

Sunday 21st April 2024

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 21 April 2024

Preacher: John Stevens

[0 : 00] Well, if you could keep your Bibles open at that kind of passage in Acts 10. Thanks so much for reading it for me, Johan. The Garrick Club in London has been very much in the news in the past couple of weeks. The Garrick Club was founded in 1831.

It's kind of focuses theatre land and kind of actors. And it's a kind of a London club to which a number of very important, powerful and significant people belong.

It's not just actors, but it's clear that senior members of the civil service, members of the judiciary are part of this kind of club.

And the reason why it's attracted attention and indeed significant criticism is because the Garrick Club is a club that still only allows men to become members.

It's been a kind of an ongoing issue amongst the membership of the Garrick Club. A recent vote proposing that women could join the club was lost.

[1 : 02] So for the moment, it remains an exclusively kind of male club. And of course, that has attracted a great deal of criticism. We live in a culture in which there's an expectation of diversity and inclusion.

There's a feeling that this club, which is for men only, means that these powerful individuals come together and make decisions from which women are excluded. So there's significant pressure on the members of the club to change the rules.

Stephen Fry, who's a member, is apparently proposing that Mary Beard be appointed the first kind of woman to be a member of the Garrick Club. Now, of course, in our culture, in which the kind of admission to women in multiple areas of society has been long established, it might seem therefore obvious that the Garrick Club ought to open its membership to women as well as to kind of men.

Whatever your opinion might be on that, I mean, it's not illegal for them to have a men only club.

And ultimately, it's a decision for the members as to whether or not they do that. But of course, for them, kind of that is already widely accepted in society.

But just imagine what it would be like or what it was like, perhaps in the 1960s and the 1970s, when there were London clubs that had been men only for centuries that were beginning to admit women for the very first time.

[2 : 29] And at that time in history, that might have been shocking that they changed their membership criteria in that way. Well, here in this passage that we're coming to today, the question that this passage really asks is, who is the church for?

Which, of course, means, who is the gospel for? Who is the church for? Who is the gospel for? And the answer that this passage gives is absolutely clear.

The church is ultimately for everybody who believes and trusts in Jesus. And that means, therefore, that the gospel is for absolutely everybody.

This passage is actually a challenge to us, that the church is not a private members club. It's not a private members club that is only for people who are like us, and only for people that we might like. That is not what the church is. In actual fact, this passage reminds us that it's not even our decision as to who should be allowed to be part of the church.

[3 : 42] It's not like the church. It's not like the Garrett Club, where we can vote on who should be allowed into the church. Actually, this passage tells us the church is God's church, not our church.

And that, therefore, he is the one who decides who can be admitted. And our responsibility is to welcome all those that God admits to membership in his church.

The church is ultimately for everyone who believes and trusts in the Lord Jesus, which means that the gospel is for, kind of, everyone.

This sum chapter is part of the, kind of, unfolding story of the book of Acts. As the good news of the gospel, the good news about Jesus, the risen Lord who brings forgiveness of sins to those who believe in him, it's part of the unfolding story of how that good news begins to go out to everybody. That's really the big story of the book of Acts. The, kind of, earliest group of Christians are all Jews. Jesus' disciples in Jerusalem. But Jesus calls them and sends them out to be his witnesses, ultimately, to the whole world.

[4 : 55] You'll probably remember Acts chapter 1 and verse 8. He sends them to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth. And the book of Acts, sort of, records how the gospel crosses these, kind of, cultural boundaries to new, kind of, ethnic and cultural groups.

The gospel begins being preached in Jerusalem. At the very end of the book of Acts, that same gospel is being preached in Rome at the very heart of the, kind of, Roman Empire. And here, chapter 10 records, kind of, a crucial moment in which the gospel goes to a new group of people. A group of people who were formerly excluded, but now God shows that they can belong to his, kind of, church.

Up until now, in the book of Acts, the gospel has gone to Jews and Samaritans. The Samaritans were a group of people who were, kind of, like Jews.

They weren't ethnically Jewish by background, but they, kind of, lived in the land of Israel. They believed in the Old Testament. They were circumcised. So, in some ways, it was quite easy for them to become members of the church.

[6 : 08] But here, the gospel crosses a fundamental boundary. And the barrier between Jews and Gentiles is overcome by the good news of, kind of, Jesus.

And actually, that's why, in the book of Acts, the story of the coming of the gospel to Cornelius, this Roman centurion, is given a, kind of, a huge focus.

It's here in chapter 10. We hear it again in chapter 11. The story of what happened is actually told at least three times. The reason for that is because this is so important and so, kind of, crucial, as the gospel goes, ultimately, to everyone.

So, who is the church for? Everyone who believes and trusts in Jesus. That means, who is the gospel for? Everyone. Everyone. That's what God teaches Peter and the early Jewish Christians here in this chapter.

And perhaps in a way that's appropriate for the Garrick Club, it's kind of a story or a drama that unfolds in five acts. So, as we follow this story through, we'll see how God teaches his people that the gospel is ultimately for everyone.

[7 : 28] So, the first stage of that story is in verses 1 to 23. And here, what we see in these verses is God sends Peter to Cornelius. That's kind of what verses 1 to 23 are all about.

This man, Cornelius, is a Gentile. He's a Roman. He's a soldier. He's a centurion. He's a, kind of, a junior officer in the Roman, kind of, army.

And again, it's important for us to grasp just the significance of who he is. In the context of, kind of, first century, kind of, Israel and Judea, he is essentially a soldier in the occupying army.

He's a foreigner who is occupying the land. In many ways, from the perspective of many of the Jews, he would have been seen as being an enemy. But we're also told that he is somebody, verse 2, who was devout and God-fearing.

And again, that's significant. This is a, sort of, a, sort of, a special category that we find in the book of Acts. God-fearers were those who came from a Gentile background, but yet had come to believe in the God of Israel.

[8 : 41] So he was, in some way, a worshipper of the God of Israel. He'd given up his, kind of, paganism, his belief in, kind of, the multiple gods of Rome.

He'd given up his, kind of, worshipping of the emperor as a god. He did, in some way, worship the God of, kind of, Israel. We don't know how he came to believe in the God of Israel.

Perhaps it was because he was posted in this country and he'd met people who were there. So he was in this, kind of, category of God-fearer. But it's really important to grasp that as a God-fearer, he still wasn't able to join the Jewish people and participate in the worship of the synagogue.

Because the key thing was, although he might have followed the God of Israel, he wasn't circumcised. He hadn't become Jewish and, therefore, he didn't belong. So he was still an outsider.

So he was a, kind of, a foreigner. And for all his, kind of, religious devotion, he was still seen as an outsider who was not permitted to belong.

[9 : 48] And so it's to this man that, kind of, God sends, kind of, Peter. Peter, Peter the Apostle, who's the leading character of the early chapters of the Book of Acts, the one who takes the good news of the Gospel, kind of, out.

And this is such a surprising step that it takes two visions from God for Peter to be sent to Cornelius. On the one hand, he gives Cornelius a vision.

Cornelius has a vision of an angel. And the angel tells Cornelius that he's to send to Joppa and ask for Peter to come to him. So God tells Cornelius to go and fetch Peter.

But then, more significantly, Peter himself is given a vision. He's praying in the afternoon. And he has a vision of something that looks like a sail, looks like a big sheet coming down.

And on this, kind of, big sheet, there are pictured all kinds of animals. Animals which, in the Old Testament, would have been regarded as unclean, unkosher. Animals that the Jews, according to their law, were not permitted to eat.

[11 : 00] And God's voice says to Peter, when he sees this vision of these animals, get up, kill and eat. Eat the pig that's on the, kind of, sheet is what's being said to Peter.

And Peter is absolutely horrified. See how Peter responds to this vision? Verse 14, surely not, Lord. I've never in my life eaten anything impure or unclean.

I'm a good Jew. I observe the law. I keep the food rules. These are things that you have said are unclean. How can I possibly, kind of, eat them?

And, sort of, God doesn't give up there. And so, he gives him the same vision a second time. And then, he gives them the same vision. Or gives him the same vision a third time.

It's a quite extraordinary thing. God is telling Peter to eat these unclean animals. And, while Peter is wondering about the meaning of the vision, verse 17.

[12 : 04] So, he doesn't get it. He doesn't know why God is telling him this. That's when the men sent by Cornelius turn up. And, that's when the pieces begin to drop into place.

As Peter discovers that, sort of, God is sending him to Cornelius. This uncircumcised Roman centurion.

The spirit very clearly commands him. That he is to go with the men who have been sent. Now, what's so crucial about this?

The reason why all these details are told is to make absolutely clear that it is God's initiative. It's God's purpose that Peter should go to Cornelius. God is making clear that this is his will.

It is his purpose. It is his command. He's the one who's in charge. And, Peter, to some extent, is reluctant and takes time to get it.

[13 : 05] But, here, what God is doing is he is revealing to Peter that he is no longer to call Gentiles unclean. That's how the Jews regarded them.

We'll see later in the passage. And, the consequence of that is that Jews refused to enter into the homes of Gentiles. Refused to eat with them. They saw them as being unclean, so they kept separate from them.

And, God is showing, by these visions, by sending Peter to Cornelius, that that is no longer what he asks. He is revealing that the time has come for the gospel to go out to everyone.

Now, just a little bit of a theological sidebar here, which I think is kind of quite important. It's significant to grasp here that God is actually not changing his mind. It would be easy to read this and think, in the past, God said these animals were unclean.

And, now, he's suddenly decided they're clean for some reason. But, actually, it's a little bit more complicated than that. We know, from the beginning of the Bible, when God created everything, including all animals, he created everything good.

[14 : 18] So, everything that God made was clean in the beginning. What we need to understand is that, actually, some aspects of the law were symbolic. They were teaching the principles of being clean and of being holy.

But, they were primarily symbolic. God wasn't really saying these animals are kind of unclean. He was using animals, certain kinds of animals, to teach the truth about uncleanness.

But, the point is that that kind of time of learning the lesson has ended. There's no longer any need, because Jesus has come, for the kind of the symbol to be maintained.

So, the law had a limited purpose of kind of teaching something symbolically until Jesus has come. Now, that's happened, we can go back to what it was always the case from creation, that everything is clean.

And, by definition, he says, all people are to be treated as the same. They're not unclean just because they're Gentiles. All human beings were made by God, created in his image.

[15:30] So, here, Peter is sent to Cornelius, and this is radical. And, God has to reveal it to him. And, of course, for us, the important thing is God has revealed it to us.

We now know that everybody can become part of the church. We now know that the gospel is for everyone. What was revealed to Peter here doesn't need to be revealed by God again.

Instead, we simply need to believe it and live it out. We don't need a vision to tell us this, because it's already been made known. Well, secondly, as a result of this, God has shown Peter that he could accept Cornelius.

That's really verses 23 to 35. And, in some ways, the crucial verses of this passage are in verse 34 and 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.

I think Peter understood that as soon as a kind of a spirit told him to go with the men who were sent from Cornelius. Right from that sort of, in a sense, command, following on from the vision, Peter has grasped this.

[16:47] That's why he invites them into his house to be his guests. That's why he goes with them. And the next day, he obeys what God has said, and he goes with them to Cornelius.

And it's interesting, we're told that verse 24, he takes some of the believers from Joppa with him. Chapter 11, verse 26, it says he takes six men with him from Joppa.

And we know from verse 45 of the passage that those six men were circumcised Jewish believers. So he takes six circumcised Jewish believers.

And I think the reason is, he's taking them to be witnesses of what happens. And in the Bible, it says you're to believe things on the basis of the testimony of two or three witnesses.

Well, he takes six. That's to make absolutely sure that what happens is witnessed. And I think what's going on here is Peter has already realised what God is saying.

[17:48] But he takes these men along who haven't got it yet to be witnesses of what happens. But Peter has understood. He has understood that God can accept Cornelius.

He's understood that God does not show favouritism. He's understood that God is able to accept people from every nation who fear him and do what is right.

In other words, Peter has grasped that the Jew-Gentile distinction has now ended. It's been kind of abolished. So that anybody can be accepted by God.

Now, I think it's important to grasp here that Peter is not saying that anybody can be accepted by God simply as they are. He's not saying that people can kind of simply be accepted by God on their own terms.

Do you notice what he says in verse 35? He accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. I think here in the context, that's the equivalent of believing in Jesus and living for Jesus.

[18:58] In other words, this is not just a kind of an inclusion on any basis a person wants. But it is saying that anybody who believes in Jesus and lives for him as Lord, they are accepted by God.

The barrier between Jew and Gentile is no longer up there. So that is what God has shown.

Peter, he's grasped it. He's realised it. And I think the challenge and the question for us is have we really realised it? Have we really realised that God does not show favouritism?

That's a real challenge for us, isn't it? Because it's actually our human nature is to show favouritism. It's our human nature to prefer some people to other people. To prefer people who are like us rather than people who are different to us.

We have an innate human kind of attraction to those who are similar. And this passage challenges the way that we fall into showing favouritism.

[20:07] The point is God does not show favouritism. He accepts people no matter who they are, no matter what their background, no matter what their race, their ethnicity, their kind of nationality, on the basis of their faith in Jesus.

Have we really grasped that and realised it in the way that Peter did? Well, thirdly, the result of that is that Peter speaks God's message to Cornelius.

That's really verses 36 to 43. What's the result of his understanding that God doesn't show favoritism? Well, it's that he speaks the message God sent to the people of Israel to Cornelius. He shares with Cornelius the gospel message that has been entrusted to him. Because he understands God doesn't show favoritism, he doesn't show favoritism in his gospel preaching. Because he knows now God can accept people from every nation, he preaches the message that enables people to be accepted by God. And what we see here in these verses is he preaches the same gospel to Cornelius that up until now in the book of Acts has been preached to the Jewish people and to the Samaritans.

[21 : 22] It's the same good news that he shares. He tells Cornelius about the life and ministry of Jesus. How Jesus ministered in the province of Judea.

He was really a historical sort of person. This is very real. This happened. He announces to Cornelius that he is the Christ, the king. He is Jesus Christ.

He reminds Cornelius or tells Cornelius of the kind of the miracles that Jesus performed. Verse 38, he went around doing good, healing all who were under the power of the devil.

Just as he did the sermon at Pentecost, he reminds of the miracles that accredit Jesus. Then he speaks of Jesus' death on the cross.

Jesus was killed by being hung on a tree. The Jewish people rejected him. But that's not the end of the story. Because God raised him from the dead, verse 40, on the third day.

[22 : 28] And he's been seen. He is now the risen Lord. And that was a real physical resurrection. He was seen by people. And he ate and drank with people after he rose from the dead.

He's commanded them to go and take the good news of the gospel to others. To testify about him that he is the Christ and the Messiah. And particularly to testify that he is the one who's coming again as judge.

He's going to judge the living and the dead. And then verse 43, the climax of all of that message, is that because of who Jesus is, because of his death on the cross, because of his resurrection, he is the one who is able to bring forgiveness of sins to everybody who believes in his name.

Verse 43, all the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. Here, Peter highlights the universal human need.

The universal human need is to have our sins forgiven ahead of the coming judgment. Our sins are all the ways that we failed to live wholeheartedly and completely for God.

[23 : 48] And because we failed to live completely and wholeheartedly for God, the result is we deserve his eternal judgment. If we're to avoid that judgment, we need to be forgiven.

We need God to forgive us. And that is possible because of what Jesus has done. He died in our place to take the judgment that we deserve so that if we trust in him, our sins can be forgiven. But the point here is that that good news of forgiveness is now for everyone who believes in Jesus. So Peter speaks God's message to Cornelius.

This gospel that he's been preaching up until now to the Jews, to the people of Israel, he now speaks to this Gentile. Because the offer of forgiveness is made to him as well.

God does not show favoritism. God accepts everyone, people from every nation, who fear him and do what is right. This is a reminder to us, isn't it, that the way that people come to share God's salvation, the way that they come into the church is by hearing the gospel.

[24 : 55] That's kind of necessary. It's not enough just to kind of in a sense rejoice that God doesn't show favoritism and people can be included. We need to grasp how they're included.

The answer is they're included by believing the gospel message. Which means that we need to share that gospel message with them, just the way that Peter did. Well, fourthly, God then sets his Holy Spirit on Cornelius.

That's verses 44 to 46. As Peter is preaching this message, even as he's speaking these words, the Holy Spirit comes on all those who heard the message.

That is Cornelius, that's his family, that's the friends he had gathered together. I think that's a clear indication here that they believed. They believed that message.

And the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on them in this very obvious public way is God making clear that he accepts Cornelius and all those who have believed.

[26 : 02] He treats them in exactly the same way that he treated the Jews on the day of Pentecost. What happens here with Cornelius is actually the Pentecost for the Gentiles.

As the same Spirit is poured out and set on them. And accompanied by exactly the same signs, verse 46, they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

God has made absolutely clear that he has accepted Cornelius by giving him his Holy Spirit. He is in exactly the same situation as the Jewish believers in Jesus who have also received God's Holy Spirit.

There's no difference between them. And of course the absolutely crucial thing is that the Spirit is poured out on Cornelius even though he is uncircumcised.

It is simply on the basis of his belief, his trust in the gospel message that he's heard. He was uncircumcised at the beginning.

[27 : 06] He's uncircumcised now. And yet God pours his Holy Spirit on him. Do you see from verse 45? The circumcised believers who'd come with Peter, that's the six men who were the witnesses, were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles.

What astonished them was that Cornelius didn't need to be circumcised. He didn't need to become Jewish in order to enter into forgiveness, to be accepted by God, to belong to his church.

God made it clear by giving his Holy Spirit. And then finally, Peter commands Cornelius to receive the sign of salvation that God had given.

That's really verses 47 to 48. Having believed the gospel that was preached, having clearly been accepted by God, by the gift of the Holy Spirit, what do Cornelius and his family and those who are with him have to do?

They don't have to be circumcised. They actually can go straight to baptism. Because baptism in the New Testament is the sign of having received salvation. Those who repent and believe in Jesus are baptised.

[28 : 27] As a sign that they have been washed and cleansed. They've come to new life. They've been united with Jesus. And baptism is the entry point into the kind of the church.

And Peter says, God's accepted them. How can we not accept them? Now, who can stop them from being baptised? Without needing to be circumcised first.

Christ first. Because God has shown that he has accepted them. You see, they've been saved by God. He's made that clear. And that means they must be accepted by the church.

And brought into it. The church cannot show favouritism. And must not impose any conditions on membership beyond those that God himself imposes.

These Gentile believers need to be accepted as members of the church. So there's the kind of the unfolding of this story.

[29 : 30] This drama in five acts. As Cornelius and those who are with him from a Gentile background. People who are saved by believing the gospel.

Accepted by God. And welcomed as members of the church. And this is a crucial turning point. And from now on in the book of Acts.

The good news of Jesus will go out to people from kind of a Gentile background. People who were God fearers. People who were pagans.

People who were kind of uncircumcised. People who had some knowledge of Judaism. And people who had no knowledge at all. Because the gospel is ultimately for everyone.

And all those who belong to Jesus. Have their sins forgiven. And are made members of his church. By God. Well what does this mean for us?

[30 : 30] What does this mean for us today? Well I think simply what it means for us today. Is that we must accept who God accepts. On the basis on which he accepts them.

We must accept who God accepts. On the basis on which he accepts them. He doesn't show favouritism. But welcomes all those who believe and trust in Jesus.

And surely we are called to do the same. We're called not to be sort of setting up any system of favouritism. We're called not to be setting up any exclusion of people.

Simply because they're not like us. Instead we are called to accept them. Because God has accepted them. Three particular implications that flow from this I think.

It's a challenge to us and a reminder to us. That we are to preach the gospel to everyone. We're to preach the gospel to everyone. Because God is capable of accepting anyone.

[31 : 31] The consequence of Peter realising that God does not show favouritism. Was to share this message that had been sent to the Jews with these Gentiles. And I think that's a reminder to us that the gospel is for all.

For all kinds of people. No matter what their background. We mustn't ever think that the gospel is only for people who are like us. We mustn't think that the gospel is only for people who are kind of relatively moral people.

Nor must we think the gospel is only for terribly wicked people. We mustn't think the gospel is only for people who've grown up in a kind of a Christian cultural context. The gospel is for people who come from a Muslim background.

A Hindu background. A Jewish background. A Buddhist background. An atheist background. The gospel is not for people of a particular kind of ethnicity or nationality.

The gospel is for everyone. A few years ago I was doing a little bit of kind of work on the history of slavery. One of the things that was utterly shocking was to discover that there were slave owners in America who basically refused to allow their slaves to hear the gospel and missionaries to go to them.

[32 : 46] Because they knew that if their slaves to go to them. They would have to accept them and enter into a relationship with them as brothers and sisters in Christ. And they didn't want that. And they didn't want that.

They wanted to keep them as slaves. So basically they banned any kind of evangelism. is that wicked that's saying the gospel is not for all people now we might not be anything like as racist and wicked as that but we need to be challenged that the gospel is for everyone not some subset of people that we choose um to i think should hear the gospel we're to preach the gospel to everyone secondly when people become christians we mustn't simply expect them to adopt our culture that's not the condition of their membership of the church they don't need to become like ours in order to belong church and christianity is essentially not a culture they don't have to dress like us they don't have to kind of eat what we eat we don't have to impose our culture on them as a condition of being welcomed as members of the body of christ one of the reasons that churches very often find it difficult to reach out to true cultural diversity is because often unknowingly they communicate that to be a christian means to adopt a particular culture and a whole variety of other things that basically go with following jesus and churches therefore end up excluding people not because they don't believe in jesus but because they don't culturally fit what is expected these kind of gentile believers were not required to be circumcised they didn't have to become like the jews and and you can imagine that was um actually really quite difficult for the jewish church to accept you'll see as you look through the book of acts it it doesn't come quickly there are all sorts of challenges of how do you bring people together across a massive cultural divide and different ways of living but as the church that's what we have to do we mustn't simply impose our culture on others and expect them to become like us in order to belong we need to welcome those that god has welcomed and then finally and lastly maybe a more personal challenge for you have you believed this gospel there may be some of you here who aren't yet christians maybe you haven't believed um in jesus you don't believe that he's god's king you you haven't believed that he's risen from the dead and you haven't received forgiveness of sins but maybe you're kind of um wondering whether or not you ever could believe in jesus maybe you're thinking could god ever accept me could um god accept me given what i've done and how i've lived could god accept me given who i am do i really fit maybe i'm not like these other people i know who are christians could this really be for me well the message of this chapter is yes it's for you peter was sent to cornelius a person who was very different to him to share the good news of jesus to make the point god does not show favoritism no matter who you are no matter what you've done no matter what your background no matter what your culture the good news of jesus is for you god does not show favoritism it doesn't matter which nation you come from if you believe and trust in jesus he accepts you he forgives your sins and you become a member of his church let's pray heavenly father we do want to thank you and praise you so much for your word

and thank you that you are not a god who shows favoritism but the good news of the gospel goes out to all people and all nations we ask and pray that we might understand that and what it really means we ask and pray that we might not set up any artificial barriers to the gospel going to others we ask and pray that we would be those who share the good news of the gospel with everyone and we ask and pray that where you have accepted people because they believed in jesus we too would accept them not forcing them to become like ours but recognizing that they are brothers and sisters who you have brought into your family help us do that by your holy spirit we would ask and pray for jesus sake amen