

Are there people in this world that your community has taught you not to trust or associate with? The big thing right now is illegal aliens. People say they bring down our wages or take jobs that we could have. Some say we should not associate with people who practice the religion of Islam because they are all terrorists! Some say don't associate with city-dwellers as they are all drug addicts or are violent! Some say don't associate with people who live in the rural areas because they are all gun-toting members of the militia! In times past the groups that we were warned against was based on who the latest group of immigrants were, or who we were at war against, or who had natural resources that will be advantageous to our expansion of power or who was trying to expand their authority. You get the picture...sometimes we make the other the enemy. This had been the belief and custom of the Jews for centuries.

Last week we talked about how the early church expanded. The expansion was first experienced through a time of persecution, and then through a time of peace. We talked about how God used the faith of the Christians at Joppa to ask Peter to come because their well-beloved Dorcas has died. She was a disciple who showed her faith by her good works. She was known for her help to the poor. The Joppa believers had such great faith that they expected the Lord to use Peter to resurrect Dorcas. And God honored their faith by restoring her to life.

This miracle, and others, led many to believe in the Lord. After this miracle Peter remained in Joppa for some time ("sufficient days") with a tanner named Simon. His house was "by the sea." That's what you missed last week.

Peter had been sent to encourage the Christians that had been scattered by the persecution. But while he was in the city Lydda, less than twenty miles from Jerusalem, he had been asked to come to Joppa, 12 miles further from Jerusalem. Before we decide this was not very far, we must remember that Peter was traveling by foot and the terrain was not level ground. Peter was invited, and he accepted

the invitation to stay in the home of Simon the tanner. By this God was beginning to break down some of Peter's prejudices. As a Jew he would not normally stay with a tanner. Tanners made animal hides into leather. Because this involved contact with dead animals, and Jewish law considered it an "unclean" job. Peter was already beginning to break down his prejudice against people who were not of his kind and customs; those that did not adhere to Jewish religious traditions.

In our scripture today, before Peter got back to Jerusalem the members of the Jerusalem church had heard that Peter had been in fellowship with Gentiles. So as soon as Peter arrived they confronted him. They had heard that Peter has gone and preached to and baptized people that did not follow the Laws of Moses. The Jewish Christians were called circumcised believers. These were Christians who still held to the Law of Moses, and thought that a convert had to become Jewish, obeying all the Jewish laws and customs in order to become a Christian. Lest we shake our heads at this, this is much like the Christian model of evangelism in the Americas, Africa and the Pacific Islands, when the missionaries told those who wanted to become Christian they must give up all their customs to become Christian, and follow only the customs of the missionaries.

The Jewish Christians accused Peter of lodging with uncircumcised men and eating with them. The primary problem was not his preaching to Gentiles but his eating with them. To share a meal meant to express trust and fellowship. To eat with someone was to say that you did not consider them a hopeless sinner. This was the same or similar argument of the Pharisees with Jesus about eating with the Publicans and sinners. But Peter went a step further and ate with Gentiles, but Gentiles did not observe the Jewish dietary laws. Therefore the assumption was that to eat with Gentiles meant they may eat things that were not lawful for Jews to eat. However, what they did not know was that Peter had had a vision and God

had told him that God had made all foods clean, and therefore all people acceptable for salvation.

Peter tells the circumcised believers in Jerusalem briefly what had occurred, including his vision, his response to it, and the trip to Cornelius' house.

Peter explained that he was in Joppa and had a vision of a huge sheet or sail being let down from heaven by four corners. In it he saw all kinds of animals that were forbidden for him to eat. In the 11th chapter of Leviticus, Moses gave a list of the animals and birds that were said to be unclean. Jews were not to eat them or even touch them. If they touched them accidentally it made the person unclean and they would have to go through an elaborate cleaning process that included sacrifices and bathing in order to be acceptable for worshipping God again, and living among the people. When Peter looked into the sheet and saw these animals he recognized them immediately and was clear that he was not to touch them. But Peter heard a voice telling him to get up, kill them as a sacrifice and eat the sacrifice. Being the good Jew that he was, he proclaimed that he had never eaten such animals and he would not! If this had been a Jewish test, Paul would have passed with flying colors! However, this was God doing a new thing after the resurrection of Jesus. The voice told him that "what God has cleansed you must not call common," or unclean. The vision was shown to Peter three (3) times and the sheet went back up into heaven. At that moment three men were at the door of Simon's house asking for Peter. They had come from Caesarea, a Mediterranean seaport 60 miles northwest of Jerusalem and 32 miles from Joppa. It was located on a major caravan route between the city of Tyre, Palestine and Alexandria, Egypt. It was the political capital, military headquarters, and commercial center for Palestine under the Romans. The Holy Spirit then told Peter to go with them without doubting. Peter asked six Christian brothers from the church of Joppa to go with him. So they went to Caesarea and met a man who said he had seen an

angel who had instructed him to send for Peter for instructions on how he and his household could be saved. As Peter spoke, Cornelius and his family received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said about John baptizing with water, but they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit. In telling what happened next, Peter made an important identification of the day of Pentecost with the Lord's prediction of **Spirit** baptism. Peter explains that on the day of Pentecost Jesus fulfilled the promise that they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit. Peter recognized that God had given these people the same gift as the Jews and therefore God had given them salvation as well.

Peter's defense did not rest on what he did, but on what *God* did. God had made no distinction between Jew and Gentile, so how could Peter?

With Peter the saints recognized that the conversion of Gentiles was initiated by God and that they should not stand in God's way. This revelation had two results. First, it preserved the unity of the body of Christ, the church. Second, it drove a huge wedge between Christian believers and Jewish temple-worshippers in Jerusalem. Before this the common Jewish people looked on Christians with favor, but after that time the Jews opposed the church.¹

So what does God want us to learn from this scripture in 2010?

1. God has created us all, and God loves us all. We are to see people through God's view.
 - a. Paul saw Cornelius, the man he preached to, as living in Caesarea, Roman military capital of Palestine
 - b. A centurion, commander of 100 occupying Roman troops
 - c. Of the Italian Regiment, all men from Italy
 - d. Gentile

¹Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:382

- e. Unclean, like the unclean animals of the Old Testament dietary laws
- f. Unlawful for a Jew to visit, as he was from another nation
- g. Uncircumcised, therefore not right to eat with

But God saw Cornelius

- a. Devout
- b. A God-fearer, along with his household
- c. Generous to the poor
- d. A man of prayer whose prayers and alms were received by God
- e. Obedient to God's angel
- f. Cleansed by God, so not unclean
- g. Crucial for Peter to visit

2. Salvation is for all people who accept Jesus as Lord and Savior.

3. You are not to judge the right of others to be saved.

4. God shows no partiality.

- a. God has promised throughout scripture that God will reach the nations.

5. Step out on faith. Every time the Spirit took Peter out of his comfort zone, Peter was obedient and more receptive to more instructions and more responsibility. We need to be faithful and obedient.

5. Talk things out.

- a. It seems that no matter what one does, conflicts are bound to happen. Peter's report of his visit to Cornelius aroused hostility and opposition among some of the believers at Jerusalem. His behavior in Joppa, socializing with the hated and feared Gentiles, was unacceptable – even scandalous, and therefore lost the right to be an apostle.

- b. Before judging the behavior of fellow Christians, it is important to hear them out. The Holy Spirit may have something important to teach us through them.
 - c. Peter was humble enough to respond with a clear honest description of what happened. He filled in the gaps in their understanding and gently interpreted his activities. As results, he not only achieved understanding, but created acceptance and approval for the new converts.
 - d. If there is a need for advocacy, interpretation, or gentle persuasion in your world, you can be a source of grace and truth between adversaries as you obey God's leading.
6. Don't divide over ethnic and custom different.
- a. No Black Christian church
 - b. No White Christian church
 - c. No Hispanic Christian church
 - d. No Asian Christian church
 - e. No Pacific Island Christian church
 - f. No Native American Christian church
7. We are all united in Christ. We are one church in Christ Jesus.

So it does not matter what we have been taught about how we are not to trust and fellowship with certain people. The gospel record teaches that Jesus died for all and will accept each of us into the eternal kingdom of God when we accept him as Lord and Savior.

Thanks be unto God for God's eternal word.