trusted and believed him. 10-11" So why are you now trying to out-god God, loading these new believers down with rules that crushed our ancestors and crushed us, too? Don't we believe that we are saved because the Master Jesus amazingly and out of sheer generosity moved to save us just as he did those from beyond our nation? So what are we arguing about?"*

Peter saw that he hadn't gone far enough in his thinking. He hadn't embraced the Gentiles. Now they were God's people too. God had shown him this by giving them their own Pentecost so there could be no doubt in Peter's mind that the walls between Jew and Gentile had been brought down. "His ritual purity, rooted in his own concept of works righteousness, is the last vestige of his old orthodoxy that needs to go."³ This was astounding to Peter. Revolutionary. You have to remember that Peter had thought about this every single day of his life. What he ate and didn't eat was a constant part of his life. And now, that day, it was all overturned. The identity markers had come down.

So God rocks the suburbs. He breaks down walls. He tears down fences. He lets people in. He goes out of his way to work with all kinds of people, in fact the very ones you think might be the least likely are the ones he typically goes for.

Who is that for you? Do you realize that you are one of these people? That Peter would never have thought YOU could be a Christian? Who do you think is outside the boundaries of even God's mighty hand? Don't say no one, for you have a category, you have a preset that you need to consider.

Deal or No Deal?

I have never watched this primetime game show, but have flipped past it several times.⁴

Okay, so what does this mean for us? Is this just some crazy story that happened a long time ago? Does it have any relevance? Obviously, I think it does.

I often have people ask me this question: "How can I know if I'm really a Christian?" I think that's a good question and a fair one. I think the Bible even calls you to ask it. How do you know? Do you have a deal or no deal with the Holy Spirit?

You will know if the Holy Spirit is in your life. And how do you know that? Let's look.

The first thing we see is that the Holy Spirit follows the Word. The Word of God is preached here and the Holy Spirit gives evidence to it. The Word and the Spirit go together. Don't look for them separated.

³ Card, 172

⁴ But I need titles. Why do I need titles? I'm not sure.

In fact, whenever you see the Spirit apart from the Word, you should be suspicious. The Holy Spirit is a full member of the Trinity, is a person, active and at work. But the Holy Spirit's job seems to be to distract or divert attention away from himself and onto the others. Onto Jesus. Onto God. Onto the Word of God. Onto the church.

So, if you want to know if you have the Holy Spirit in your life – do you love the Bible? Do you want to hear it accurately and passionately preached?

When you think that Holy Spirit is talking to you, what does he say? If he is saying things that you would think anyway, like break up with your girlfriend, then you probably aren't hearing the Holy Spirit after all. You're just blaming him and using him. The Holy Spirit says The Bible.

When the Holy Spirit speaks and confirms the Word to you, does that move you? Are you ever amazed at the gospel message, that Jesus came to save sinners, that he came to save YOU?! Are you interested? Does that strike a cord in you? Do you rejoice when you see God at work in other peoples' lives? When does that happen?

In our passage we read that when they heard Peter's sermon, they extolled God. They praised him.⁵ This means that they were changed what we would call psychologically. Their psyches were changed. After this event, Peter and everyone else looked at God differently. Before this, I'm sure that they had a category for God. All people do. But they didn't worship God. Everyone worships something. You can't help it. You have to give an ultimate value to something. It can be grades, looks, beauty, achievements, what people think of you, power, success, money – anything. It is this thing, this ultimate value, that you worship. But you do not control what you worship. You *are controlled by* what you worship – give me life! You'll never change until you change what you worship.

You've seen this. You know people who have left the faith in college even in their first semester. Or they've seriously tanked it, put it on the back shelf, the back burner (pick a metaphor, any metaphor). But could it be that they really weren't Christians at all? You aren't a Christian because you've walked the aisle at Falls Creek Christian camp⁶ or memorized the catechism or gone through confirmation class, or carried your Bible to church every week, or remained a virgin. Nope. Those things won't change you. Some of them are good, but you're not a Christian until you change what you worship. Not until God thrills you. Not every day. But has that happened? Has it rung true for you? Have you looked at Peter and said, That's me!

So when the Holy Spirit showed up in their lives, they worshipped God. And they spoke in tongues. This means that they changed not just psychologically, but also socially. We've mentioned this already. Peter connects what happens here with what happened in Acts 2 at Pentecost. He associates it because *the same thing happens*. Walls are broken down. People are hearing languages spoken, and this is breaking down cultural barriers so they can hear about Jesus together.

Let me say here that, in my opinion, these tongues signs and gifts are not for today. I think we see tongues in particular instances in Scripture but by no means is it a consistent theme. These miracles show up around new manifestations of the Bible being written and confirmed. I think that these sign gifts, those of tongues and miracles, ceased when the apostles died.

The speaking in tongues wasn't just a really cool thing that people would stand up and be in awe about. The whole reason they are there are to point to the work of God, to show that the gospel was moving out from its regional bounds. That socially, the gospel is for all people. This is the Gentile Pentecost. The very same Holy Spirit is for the Gentiles.

I think this means that Christianity is not tied into a certain culture. It is transcultural. I don't think the church has always acted that way, and I don't think it does so even now. I also don't think that we should be ashamed of our culture per se, and try to eradicate it. We must be careful, however, neither to baptize it, never ever scrutinizing it and always seeking to pass it on as what is of the essence of Christianity (we've seen this with western churches planted in Africa, for instance, insisting on American hymns being sung). And we need to be careful that we don't forsake it, hating it and doing everything we can to get out from it (perhaps what we're seeing with the phenomenon of postmodern or emerging churches). We should seek to have as full an expression as we can. We'll never really fully get it, and we shouldn't always complain about its lack of completion, but we should want it. We should want to break down the barrier walls. To be transcultural in our faith.

Let's say a few things in closing. Next time we'll talk about Peter's letters, but in essence at Acts 15, Peter fades from the Biblical narrative. These are his last words in Acts. He says he is sorry. He had it wrong about God's redemptive work. He repents of his ideas, and calls the church to bring in God's people from every tribe, tongue, people and language.

This is Peter. ***Peter***. He lays down his position, his authority, his power, and takes up the basin and the towel in order to go and serve others. To tell them about Jesus Christ who saves. He goes to Antioch and then eventually back to Rome to die.

What does that do for us? We need to understand that this message of tearing down the walls is needed for our state, city and university. They need to see us, as Christians, coming into unexpected places without all of our identity

⁵ This in essence comes from Les Newsom and that may come from Tim Keller.

⁶ Or Camp Galilee where I went. I'm not sure that's the best name for a church camp in Missouri.

markers up front and loving with people in the midst of life. We can be transcultural in this sense. Without Christian tshirts and Christian music.

What sort of person's home would you not want to be in? What kind of people do you judge right off the bat? Why do you want to be around people like you ALL THE TIME? Why do you hate the dorms so much? What would make you uncomfortable?

Are you against interracial marriages? Why? How can you be a Christian and think that way? Are you for helping people or would rather have "those people" live "over there"? Would you ever consider living in the poor part of town?

Why are we into all these distinctions? We do we make them and promote them? Some of you can tell me what kind of person a TriDelt is, or a Gamma Phi girl is like without knowing her. That is a barrier, an identity marker.

We must break down the dividing walls. I am guilty of this too, friends. I need to stop. The Holy Spirit is against this way of thinking. There are categories, sure. Christians and nonChristians are different. Yes. Let's not pile on differences upon differences.

What about you? Do you see that you were once far off and are now near? That Jesus was forsaken and taken out of the city so that you could be loved and brought in? That he pulled down the wall and sent the border patrol home so that you, an illegal alien, could be brought in and made a citizen of his nation? That you had no rights at all, and are now given the full rights as sons and daughters of the king? Do you have the Holy Spirit? Deal or no deal? Are you moved by God? Do you worship him? Does the Holy Spirit leap inside of you when you hear the Bible? Have you been changed? Are you seeing God at work in your life, and in the lives of others? Do you pray?

At the end of his chapter on Acts 10, James Montgomery Boice writes:

"Harry Ironside tells a personal story at this point... As his father was dying, he kept muttering something and the family couldn't understand what it was. But finally they got it. Mr. Ironside was thinking about this vision [from Acts 10], thinking about the sheet full of animals. He was saying, "A great sheet and wild beasts and, and, and..." He couldn't quite finish it. A friend bent over and whispered, "John, it say 'creeping things.'" [in the King James]

"Oh yes," he said. "That's how I got in. Just a poor good-for-nothing creeping thing, but I got in – saved by grace."

Whenever you see yourself, not as the clean animal, but as the unclean animal, not as the attractive beast but as the creeping thing, as one who by the grace of God got into that sheet and is pronounced clean by the sheer grace of God in Jesus Christ, then you are ready to open your heart and arms to others people. And it does not make any difference who they are. God does not show favorites. If you got in, the gospel must be for everybody."⁷

⁷ Boice, *Acts*, 179