

August 27

Lesson 13

CALLED TO

BE INCLUSIVE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 15

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Acts 10

ACTS 10:19-33

¹⁹ While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Simon, three men are looking for you. ²⁰ So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.”

²¹ Peter went down and said to the men, “I’m the one you’re looking for. Why have you come?”

²² The men replied, “We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to ask you to come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say.” ²³ Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.

The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the believers from Joppa went along. ²⁴ The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. ²⁵ As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. ²⁶ But Peter made him get up. “Stand up,” he said, “I am only a man myself.”

²⁷ While talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. ²⁸ He said to them: “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. ²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?”

³⁰ Cornelius answered: “Three days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me ³¹ and said, ‘Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. ³² Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.’ ³³ So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.”

KEY VERSE

[Peter] said to them: “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.”—Acts 10:28

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify the “clean” and “unclean” references in Peter’s vision and his reaction thereto.
2. Evaluate Peter’s resistance to interacting with Gentiles in light of his declaration on Pentecost that the gospel is for everyone (Acts 2:39).
3. Pray for an opportunity to present the gospel cross-culturally.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Steadfast or Stubborn?
- B. Lesson Background

I. Peter Responds ([Acts 10:19-24](#))

- A. Listening to God ([vv. 19, 20](#))
- B. Receiving Others ([vv. 21-24](#))

II. Peter Clarifies ([Acts 10:25-29](#))

- A. Shared Humanity ([vv. 25-27](#))
On Being Not God
- B. Divisive Differences ([vv. 28, 29](#))
When to Obey, and When Not To

III. Cornelius Explains ([Acts 10:30-33](#))

- A. Prepared Host ([vv. 30-32](#))
- B. Eager Audience ([v. 33](#))

Conclusion

- A. Just for You
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Steadfast or Stubborn?

What are the nonnegotiables of your congregation, spoken or unspoken? A set order of service? A particular style of worship music? A certain Bible translation? A specific time for services? The mode of baptism? Home small groups? Type of clothing? Leadership qualifications?

Nonnegotiables that involve Bible doctrines we can call *matters of the faith* (with “the faith” referring to the body of doctrine to be believed; compare [Titus 1:13](#); [Jude 3](#)). The things some may consider to be nonnegotiable but which have no basis in Scripture can be called *matters of expediency*. Typically, these are changeable methods of making ministry happen.

The matters-of-the-faith list is, of course, the more important. As we ponder our lists, we should ask this question: *When is “standing firm” valid and when it is merely lifeless legalism?* Being steadfast in following God’s will is one thing; stubbornly insisting on our own will, which we think to be God’s will too, is another. Let’s look at how Peter dealt with this dilemma.

B. Lesson Background

Following the account of Saul’s conversion, the focus of the book of Acts shifts back to Peter. Persecution had subsided, and Peter enjoyed freedom of movement ([Acts 9:31, 32](#)). He healed a bedridden man in Lydda, which resulted in mass conversion to Christianity ([9:33-35](#)).

Called hurriedly to nearby Joppa, Peter encountered the grief of those whose friend Tabitha had died. Mass conversion resulted yet again, as God brought the dead woman back to life through Peter’s ministry ([9:36-42](#)). A welcome reception resulted in his staying “for some time with a tanner named Simon” ([9:43](#)). The fact that Peter would stay there for any length of time is interesting given that tanners were regularly “unclean” because of contact with animal carcasses ([Leviticus 11:26-28](#)).

Joppa is a coastal city of central Palestine, situated on a bluff overlooking a small natural harbor. It is about 35 miles northwest of Jerusalem. A well-traveled thoroughfare connected the two cities, for Joppa effectively had served as the Mediterranean port city for Jerusalem since the time of Solomon (see [2 Chronicles 2:16](#)).

About 30 miles north of Joppa was the newer city of Caesarea Maritima (Caesarea by the sea), rebuilt by Herod the Great and named for his patron and friend Caesar Augustus. Herod created Caesarea according to the pattern of grand Roman cities, with broad streets, landmark temples, an aqueduct water supply, and a spacious theater. These features made Caesarea Maritima (not to be confused with Caesarea Philippi [[Mark 8:27](#)]) the preferred residence for Roman officials stationed in Palestine. When compared with hot, dusty, and trouble-prone Jerusalem, we can see why!

Centurions, one of whom Peter encountered in Caesarea, were professional, career soldiers. A centurion commanded a unit known as a century, which consisted of 100 soldiers and support personnel. There were six centuries in a band (or cohort), and 10 bands in a Roman battle legion.

The centurion Peter encountered in today's lesson is said to have been part of "the Italian Regiment" ([Acts 10:1](#)). The designation *Italian* indicates that the unit's constituents were men primarily from Rome and its surrounding regions. The men were not provincial auxiliaries from allies or conquered territories. This was an elite group, as Roman as Roman could be. The word *regiment* may indicate that the troop strength in Caesarea was at least 600 soldiers.

HOW TO SAY IT

Caesar Augustus *See-zer Aw-gus-tus.*

Caesarea Maritima *Sess-uh-ree-uh Mar-uh-tee-muh.*

centurion *sen-ture-ee-un.*

Cornelius *Cor-neel-yus.*

Galilee *Gal-uh-lee.*

Gentiles *Jen-tiles.*

Joppa *Jop-uh.*

Judea *Joo-dee-uh.*

Lydda *Lid-uh.*

Mediterranean *Med-uh-tuh-ray-nee-un.*

Samaritan *Suh-mare-uh-tun.*

Solomon *Sol-o-mun.*

[Acts 10:1](#) also tells us that the name of the centurion Peter encountered was Cornelius. He seems to have been a most unusual Roman! Rather than despising the Jews of Palestine (as most Romans did; contrast [Luke 7:1-5](#)), he was attracted to them and their religion. He is described as devout: one who feared God, gave to the poor, and prayed ([Acts 10:2](#)). His lifestyle and attitude had not gone unnoticed either by God ([10:4](#)) or by the Jewish people ([10:22](#)).

I. Peter Responds

([ACTS 10:19-24](#))

Just before today's lesson text opens, Peter experiences a three-part vision in which he sees many animals that are "unclean" by Jewish law, and yet he is commanded three times to kill and eat them. Peter protests the directive each time, claiming that he has never violated the law by eating what is considered unclean ([Acts 10:10-16](#)).

This is a side of Peter we have not really seen before as recorded by the author Luke (who wrote Luke and Acts). He has been presented as a self-confessed sinful man ([Luke 5:8](#)). His sinfulness lies in areas other than keeping the dietary laws, though, and he cannot conceive of eating pork or lizard meat.

Yet the voice in the vision tells him not to call things "impure that God has made clean" ([Acts 10:15](#)). This points to a coming need for Peter to move beyond his long-held understanding of Jewish purity and Gentile impurity.

A. Listening to God (vv. 19, 20)

19, 20. While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."

A stunned Peter is sorting it out when *the Spirit* interrupts with instructions. The *three men* who are outside looking for Peter consist of two household servants and a trusted soldier sent by Cornelius ([Acts 10:7](#)). The ultimate sender though is God, for the Spirit tells Peter, *I have sent them*. God is orchestrating the meetings of key people according to his plan. What is being arranged is the most startling of divine appointments: a Jewish fisherman with a Gentile army officer!

What Do You Think?

How do we know when hesitating is a good thing or a bad thing?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In Christian contexts (new ministries, etc.)

In secular contexts (job offers, etc.)

"He who hesitates is lost" vs. "Look before you leap"

B. Receiving Others (vv. 21-24)

21. Peter went down and said to the men, “I’m the one you’re looking for. Why have you come?”

Peter may be puzzled, but he obeys the urging of the Spirit without delay. The three men are Gentiles, so greeting and meeting them is not normal procedure for one such as Peter, who keeps the Law of Moses.

Peter doesn’t play hard to get as he immediately identifies himself and pushes the visitors to disclose their mission. He wants to make sense out of all this. How do three strangers at the door relate to a vision of eating forbidden food?

22. The men replied, “We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to ask you to come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say.”

Imagine the conflicting thoughts in Peter’s mind as he listens. *Another centurion like the one I met earlier? [Luke 7:1-10] An arrogant occupier of my homeland? A righteous and God-fearing man? Is there any such thing among the brutal Romans? How can he fear the one true God, since the Romans worship many gods? Respected by all the Jewish people? A holy angel has spoken to an unholy Gentile?*

Peter’s head must be spinning with all this startling information—information that ends with an invitation. But it is presented in a way that makes it hard to sustain his doubts.

What Do You Think?

How should Christians respond to those who fear God but have not yielded to Jesus?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Ways to respond relationally

Ways to respond doctrinally

Ways to respond emotionally

Other

23. Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.

The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the believers from Joppa went along.

Peter obediently welcomes the men into Simon’s house. Simon himself is regularly “unclean” (see the Lesson Background), and now more uncleanness is added as Gentiles are provided overnight lodging. But this indicates that Peter is agreeing to accompany them the next day.

The believers from Joppa who join Peter on the trip are six in number ([Acts 11:12](#)). Adding those six to the three from Cornelius plus Peter himself yields a traveling group of 10. A 30-mile trek by foot to Caesarea means a journey requiring more than a single day of dawn-to-dusk walking.

24. The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends.

The time required for the envoys of Cornelius to travel to Joppa and back allows the centurion time to assemble *his relatives and close friends*. This gives the impression that he has been stationed in Caesarea for some time, having brought family along on the deployment. Caesarea is a Gentile enclave, making it unlikely that a Jewish fisherman from Galilee has been there before.

What Do You Think?

In what unusual ways have you seen God open doors for the gospel?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Among neighbors

Within families

Among your colleagues at work or school

Other

II. Peter Clarifies

([Acts 10:25-29](#))

Before we consider what Peter has to say to those gathered, we can pause to realize that he has already spent many hours walking and talking with the three men Cornelius sent. The text does not record the content of those conversations, but their substance is easy to imagine!

A. Shared Humanity (vv. 25-27)

^{25, 26.} As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. But Peter made him get up. “Stand up,” he said, “I am only a man myself.”

The surprises continue for Peter as Cornelius, a centurion who is quickly recognizable as such by his attire, falls down in a posture of worship toward the apostle! This is both unexpected and unpleasant for Peter. It is unexpected because if anyone is to show deference toward another in that culture, it would be Peter's deference toward the Roman centurion. Moreover, Peter knows that worship is to be directed toward God alone ([Exodus 20:3](#); etc.).

Therefore Peter cannot allow this false worship to continue. In affirming their common humanity, Peter implies that mortals are not to be worshipped (compare [Acts 14:11-18](#)).

ON BEING NOT GOD

I once met a man who had been a radio operator in the Russian army in 1953. When he sent out word that Stalin had died, his commander threatened to shoot him for spreading a falsehood. “Stalin cannot die,” the commander declared.

History is filled with accounts of people who think more highly of themselves than they ought (compare [Romans 12:3](#)). Roman emperors considered themselves to be at least semi-divine (compare [Acts 12:21-23](#)). Medieval kings were often thought to have miraculous healing powers. The disciples themselves needed correction in their self-evaluations ([Mark 9:33-37](#); [10:35-45](#)).

Today's text reveals that Peter rejected any divine prestige for himself. While no genuine Christian would dare claim to be deity, we skirt the edges of that danger when we take credit that belongs to God (see [Daniel 4:29-32](#)).

The best way to handle such temptation? Listen to Jesus: “When you have done everything you were told to do, ... say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty’” ([Luke 17:10](#)). —J. B. N.

^{27.} While talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people.

A potential surprise for Peter: this is not to be a private discussion. There is a houseful of men and woman, likely all Gentiles, who have assembled to hear what Peter has to say.

B. Divisive Differences (vv. 28, 29)

^{28.} He said to them: “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 is processing his conflicting thoughts out loud. On the one hand, he believes strongly that Jews are to have no contact with any *Gentile*. This is what he has been taught from childhood. His view of Gentiles is culturally ingrained and is supported by Scripture applicable to the old covenant ([Leviticus 20:23, 24, 26](#); etc.).

On the other hand, Peter has just had a troubling vision that has challenged his most cherished taboo: eating the flesh of an animal forbidden as unclean (see the Lesson Background). This has served to remind him that the Lord is the master of his own laws.

God's laws are purposeful. He set boundaries on what the nation of Israel should eat and with whom they should associate for their benefit. But as Peter hears himself say *I should not call anyone impure or unclean*, he seems to realize that these ancient laws are passing away. He must let the Lord's leading overcome long-held beliefs that cause him to shun Gentiles.

WHEN TO OBEY, AND WHEN NOT TO

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 required that authorities and citizens in America's “free” states had to assist in the capture and return of runaway slaves. This unjust law caused political upheaval across much of the United States, and the law was often disobeyed. Given our need to respect governing authority ([Romans 13:1-7](#)), this question arises: Under what circumstances can or should a law be disobeyed?

At least three situations present themselves. A given law should be disobeyed if (1) it contravenes universal principles of morality and justice or (2) following it would result in breaking a more important law or (3) it has been superseded or set aside by appropriate authority. The first situation fits that of disobeying the Fugitive Slave Act. The second concern stands behind the dialogue in [Mark 12:28-34](#). The third is illustrated by today's text.

The Law of Moses required separation from that which was unholy ([Leviticus 11:44, 45](#); [19:2](#)). Therefore there was to be no friendship with the unholy pagans ([Deuteronomy 7:1-6](#)). Various traditions developed during the centuries between the Old and New Testaments to ensure enforcement, lest sins of the past be repeated. But Peter realized that something had changed!

The holiness mandate still applied, as Peter himself later wrote ([1 Peter 1:15, 16](#)). But he was not to allow old-covenant mandates for maintaining holiness to keep him from interacting with those who needed the gospel. It took time for Peter to conduct himself consistently in this regard ([Galatians 2:11-14](#)). May it not take us as long! —J. B. N.



Visual for Lesson 13. Create a multiple-choice test with these four topics as the potential responses to each question. Use the test as a unit review.

What Do You Think?

How might God answer prayers to help us take the gospel across a cultural barrier?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding the “internal barriers” of our own viewpoints (example: [Jonah 3:10-4:11](#))

Regarding the “external barriers” between cultures themselves (example: [Acts 17:16-31](#))

Regarding combinations of the two

29. “So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?”

Although Peter has come *without raising any objection*, he does not yet know exactly why God has put him in this position. Peter is ready to do God’s will and assumes that Cornelius can provide details that will help him understand. Peter is already aware that Cornelius also has had a vision from God ([Acts 10:3, 22](#)).

III. Cornelius Explains

([ACTS 10:30-33](#))

Recalling the information in the Lesson Background enriches our understanding of what happens next as Peter yields the floor to Cornelius.

A. Prepared Host (vv. 30-32)

30. Cornelius answered: “Three days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me

Cornelius begins by recounting the facts of the angelic visitation of [Acts 10:3-6](#). *Three days* may seem a long time for us, but it shows the immediacy of the events to first-century readers. Considering the time it takes to walk to and from Joppa, there is no delay. A clue to the devoutness of Cornelius is seen in the fact that *three in the afternoon* is “the time of prayer” for Jews ([Acts 3:1](#)).

31. “and said, ‘Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor.

We are not told the exact content of the prayer of Cornelius, but that is not the point here. The angel revealed to him that God had been hearing his prayers and noting his kindness toward the poor. Cornelius’s *gifts to the poor* may refer specifically to monetary gifts (as in [Acts 3:1-6](#)) or to acts of compassion in a general sense (as in [Matthew 6:1](#)).

A very important thing to learn from this verse is that God may indeed hear the prayers of non-Christians. Cornelius is neither a Jew nor a Christian at this point, yet his prayers have been heard. It is God who decides whose prayers are heard, not we or our doctrinal positions.

32. ““Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.’

The details of Cornelius’s vision must startle Peter. The centurion has been made aware of the details of Peter’s name and given the apostle’s exact location! It is also important that Peter come to Cornelius rather than the other way around, because full acceptance of Gentiles is best brought about in a Gentile home.

B. Eager Audience (v. 33)

33. “So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.”

By means of the last sentence of this verse, Cornelius yields the floor back to Peter. History is about to be made, and Cornelius seems to know it. The stage is set for a great leap of inclusion, the moment when the church expands beyond its Jewish foundations. The barrier between Jew and Gentile is about to fall.

God does not leave this to chance or accident. He has chosen Cornelius to be the launching point for Gentile inclusion in the church because that man’s heart is receptive to God’s leading. Cornelius surely has his own baggage of bias against Jews. He surely is tainted with his own history of pagan practices as any Roman of the day is. But the Lord sees into his heart. God knows he is the right person at this pivotal moment in history.

The vital nature of this moment is underlined and highlighted by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit ([Acts 10:44](#)) and Peter’s lengthy defense of his actions later in Jerusalem ([11:1-18](#)). That section ends with Peter’s critics saying, “So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.” God’s activities are truly remarkable!

What Do You Think?

What can your church do to make its outreach more inclusive? What limits to inclusiveness, if any, should be maintained in the process?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- In reaching across racial divides
- In reaching across generational divides
- In reaching across doctrinal divides
- Other

Conclusion

A. Just for You

The spokesperson in an insurance company commercial offers an excellent deal to a customer. The grateful response is, “You’d do that just for me?” The spokesperson replies, “Just for you ... and everyone else.” A turning point in history occurred when God revealed to Peter that Jesus was just for him ... and everyone else.

The Christian faith is intended to be universal. The church Jesus established is to stand apart from the ethnic or national ties that characterize so many other religions, whether in the first century or in the twenty-first. The church is not just for those who dress as we do or share our taste in worship music. The church has no second-class citizens. The church is not just for those of a “targeted demographic.” Jesus expects us to invite everyone from everywhere. See [Matthew 28:19, 20](#).

B. Prayer

Father of all, we thank you for including us in the church your Son established. May the Spirit empower us to ensure that others are included as well. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

May we heed God as he teaches us where to stand and where to stretch.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Into the Lesson

Divide the board into two columns, with *Practices of the church that should NEVER change* heading one column and *Practices of the church that COULD be changed* heading the other.

Spend a few moments asking students to suggest practices that could go into either one of these columns. After making these lists, discuss how we decide which practices go into which column. Ask, "When is standing firm guarding the purity of the church and when is it lifeless legalism? When is change simply making accommodation to the needs of others and when is it a compromise of core values?"

Alternative. As students arrive, distribute copies of the "Positive or Negative?" reproducible page, which you can download. Students can begin working on it immediately. Discuss the activity briefly after all students have arrived.

After either activity, lead into Bible study saying, "We have identified a question with which the church has wrestled from the very beginning. While being steadfast in following God's will is one thing, stubbornly insisting on our own will is another. Let's look at how Peter dealt with this problem."

Into the Word

Divide your class into three groups. Give each group paper and pens. Each group should be assigned a section of the lesson text and should summarize its portion of the lesson text as a tabloid heading and subtitle.

Scripture assignments and sample headlines follow:

Group 1—Be Available ([Acts 10:19-25](#))

Delegation Sent to Jewish Teacher!

Peter Welcomes Cornelius's Emissaries

Group 2—Clarify the Situation ([Acts 10:26-29](#))

Unlikely Summit

Jew Meets with Roman Military Leader

Group 3—Accept Opportunities ([Acts 10:30-33](#))

Commander or Crazy Man?

Cornelius Claims to Have Had a Religious Vision

Allow time for groups to share their headlines and summarize their Scripture assignments.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the "Surprised or Expected" activity from the reproducible page. Give students a chance to mark the statements summarizing the content of the lesson text as something that surprised them or as something they expected. Ask students to defend their responses.

Into Life

Move to the closing of the class by saying, "Cornelius was a person many would have seen as unlikely to believe in Jesus. Over the course of history, many more unlikely converts have become Christians." Then read the following list.

Leif Erikson—Viking explorer who turned from Norse paganism to Christ. He was given the mission of introducing Greenland to Jesus.

Wernher von Braun—This German aerospace engineer, considered the "father of rocket science," accepted Jesus after visiting a church in Texas.

Chuck Colson—Once known as President Nixon's "hatchet man," Colson went to prison due to his part in the Watergate scandal. After accepting Jesus, he became an influential Christian leader and author.

Lee Strobel—This former atheist and journalist for the *Chicago Tribune* sought to disprove Christianity, but his research convinced him to accept Christ.

Dr. Rosaria Champagne Butterfield—A professor of English and Queer Theory (a form of gay and lesbian studies) once despised Christianity. She is now a Christian and a minister's wife.

Close class by praying with students that God will bring unlikely converts into their lives.