

Eat what you like

Acts 11:1-18

Do you know what I mean if I talk about the 'in crowd'? Sometimes in life there is an in-crowd, and a *not-in* crowd. Have you ever had that experience where you feel excluded? Perhaps you're going to a gathering of people where you really don't know many people (or anyone)... It can be quite intimidating! If you feel like everyone knows each other already, they already have their groups of friends sorted out, they go way back(!) you can feel excluded and on the outside, even before you talk to anyone.

Imagine how a black person might feel walking up to and meeting a new group of only white people. Or a white person a group of only black people. Can you imagine it? Can you feel that there's a 'something there' – something we would feel, about being in and out. Imagine perhaps a man trying to go up to and join in conversation with a group of women. Or as a woman trying to break into an all-boys group. We might feel it with age... when you see a group of teenagers, or 'youff', that you just can't be a part of their conversation, that you're necessarily on the outside. Now, you may not mind that with the 'youff', but you get the idea don't you, about the in-crowd, and feeling excluded. It's not a nice feeling, being excluded, being on the outside, it's not nice to feel different and like you don't belong, we all want to belong.

Now take that situation and that feeling, and think about God! Some people think that God, has an in-crowd, a group of his chums who he likes to keep close to him, a group into which they cannot come – they feel excluded. How awful is that! If we think it's bad being excluded from a certain group of *people* – imagine how awful it would be to be excluded from closeness and familiarity and friendship with *God*. I think it would be excruciatingly painful to think that I cannot come close to God, because I'm just the wrong type of person, and I need to be more like *that* person over there.

Well, today's passage is not *just* the story about how God led someone from his out-crowd, into his in-crowd! It's actually about how God taught Peter, the first leader of the church, and God teaches us today, there **is no** in-crowd and out-crowd with God. God has no favourites! Anyone can come to him, no matter how 'in' they are/ no matter what they're like, no matter what they've done, he welcomes them.

Now I want us to *see this from the passage*, and I want us *to feel* the privilege and joy that we can be included (and come to God). And to marvel at what a kind God we have. We're going to walk through the story to see it, and then I'm going to draw out some lessons for us today. Our passage in chapter 11 is, if you like, the debrief after the event.

All the action happens in chapter 10, and in chapter 11 most of it is repeated exactly, as Peter returns to Jerusalem and explains to the church what happened.

So, as we set up the story, notice **the in-crowd and the out-crowd**.

Look at verse 1

¹The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that **the Gentiles** also had received the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, **the circumcised** [Jewish background] **believers criticized him** ³ and said, “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.””

Can you feel the animosity? The groups are Jews and Gentiles (which just means non-Jews). In chapter 10 we learn that Cornelius is a Roman centurion, so he’s a well-known and powerful man, *and not a Jew*. Peter *is* a Jew! Now the difference between Jews and Gentiles is so great, that according to the Jewish law, “Jews must not associate with or visit a Gentile”. They can’t even go into their houses! They shouldn’t hang out with them. Jews are the in-crowd, and Gentiles are out! And God, is the God of the Jews! That means, that if you’re a gentile, you are kept away from God. Actually that’s even physically seen in the temple(!) in Jewish law the gentiles could come into the outer court, but only Jews could come *inside, in* to the place where they could meet with God. So look at how it’s put in v2, “they **criticized** peter, saying “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.””

“What are you doing Peter! You got it wrong Peter!” Do you see? In their minds, there is a very clear in-crowd and out-crowd with God. And actually that’s how Peter thought at the start. But God taught him that that’s wrong.

Just before we move on in the story, let me point out how interesting it is that they criticize Peter. Peter is not just anyone – he’s the leader of the church, an Apostle, Jesus said “on this Peter/this Rock, I will build my church”, he’s a big-cheese. Just before this incident he has done two miracles, healing a man called Aeneas who was paralysed and bed-ridden for 8 years, and raising a lady called Tabitha from the dead. This is not normal stuff! Peter is special, he’s an apostle! Yet they are happy to criticise him, why, because they believe he has gone against God, and it is God and not Peter who is the authority here.

So what does Peter say? Have a look down at v4

⁴ Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story: ⁵

“I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision”

In chapter 10 we actually find out that Peter is waiting for his lunch and he’s really hungry. He’s up on the roof in the heat, wanting his lunch, and as he’s praying he falls into a trance:

“I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. [we’re supposed to think ‘*tablecloth*’]

⁶ I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles and birds.

[*All things which aren’t kosher, which a Jew shouldn’t eat*]

⁷ Then I heard a voice telling me, ‘Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.’

⁸ “I replied, ‘Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’

And as Peter is telling this story, we need to appreciate that all the Jews who were listening would have felt disgust at the idea of eating pork and bacon and so on. This isn’t a nice little

day-dream about some tasty food just before lunch – it seems more like a temptation to disobedience, a moment of conflict! Will he break the kosher food laws?

⁹ “The voice spoke from heaven a second time, ‘**Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.**’

It’s a shock, Peter wasn’t expecting that, this isn’t something he wanted, it wasn’t his idea. He makes clear that God is the one who is initiating this change.

¹⁰ “This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again.”

Just as Peter denied Jesus 3 times when the cock crowed, and just as Jesus asked him 3 times “Peter do you love me”, and Peter was 3 times restored.

So here, 3 times God tells Peter “not to call impure something he has made pure”.

That is, not to rule *out* something God has ruled *in*.

And here, ruling *in* bacon and pork, is a new thing.

But for Peter, the leader of the church, this vision is just the start.

He hasn’t even had his lunch yet, he’s just on the roof wondering what this all means, when seemingly at exactly the same time 2 things happen.

1. Cornelius’ men arrive at the gate and shout out “is this where Simon called Peter is staying?”
2. Somehow the Holy Spirit ‘tells’ Peter that 3 men are looking for him, sent by God, and he should go with them.

(we get a little more detail in chapter 10)

And Peter is saying – “this isn’t just coincidence, isn’t this amazing, this is what God was up to”

Look at v 11:

¹¹ “**Right then** three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea [a full day’s journey away] stopped at the house where I was staying. ¹² The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them.

That’s the second thing, now we’ve seen Peter’s dream, and God’s orchestration.

Next Peter makes the journey, and look v12 how he takes 6 witnesses with him.

6 other trustworthy brothers in the faith go with him and see what happens.

And what does he find when he arrives.

He finds people whom God had already prepared in their hearts to listen to him, to really listen and believe him.

v13 [Cornelius] told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, ‘Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. ¹⁴ **He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.**’

And Cornelius had done just that.

God had prepared the way, just another part of what convinced Peter, that God was bringing about this change!

Then lastly, the biggest thing, the moment **Pentecost repeated itself**, and the Holy Spirit came, and this time upon the gentiles...

¹⁵ “As I began to speak, *[and he was preaching and explaining about Jesus and the cross]* the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. ¹⁶ **Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’**¹⁷ So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?”

The final piece for Peter, which persuaded him without any doubt, was that the Holy Spirit came on those Gentile believers, and God was the one who did it.

People can baptise with water, but only God can baptise with the Holy Spirit, and so, remarkably, surprisingly, in a way outside of Peter’s expectations: God had included these Gentiles into his people. The outsiders(!) the out-crowd, have been brought into the in-crowd.

And who was Peter to think any different!

Peter explained all this, I’m sure to gasps, and oooh’s and aaa’s(!) and the early church and it’s leaders rejoiced! “wow, praise God, he really has brought them in, wow, anyone can be one of God’s people now, woah this is huge” they say –

¹⁸ When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, **even to Gentiles** God has granted repentance that leads to life.”

There aren’t boundaries, the isn’t an in-crowd and an out-crowd.

Anyone can repent, ask for forgiveness in Jesus’ name, and turning to him in faith, be brought into God’s family.

That’s the story!

And these amazing events, the coming of the Holy Spirit on the gentiles (a bit like a second Pentecost) still has some great things to teach us today.

And it’s not *just* that there are no clean/unclean foods anymore – so we can all eat pork and bacon and know we aren’t going against God.

It’s that there are no clean/unclean people.

Or put more clearly: There are no ‘in’ groups and ‘out’ groups within the Christian faith.

But I wonder, is that actually how people view the church?

Sadly I don’t think so. I think that people from the outside look at churches and what they think is exactly that: Church is an exclusive club. Not just anyone can join. You have to act a certain way, think a certain way, dress a certain way and so on.

And who wants to join an exclusive club when they won’t fit in? Especially when it’s expensive – which many will think it is in various ways. No one wants to join that! Would you?

But that’s not the truth! There are no ‘in’ groups or ‘out’ groups within the Christian faith, and here are some of the consequences:

1. Anyone can become one of God's people.

Please don't feel like you can't become one of God's children!

Please don't think that you are too different, or you are too bad, or you can't be like this or that. *Anyone* can become one of God's people.

Cornelius was an outsider, if he had gone to the temple, they wouldn't have let him come past the very outer court. He was cut off.

But by believing in Jesus, through faith in him... following him... he was forgiven, God gave him his Holy Spirit, and he became part of the people of God, and you can too!

Listen, some people think that as long as you're nice, and a good person, you'll be alright with God.

But Cornelius was a really really good guy! And if he hadn't turned to God, if he hadn't come to faith in Jesus he would have stayed cut off from God, and one day it would have become permanent. Cornelius really needed to hear about Jesus – that's why God brought Peter to him.

Everyone is *invited* in, and anyone can come, so come!

If you're not a Christian, God invites you, through faith in Christ, to come to him, you *can* become one of his people.

And if you already are, this is a great reminder to us, that no one is too far from God, no one is in a place where they cannot come to God.

You might think of a particular friend, or family member. Well if they want to they can come to God through faith in Jesus, he invites them, they can come.

2. If you have faith in Jesus, you are a **full** member of God's people

It's not uncommon that people feel that they are second-class Christians.

I don't know if you've ever felt that? Perhaps you look at other people in church, and you see their gifts, or perhaps their passion for God, and think "I'm just not as good as them".

Peter had to learn that God didn't have favourites.

If you are a Christian, God accepts you and sees you as perfect, because of Jesus' blood shed for you! *That* is why you can come to him.

Now that is true of the super-duper Christian who you watch and think they are so amazing, and it's true for you. (By the way, if you see someone like that then you don't know the whole truth of what's going on in their lives and hearts)

You mustn't feel like you aren't a full part of God's people!

You are, he loves you and treasures you, and you are in his family. There are no second class Christians, you're a full member!

That means we don't need to feel we have to become like someone else at church, we don't. We *do* all need to change, (God takes us as we are, but doesn't leave us as we are) but we need to change to be more like **Jesus**, and become more the individuals God wants us to be.

3. The flip side of that: Don't think that you have any greater favour from God than any other Christian.

The really disastrous thing which Peter and the early church were saved from thinking, was that Jews were God's favourites.

(And they weren't)

We too, **mustn't** look down on other Christians. Some people even teach that there are 'special' Christians who have received the Holy Spirit, and normal Christians who haven't, nonsense.

There aren't different tiers of Christian: If you have faith in Jesus, you are a **full** member of God's people, and so is someone else. They are loved by God because of Jesus, just like you. So we mustn't look down on them and feel that we are more favoured by God, perhaps because of a particular way we behave, or way we think.

We mustn't accidentally slip into thinking **we're** God's favourites, because we're not, God doesn't have favourites – We're all loved the same!

Lastly 4. What a wonderful God we have.

I saved this for last because I think this is the most important thing for us to notice and take from this passage.

God here is keeping his promises, and he's doing amazing things to rescue and save people's souls, isn't that great! God loves to save!

God sends an angel to Cornelius with instructions, he calls Peter in a vision, and he ensures a whole crowd of people are gathered, some of Cornelius' friends and family, and Peter's friends, other followers of Jesus – all get together to witness God pouring out his Holy Spirit on gentiles and saving them, just as he'd promised hundreds of years before.

I say just as he'd promised (although the Jews seemed to forget it), it was always God's intention to save anyone, he never had favourites, and he hasn't changed his mind or his plan.

So as we finish, I'm going to read to you from Isaiah 49:6 where God says this about Jesus: (Isaiah 49:6) "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of [Israel]. I will **also** make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

It's not glorious enough just to save the Jews, Jesus needs to save *anyone* who would come to faith in him.

And that's exactly what Jesus does, brings salvation to the very ends of the earth, so that people far far away, as far as Russia, as far as Australia, and as far as the United Kingdom, no matter who they are, can come to God through faith in Jesus, and be saved.