**What God Makes Clean (A God of All Peoples)**

Acts 11:1-18 on March 21, 2021

Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson

*Please Read Acts 11:1-18 before going further in this transcript.*

After driving old minivans around for the past 20 years or so, God blessed me this week with a new truck. Well, actually it’s a used truck, but it’s new to me. It’s a 2017 Honda Ridgeline. I bought this truck from a guy I’d never met before, a guy named Ivan. On the day I was closing the deal with Ivan, I learned that he is from Moldova. Moldova is located right between Romania and Ukraine. Ivan explained that he came from a Russian background because Moldova is in Eastern Europe, and it had been part of the former Soviet republic. In Ivan’s words, “Russia was atheist, you weren’t allowed to believe in God.” All of a sudden, our business conversation turned into a spiritual conversation. Ivan began telling me that HE was a follower of Jesus! And that’s actually why I’m sharing this story: it turns out that Ivan, the car salesman from Moldova, is also a Deacon at his Romanian Baptist Church. My wife, Debbie, was also there with me and the three of us ended up having the most wonderful and encouraging conversation with this Brother in Christ. Ivan was SO excited about Jesus and the Bible and what God was doing in/through his local church. As Debbie and I drove away, we felt remarkably blessed to have had this time of Christian fellowship with someone from such a remarkably different racial and cultural background. We were amazed once again by God’s amazing grace and by this reminder of how God is at work among all nations and all peoples. Today we’re going to focus on how God has intentionally designed the gospel to be a gospel for ALL peoples; peoples from different nations, races, cultures, tribes, and tongues.

Please turn/click in your Bible to Acts 10:34. The verses that you just read in Acts 11, are directly connected back to Acts 10. We talked about this two weeks ago, when we learned about a man named Cornelius and some other Gentiles who were with him. We learned about how they heard the message of salvation from Peter and responded to it in faith. In the midst of all this, we watched Peter learn a valuable lesson back in Acts 10:34-35, “Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.” Notice that word nation.[[1]](#footnote-1) The Greek word is “Ethnos” (ἔθνος), a group of people united by culture and common traditions, a nation, or a people.[[2]](#footnote-2) [[3]](#footnote-3) When Peter realizes this truth, “that God does not show favoritism,” he sees it, at least in part, through a national lens. Even though he himself had a preference for his own Jewish “ethnos,” he was beginning to see more clearly, that God accepts people from every “ethnos.” In other words, not only was Peter learning that he needed to accept UNCIRCUMCISED Gentiles, but also that he needed to accept Gentiles FROM EVERY NATION. In fact, that’s what a Gentile is, a non-Jew, or we could even say, someone from another nation. Gentiles made up all the other nations.

Peter ends up catching some flak for this! Acts 11:1-3 begins, “The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers… […rejoiced in this good news! Ok, no, not really.] …criticized him and said, “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.” This reference to the “circumcised believers” in v. 2, is just another way of saying “Jewish Christians.” The fact is, in the early days of the church, almost every Christian was Jewish, and had been circumcised.[[4]](#footnote-4) These particular circumcised believers were some of the more conservative “Jewish Christians in Jerusalem… [They] believed that Gentiles should become Jews [that they should…] (be circumcised and keep the OT law) in order to be saved.” This will come out even more clearly when we get to Acts 15. In their view, if [the] Gentiles are [going] to join the believing community, [then] they MUST become like Jews.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Therefore, while much of their concern was focused on ceremonial cleanliness, their concern was also connected to their nationalistic expectation, that these other “ethnos,” should become more like their “Jewish ethnos.”

This immediately begs the question: “To what extent might we be committing this same kind of error today in our church, E-Free Bemidji? To what extent are you and I asking other people to become more like us BEFORE we allow them to join our church community? Perhaps we’ve criticized someone for wearing the “wrong” clothes, or for having hair that’s too long or too short, or for having a tattoo, or for just being too different in some other way. For not speaking English well, or having customs that seem strange to us. We need to be careful that we don’t add conditions to the gospel of grace. Maybe we haven’t quite said it out loud, but perhaps in our hearts/minds we’d really prefer that people conform to our standards and norms first, BEFORE they walk in the doors of this Sanctuary. Only then do we feel comfortable with someone coming in the doors of our church, and joining this fellowship of believers. Acts 10-11 force us to reconsider these kinds of attitudes and ministry approaches. Just because someone doesn’t look the way we do or follow the same religious traditions that we do, that doesn’t make them unacceptable to God. We need to be incredibly careful not to make too big of a deal, about outward appearances, or any kind of “rules for membership” in our elite Christian Club. To be clear, none of this is to suggest that we ignore sin, but it is to suggest, that we not make a similar kind of mistake, to the one some of the Jewish Christians were making in Jerusalem.

Back in Acts 10:28 Peter said, “…You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean.” Peter later clarifies, as we’ve already read in Acts 10:35, that God accepts people from EVERY nation (ethnos).[[6]](#footnote-6) Not just the Jewish nation, but EVERY nation. Every nation, every people, every tribe, every tongue. Revelation 5:9 celebrates this with a new song to Jesus, “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

News about these new Gentile believers had traveled fast; criticism had traveled even faster. Rather than rejoicing in these new bros/sis in Christ, the Jewish believers criticized Peter for associating with them.[[8]](#footnote-8) [[9]](#footnote-9) Now, to be fair, the Jews had spent hundreds of years being told they were a holy nation, set apart from other nations. This was an extremely controversial direction for Peter to take, seemingly unilaterally. Peter hadn’t consulted with the church leadership before he went to Caesarea to meet with Cornelius and the other Gentiles. Peter knew that his behavior was way out of the norm; he said so himself back in Acts 10:28, “…it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile….”[[10]](#footnote-10) And yet, he still went. He went because God sent Him.

He went because he was obeying God. Now, we shouldn’t think that God is doing something entirely brand new here. What God is doing is bringing greater clarity to the plan that He’s had from the very beginning. In fact, God’s plan for all nations goes back as far as Genesis 12:3, when God promised Abraham, “…all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” And in Genesis 22:18 God told him,

“and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.” Including the Gentiles in the gospel did NOT come out of nowhere; God has ALWAYS been concerned for ALL nations and ALL peoples. In other words, these circumcised believers weren’t just criticizing Peter… without knowing it, they were openly criticizing the divine initiative of God Himself.[[11]](#footnote-11) So Peter graciously tells them what’s going on.

In Acts 11:4-15, Peter briefly recounts how God worked in/through the events in Acts 10. Since we covered most of this 2 Sundays ago, let’s just summarize the main points: Peter tells them about being in Joppa and seeing something like a sheet being lowered down from heaven with all kinds of animals in it. He tells them about the voice from heaven that told him to eat, and about his refusal to eat anything unclean. Then how 3x he heard the same thing:

“Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

“Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

“Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

Peter then mentions the three men who showed up at his door and how the Holy Spirit told him to go w/ them. Peter explains that when he arrived in Caesarea, Cornelius told him about the angel who had appeared to him. That he’d sent for Peter, so that they could hear the message of salvation.

In Acts 11:15-16 Peter concludes, “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. [referring back to Pentecost in Acts 2] Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’” [Referring to Jesus’ words back in Acts 1:5] Peter notes 4 particular supernatural acts of God:

1. The Gentiles speaking in tongues. 2. The angel who appeared to Cornelius.

3. The Holy Spirit telling Peter to go with them. 4. The voice from heaven.

Now, despite Peter’s authoritative position as an Apostle, he appeals instead to God’s authority. In other words, we don’t hear Peter saying anything like, “Hey, I’m an Apostle, you should just take my word for it!” The fact is, this was NOT Peter’s idea in the first place; this was God’s idea ALL along. That’s why He sent the gift of tongues, the visions, the HS, and the angel.

Peter then delivers the knockout punch, to those who had criticized both him AND God. In Acts 11:17 Peter asks them, “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?” Can’t you just hear the room go dead quiet at this point? “Well Peter, when you put it THAT way!” Their change of heart is immediate in Acts 11:18, “When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, even to Gentiles [even to Moldovans, even to fill in the blank… \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_] God has granted repentance that leads to life.”

If only this attitude of “no further objections” had lasted. After reading Acts 11:18, you’d think that the question of Gentile inclusion would be completely settled, once and for all. Unfortunately, it was not settled. Instead, we find Peter himself was still wrestling with how to live out this change. In the book of Galatians we learn that Peter lapses back into his old pattern, of favoring his fellow Jews over his Gentile bros/sis in Christ. The Apostle Paul has to later call Peter out in Galatians 2:12 because “…[Peter] began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.” Paul confronts Peter in front of everyone and asks him in Galatians 2:14, “…How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?”

Peter is not the only Jewish Christian who needed a little more time to wrap his head around this though. We’ll also see the ongoing struggle with this when we get to the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. Here we’ll find a lengthy discussion and intense debate, over how to settle this very same issue of Gentile inclusion. At that council, Peter will once more refer back to the events of Acts 10.[[12]](#footnote-12) Not only does Peter once again recount a summary of his encounter with Cornelius, but he clarifies once again that Gentiles are saved by grace just as the Jews are.

John Stott brings the application right into our present day: “Even after that, the same ugly sin of discrimination has kept reappearing in the church, in the form of racism… nationalism… tribalism… [and] social and cultural snobbery…. All such discrimination is inexcusable… in the Christian community it is both an obscenity (because [its] offensive to human dignity) and a blasphemy (because [its] offensive to God who accepts without discrimination all who repent and believe). Like Peter, [in Acts 10:34] we have to learn that ‘God does not show favoritism’.”[[13]](#footnote-13) [[14]](#footnote-14) God’s gospel is for ALL people and it is unstoppable.[[15]](#footnote-15) So no matter who criticizes God for how He chooses to work in our world, He is the One who is sovereignly calling the shots.

The fact is, it’s NOT easy for us to get along with people who are different than us. People who look different, speak differently, and think differently. And yet, all of this is part of God’s design. This is not just God’s design for the world at large, it’s also His design for the local church. God has designed the church to be a united body of believers, from every people, nation, tribe, and tongue.[[16]](#footnote-16) [[17]](#footnote-17) It’s only been recently in my own personal life, that I’ve truly begun to appreciate the beauty, of different people groups. Growing up in northern WI, I grew up pretty Anglo. Although I lived in the midst of some Native peoples, I wasn’t friends with any Natives, or with anyone who came from a different people group. Just about everyone who attended our local church was Anglo. In fact, quite possibly EVERYONE who attended, 100% were white. I had no idea how racially/culturally poor I was. How desperate my poverty of access to different people groups truly was. One of the things that God used to open my eyes was blessing me with seven different short-term mission trips to MX. As best as I can remember, I’ve been to Tijuana, Ensenada, Juarez, Monterrey, Reynosa, and Matamoros, MX.[[18]](#footnote-18)

I actually led a trip from E-Free Bemidji down to Ensenada, MX back in 2009. While there we met an amazing young Christian man named, Felipe. As one of our translators, Felipe helped us learn some Spanish phrases. He also taught us a LOT about following Jesus. Each and every time I’ve gone to MX, I’ve been deeply blessed to meet some new brothers and sisters in Christ on the other side of the border. These men and women had so much to teach me about godly contentment, about love for community, and about finding joy in the Lord.

**So here are 2 suggestions for spiritual growth in the area of All Peoples:**

1) Read “Right Color, Wrong Culture” by Bryan Loritts.[[19]](#footnote-19) It’s a fable that was written to get us thinking about how to be the multiethnic church that God intends us to be.

2) Intentionally develop a close friendship with someone from a different people group. Don’t consider this just a token friendship, but rather as an opportunity for God to teach you something. You may be surprised what God has to teach you, through that one particular, unique relationship. It has been SUCH a blessing, for an Anglo named “Jerry JOHNSON” to meet some Christian friends from Mexico and Moldova, with names like “Felipe” and “Ivan.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Each of them is a precious Brother in the Lord. Each of them has taught me something about living for God. Things I’ve not learned, from my Anglo friends.

1. The Greek word that is translated “nation” can also be translated “Gentile.” In fact, it is in Acts 11:1, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sometimes “ethnos” is used to specifically refer to Gentiles who are foreigners to Israel. Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature (3rd ed., p. 276). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Therefore, Bible translators have their work cut out for them. They have to pay careful attention to the immediate context, which then helps them know which particular English word to choose when translating the word “ethnos.” In fact, “ethnos” can be used not only to refer to the GENTILES but also to the JEWS, both were groups of people united by culture and common traditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Especially in its early days, most Christians were circumcised Jews. Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 406. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Acts 15:1. Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 407. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Later in Acts 15:9 Peter says, “He did not discriminate between us and them….” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Also consider Revelation 7:9-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. When Peter “ate with them” it was more than simply associating with them. In Jewish culture, eating with a person was an indication that you accepted that person and approved of them. (*The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1735 footnote on Luke 15:2.) See 1 Corinthians 5:11. This kind of contact with a Gentile threatened to make a Jew ceremonially unclean. In other words, it would temporarily prevent them from certain religious practices and opportunities. It’s hard to think of a modern-equivalent to this, because we just don’t tend to practice our faith this way. The closest thing I can think of, is getting sprayed by a skunk and deciding to skip church that weekend. For the Jews, it was much more serious though. Gentiles were to be avoided because they could make you spiritually unclean and unacceptable to God. See John 18:28 and consider Genesis 17:9-14 and Leviticus 22:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. They don’t seem to show him much respect, regardless of his leadership position. It seems like it would have been more appropriate for them to be a little more gracious; to gently ask Peter, “hey could we get a cup of coffee some time and talk about a few things?” You see, raising an honest objection and asking for clarification was completely understandable. We shouldn’t be at all surprised that, “the church would have found such a revolutionary move initially controversial, which would require a defense of its legitimacy and a justification for this new avenue of ministry.” Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 405. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Notice here that Peter didn’t say “someone who is uncircumcised” but rather more broadly a Gentile. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 404. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Acts 15:7-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990, p. 197. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. God’s redemptive plan was moving forward; the Gospel was advancing among all peoples. You see, Acts chapters 1-11 and following, are just one step in a much larger plan. This is all part of a much larger story, reaching back to eternity past and forward to eternity future. From all the way back in Genesis 12:3, to all the way forward in Revelation 5. In fact, we can go all the way forward past the end of this world and all the way back even before the creation of this world. Ephesians 1:4 says that God chose us before the creation of the world. He chose both Jews/Gentiles, people from every nation, before He even created this world. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Acts 5:39 and 5:42. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. A writer named Darrell Bock summarizes this passage this way: “Jesus brings reconciliation not only with God but also between people. The new community will be diverse in makeup, equal in status, and called to reflect peace with one another.” (Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 410) This should cause us to ask, “does this describe E-Free Bemidji? Are we diverse in makeup? Are we equal in status? Are we reflecting peace with one another?” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Passages like Acts 11 deepen my burden for greater racial diversity here at E-Free Bemidji. We do enjoy some diversity, but probably not to the degree that reflects our local community. All of this causes me to wonder what the make-up of the early church looked like. What I mean is this: did they have some local churches where Jewish Christians worshipped and other local churches where Gentile Christians worshipped? Or, were they all blended together under one roof? [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. “Hablo un poco de Español.” (I speak a little Spanish.) [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Learn more at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/right-color-wrong-culture/> [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Not to mention “Little Elk” and “Mohammad.” [↑](#footnote-ref-20)