

The Book of Acts, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 16: Cornelius: The Gospel Comes to the Gentiles

Acts 10:1-48

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Acts 10 is a hinge of the whole book: the gospel breaks decisively out of the Jewish world and reaches the Gentiles. This lesson carries heavy doctrinal weight. What is at stake includes the impartiality of God and the gospel for all nations, the removal of the old ceremonial clean and unclean distinctions in Christ, the truth that even a devout and sincere person still needs the gospel to be saved, the content of the gospel itself, and two crucial points about the Spirit and baptism that must be handled with care.

First, present the outpouring of the Spirit on Cornelius's household as God's confirmation that the Gentiles were to be received, a special sign like Pentecost, not the normative way every believer receives the Spirit. The point of the account is that the gospel is for all nations. Second, note carefully that Cornelius, even after receiving the Spirit, was still commanded to be baptized (vv. 47-48), which refutes salvation by faith only and shows baptism is essential, not optional. The heaviest doctrinal weight falls on these two points together.

Yet aim at the heart. This passage demolishes our partiality and prejudice and enlarges our vision of God's love for all people. Help students lay down favoritism, see every person as one for whom Christ died, grasp that sincere good people still need the gospel, learn the gospel well enough to share it, and obey the Lord who still commands baptism.

Question 1

Student Question:

Peter came to understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him (vv. 34-35). What does it mean that God shows no partiality, and what does this reveal about the scope of the gospel?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Peter's words mark a breakthrough in understanding: God shows no partiality. God does not play favorites based on nationality, race, status, or background. He is not the God of one people only but the God of all, and His gospel is for every nation.

This had always been God's purpose, foreshadowed in His promise to bless all nations through Abraham (Genesis 12:3), but it broke upon the early church with fresh force here. The dividing line between Jew and Gentile, which had stood for centuries, was being erased in Christ. The gospel is for the world.

Understand rightly what Peter means by acceptable. He does not mean that Cornelius was already saved apart from Christ, or that sincerity in any religion is enough. As the next chapter makes clear, Cornelius still needed to hear words by which he would be saved (Acts 11:14). Acceptable here means that God welcomes and reaches out to the God-fearing person of any nation, drawing them to the gospel. God shows no partiality in who may come to Christ.

Help students grasp the breadth of God's heart. There is no nation, race, or kind of person outside the reach of the gospel or beneath God's concern. The same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing His riches on all who call on Him (Romans 10:12). This truth should shape a church that welcomes all and a people who carry the gospel to everyone.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's impartiality, showing no favoritism by nation or status (vv. 34-35)
- The gospel for all nations, foreshadowed in Abraham (Genesis 12:3)
- Acceptable meaning welcomed toward the gospel, not already saved (Acts 11:14)
- The same Lord, Lord of all, rich to all who call on Him (Romans 10:12)
- The breaking of the Jew-Gentile dividing line in Christ

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that God shows no partiality?
- Why is it important to understand acceptable rightly, in light of Acts 11:14?
- How does God's impartiality define the scope of the gospel?

Question 2

Student Question:

God shows no partiality, but our hearts often do (vv. 34-35). Where do you notice favoritism or prejudice in yourself, treating people differently based on appearance, status, race, or background? How does God's impartiality call you to change?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

If God shows no partiality, then partiality in us is a serious flaw, a failure to reflect His heart. Yet favoritism comes naturally to us all. We instinctively treat people differently based on how they look, what they have, where they are from, or what they can do for us.

Invite honest self-examination. Whom do I favor and whom do I overlook? Do I treat the wealthy or impressive differently from the poor or ordinary? Do I carry prejudices, spoken or unspoken, toward certain races, classes, or kinds of people? James rebukes the church sharply for showing partiality (James 2:1-9), calling it sin.

Partiality contradicts the gospel. At the cross, all are equal, equally sinful, equally loved, equally welcome. To value some people over others based on outward things is to deny the very grace that saved us, for God did not choose us for our impressiveness.

Encourage one concrete change. Where do I need to repent of favoritism and begin treating people as God does, with equal dignity and love? Perhaps it means welcoming someone I have overlooked, laying down a prejudice, or examining how I speak about certain groups. A heart that reflects God's impartiality is a heart being conformed to Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Partiality in us as a failure to reflect God's heart
- Favoritism rebuked as sin (James 2:1-9)
- Equality of all at the cross
- Repentance from prejudice as conformity to Christ

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you notice favoritism or prejudice in yourself?
- How does partiality contradict the gospel?
- What is one way you could begin treating people as God does?

Question 3

Student Question:

In Peter's vision, God declared, what God has made clean, do not call common, overturning the old distinctions between clean and unclean (vv. 9-16, 28). What was God teaching Peter through this vision, and how does it relate to the old ceremonial law and to the barrier between Jew and Gentile?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Peter's vision of the sheet full of unclean animals, with the command to kill and eat, was deeply shocking to him. The food laws had marked Israel as separate from the nations for centuries. To eat unclean animals was unthinkable to a devout Jew. Yet God said three times, what God has made clean, do not call common.

The vision was not finally about food; Peter himself interprets it: God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean (v. 28). The clean and unclean distinction had served to keep Israel separate from the Gentile nations. God was now declaring that this barrier was removed; the Gentiles were not to be regarded as unclean and off-limits.

This relates to the passing of the old ceremonial law. The food laws, like the rest of the ceremonial system, were part of the Old Covenant that was fulfilled and set aside in Christ. Jesus had already declared all foods clean (Mark 7:19), and Paul teaches that the regulations about

food and ceremonial matters were a shadow of things to come, the substance belonging to Christ (Colossians 2:16-17). In Christ the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile is broken down (Ephesians 2:14-16).

Help students see the great transition. The ceremonial barriers that once separated God's people from the nations have been removed in Christ. There is now no clean and unclean distinction among peoples; all may come to God through the gospel on the same terms. The wall is down, and the gospel is for all.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The vision teaching that no person is to be called common or unclean (v. 28)
- The clean-unclean distinction as a barrier now removed in Christ
- The ceremonial food laws fulfilled and set aside (Mark 7:19; Colossians 2:16-17)
- The dividing wall between Jew and Gentile broken down (Ephesians 2:14-16)
- All peoples coming to God on the same terms through the gospel

Discussion Prompts

- What was God really teaching Peter through the vision?
- How does this relate to the old ceremonial law?
- What does it mean that the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile is broken down?

Question 4

Student Question:

God had to work to move Peter past barriers he had held his whole life (vv. 28-29). What barriers, prejudices, or categories of unclean people do you still maintain in your heart that God has already torn down? How might He be calling you to see and love them differently?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Peter was a good and devout man, yet he carried barriers so deep that it took a heavenly vision, repeated three times, and the direct prompting of the Spirit to move him past them. This is humbling: even sincere believers can hold prejudices they barely notice.

Invite honest reflection. What categories of people do I, perhaps unconsciously, treat as off-limits, unclean, or beyond my concern? They may be defined by lifestyle, politics, religion, background, reputation, or simple unfamiliarity. We all draw lines that God has erased.

God has already torn down these walls in Christ. The person I am tempted to keep at a distance is someone for whom Christ died, someone God loves and may be drawing to Himself. To maintain a barrier God has removed is to lag behind His heart.

Encourage one specific step. Whom is God calling me to see and love differently? Perhaps it means moving toward someone I have kept away, laying down a prejudice, or simply asking God to give me His heart for a group I have written off. Like Peter, we may need God to keep enlarging our hearts until they are as wide as His love.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Even sincere believers holding barely-noticed prejudices
- Barriers already torn down in Christ
- Every person as one for whom Christ died
- God enlarging the heart to match His love

Discussion Prompts

- What categories of unclean people do you still maintain in your heart?
- How does it change things to see them as people Christ died for?
- Whom is God calling you to see and love differently?

Question 5

Student Question:

Cornelius was devout, generous, and prayerful, yet he still needed Peter to come and tell him words by which he and his household would be saved (vv. 1-6; Acts 11:14). What does this teach about whether sincere, good people still need the gospel?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Cornelius is described in remarkable terms: devout, God-fearing, generous to the poor, praying continually. By any human measure he was a good and sincere man, and his prayers and gifts were noticed by God. If anyone might be thought not to need the gospel, it would be Cornelius.

Yet God sent an angel, who did not save Cornelius or even preach to him, but told him to send for Peter, who would tell him words by which he and his household would be saved (Acts 11:14). For all his sincerity and goodness, Cornelius was not yet saved and needed to hear and obey the gospel.

This teaches a vital truth: sincerity and moral goodness, however real, are not enough to save. People are saved through hearing and responding to the gospel of Christ, not through their own devoutness or good intentions apart from Him. There is salvation in no other name (Acts 4:12), and faith comes by hearing the word of Christ (Romans 10:17).

Help students apply this carefully and lovingly. We must not assume that sincere, moral, religious people are saved apart from the gospel. The kindest thing we can do for such a person is not to leave them in their sincerity but to bring them, as Peter was brought to Cornelius, the words by which they may be saved. Good people need the gospel too.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sincerity and moral goodness as insufficient to save
- Cornelius needing words by which to be saved (Acts 11:14)
- Salvation through hearing and obeying the gospel (Romans 10:17)
- No salvation in any other name (Acts 4:12)
- The kindness of bringing the gospel to the sincere

Discussion Prompts

- Why did a devout, praying man like Cornelius still need the gospel?
- What does this teach about sincere, good people today?
- Why is it loving, not arrogant, to bring the gospel to such people?

Question 6

Student Question:

An angel did not preach the gospel to Cornelius but sent for Peter to do it, and Cornelius needed someone to tell him the way of salvation (vv. 5-6, 22). Do you sometimes assume that sincere or moral people do not need to hear about Christ? How ready are you to share the gospel with such a person?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

It is striking that God used an angel to arrange the meeting but entrusted the actual preaching of the gospel to a human being, Peter. God has chosen to spread the good news through people, and Cornelius needed someone willing to come and tell him.

We often hesitate to share the gospel with sincere, moral, religious people precisely because they seem fine as they are. We assume that good people must be alright with God, and so we keep silent, mistaking our reluctance for respect.

Yet Cornelius reminds us that such people still need the gospel, and that God may have been preparing their hearts, as He prepared Cornelius's, long before we arrive. Our part is to be willing, like Peter, to go and speak the words by which they may be saved.

Invite students to examine their readiness. Is there a sincere, good person in my life whom I have assumed does not need Christ? Am I prepared to share the gospel clearly if the opportunity comes? Encourage them to identify such a person, to pray for them, and to be ready to speak, trusting that God may already be at work in their heart.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God spreading the gospel through willing people
- The temptation to assume good people need no gospel

- God preparing hearts before we arrive
- Readiness to share the gospel clearly

Discussion Prompts

- Do you assume sincere or moral people do not need to hear about Christ?
- Is there such a person in your life right now?
- How ready are you to share the gospel clearly with them?

Question 7

Student Question:

Peter preached the heart of the gospel to Cornelius: Jesus' ministry, His death on the cross, His resurrection, His appointment as judge, and forgiveness of sins through His name (vv. 36-43). What are the essential elements of the gospel Peter preached, and why does each matter?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Peter's sermon to Cornelius is a compact summary of the gospel, and it is worth tracing its elements. He preaches the ministry of Jesus, anointed with the Holy Spirit and power, going about doing good and healing (v. 38). He preaches the cross, they put him to death by hanging him on a tree (v. 39). He preaches the resurrection, God raised him on the third day and made him to appear to chosen witnesses (vv. 40-41). He preaches Christ as the appointed judge of the living and the dead (v. 42). And he preaches forgiveness of sins through his name to everyone who believes (v. 43).

Each element matters. The ministry of Jesus shows who He is, the good and powerful Son of God. The cross is the heart of the gospel, where He bore our sins. The resurrection is God's vindication and the ground of our hope. His appointment as judge means we will all answer to Him and must be ready. And forgiveness through His name is the offer held out to all who believe.

This gives us a model of the gospel we are to share. It centers on Jesus, His person, His death, His resurrection, His lordship and coming judgment, and His offer of forgiveness. The gospel is good news about what God has done in Christ, calling for a response.

Help students know this gospel well. We cannot share what we cannot articulate. Peter's sermon shows the essential message: who Jesus is, what He did in His death and resurrection, His authority as Lord and judge, and the forgiveness available in His name. This is the message that saves.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The ministry of Jesus, doing good in the power of God (v. 38)
- The cross as the heart of the gospel (v. 39)

- The resurrection as vindication and ground of hope (vv. 40-41)
- Christ as the appointed judge of all (v. 42)
- Forgiveness of sins through His name for those who believe (v. 43)

Discussion Prompts

- What are the essential elements of the gospel Peter preached?
- Why does each element matter?
- How would you summarize the gospel to someone who asked?

Question 8

Student Question:

Peter was able to clearly explain who Jesus is and what He has done (vv. 36-43). Could you explain the gospel clearly if someone asked you today? What would it take for you to be better prepared to share the good news?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Peter could preach the gospel because he knew it deeply and had lived it. Many believers, by contrast, feel unprepared to explain the good news clearly, and that lack of readiness keeps them silent when opportunities come.

Invite honest self-assessment. If someone asked me to explain the gospel right now, could I do it clearly, who Jesus is, why He died and rose, and how a person responds to Him? Or would I fumble, unsure how to put it into words? There is no shame in admitting we need to grow here.

Being prepared is not about memorizing a script but about knowing the message well enough to share it naturally. This comes through studying the gospel, learning the key passages, perhaps practicing how we would explain it, and being ready to give a reason for the hope that is in us (1 Peter 3:15).

Encourage one concrete step toward readiness. Perhaps it is to study Peter's sermon and others like it, to learn the conversion accounts in Acts, to write out how they would explain the gospel, or to practice with a fellow believer. The better we know the good news, the more freely we will share it when God brings a Cornelius across our path.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Knowing the gospel well enough to share it
- Readiness as a barrier or aid to witness
- Giving a reason for our hope (1 Peter 3:15)
- Preparation through study of the gospel

Discussion Prompts

- Could you explain the gospel clearly if someone asked today?
- Where do you feel least prepared?
- What is one step that would better prepare you to share the good news?

Question 9

Student Question:

While Peter was still preaching, the Holy Spirit fell on Cornelius's household, and yet Peter immediately commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (vv. 44-48). Why was the Spirit poured out in this special way, and what does it mean that these believers were still commanded to be baptized even after receiving the Spirit?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, and it must be taught carefully on two points. Both concern what happens when the Spirit falls on Cornelius's household and Peter responds by commanding baptism.

First, why was the Spirit poured out in this special, visible way? The key is the reaction of the Jewish believers: they were amazed that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles (v. 45). This outpouring, like the one at Pentecost, was a special sign for a specific purpose: it was God's public confirmation that the Gentiles were to be received into the church on equal terms with the Jews. Peter later explains that the Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning, and this is how he knew God had accepted the Gentiles (Acts 11:15-17; 15:8-9). The point of the outpouring was not to teach that every believer receives the Spirit this way; it was God's dramatic seal on the inclusion of the Gentiles. We must not turn this exceptional, confirming sign into the normative pattern for how people receive the Spirit. The lesson of the account is that the gospel is for all nations.

Second, and crucially, notice what Peter does after the Spirit falls: he commands them to be baptized. Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (vv. 47-48). This is enormously significant for our understanding of salvation. Even though these Gentiles had received this remarkable sign of the Spirit, Peter did not regard them as finished. He still commanded them to be baptized. If receiving the Spirit, or believing, were all that was needed, baptism would have been unnecessary. But it was not optional; Peter commanded it.

This refutes salvation by faith only and the idea that the Spirit's coming replaces baptism. Some argue that if a person has the Spirit, baptism is just an outward symbol that adds nothing. But Peter, with the Spirit visibly poured out before his eyes, still commanded baptism in the name of Jesus Christ. Baptism remains the God-appointed response to the gospel, even here. The whole pattern of Acts holds: people hear, believe, repent, confess, and are baptized into Christ for the

forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; 22:16). Cornelius's household is no exception; they too were commanded to be baptized.

Help students hold both truths firmly. The outpouring of the Spirit on the Gentiles was a special, confirming sign that they were to be received, not a model for how everyone receives the Spirit. And the command to baptize, even after that sign, shows that baptism is essential and not optional. The God who shows no partiality opened the door to the Gentiles, and He brought them in by the same door as everyone else: through baptism into Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Spirit's outpouring as God's confirmation that Gentiles were to be received (vv. 45-47; Acts 11:15-17)
- An exceptional, confirming sign, not the normative way believers receive the Spirit
- The point of the account: the gospel is for all nations
- Baptism commanded even after the Spirit fell (vv. 47-48)
- The refutation of salvation by faith only and of baptism as a mere optional symbol
- The consistent conversion pattern upheld for the Gentiles (Acts 2:38; 22:16)

Discussion Prompts

- Why was the Spirit poured out in this special way on Cornelius's household?
- Why is it a mistake to treat this outpouring as the normal way everyone receives the Spirit?
- What does Peter's command to be baptized, even after the Spirit fell, teach about the necessity of baptism?

Question 10

Student Question:

Looking back over this whole account, God's impartiality, the broken barriers, the gospel preached, and the Gentiles brought into Christ, name one specific way the Lord is calling you to respond, in laying down prejudice, in sharing the gospel, or in obedience, and what is one step you will take this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone draws the lesson to a personal response. Acts 10 calls us to reflect God's impartiality, to lay down our prejudices, to bring the gospel even to the sincere and good, to know and share the good news, and to take seriously the Lord's command to be baptized into Christ.

Invite each person to name one concrete step. Perhaps it is to repent of a favoritism or prejudice, to move toward someone they have kept at a distance, to prepare to share the gospel with a sincere person, or, for anyone who has not, to obey the gospel in baptism.

Keep the focus on the breadth of God's heart. This account expands our vision of who the gospel is for, everyone, and humbles our narrow hearts. Transformation means coming to love and reach people the way God does.

Close by reminding students that the same God who broke down the wall between Jew and Gentile, who shows no partiality, and who opened the door of faith to the nations is at work in them, enlarging their hearts and sending them with good news for all.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal response to God's impartiality and the gospel for all
- Laying down prejudice and favoritism
- Sharing the gospel and obeying the Lord's commands
- A heart enlarged to love as God loves

Discussion Prompts

- What most challenged or moved you in this account?
- What specific step toward laying down prejudice, sharing the gospel, or obedience will you take?
- How can this group encourage and pray for you?