

Lord of All 1) Peace to All Through the Gospel

Acts 10:34-38 • 2023-01-08 • Epiphany Series: "Lord of All"



A few months ago, the US Department of Defense put out a memo that it is unable to attain enough military recruits because too few people want to enlist. And many of those who want to enlist are not able to pass the physical fitness standards or educational standards. One major media outlet poked fun at the situation saying that the US military is too woke for too many potential recruits. Others have pointed out that the defense department's memo indicated that less than one fourth of young Americans actually meet the standards. So, the Defense Department fast-tracked a change to the entry requirements. Combat fitness test standards were reduced. Educational standards had to give way to a less-educated citizenship. I'm not going to comment today about the necessity or the wisdom of changing military entrance requirements. But you can be sure that it caused a bit of a stir when they started to implement it. No doubt some who previously had to meet the standards were jealous of the new recruits. Maybe they even looked down on them. Others tried to resist the changes. Still others such as foreign media mocked it. Other things require standards too. The US citizenship test was regarded by many as too easy. Then for a time it was made harder, and questions were added to the test. But that more difficult test was recently rescinded. Once again, I'm not here to comment on or debate how hard a civic test ought to be. But you can be sure the changes caused quite a bit of controversy for a lot of people.

One thing God does want us to discuss here today is his requirements for those who can belong to his kingdom. If you haven't struggled with what God requires, keep in mind that many have. There have been debates, attacks, even wars over the discussion. And controversies continue to arise on what it exactly means to be Christian.

But it shouldn't surprise us that the entrance requirements for being a part of the kingdom of God cause quite a bit of controversy. That's exactly what happened to the first apostles who carried the gospel to nations outside of Israel. Today were going to look at one of the very first times that the barrier between Jews and non-Jews was openly crossed. What were God's requirements for us to enter his kingdom? We read about that in Acts chapter 10.

God had given rules to separate his own people from other nations. You can read all about the regulations and requirements he set for the people of Israel. It started with the nation of Israel when God told them that they were to be separate from other nations. God introduced many laws and requirements for the priests and for the people. Some of these laws we can readily understand such as laws against adultery, incest, homosexuality, bestiality, infanticide, and idol worship. They were not supposed to live like the immoral and idol worshipping nations around them. They were to honor God and honor their bodies and the gift of marriage. It is obvious that you cannot claim to worship God while at the same time despise and defy him and his creation.

But maybe we struggle at times to understand some of his other requirements for Israel. He gave many ceremonial laws for Israel. Keeping those requirements made a person clean or unclean, fit or unfit to worship him. These laws included things like circumcision, types of cross breeding and cross pollinating, how they cut their beards, and even which animals were considered ceremonially clean or unclean. But one thing about these regulations was clear. God intended them as special requirements to follow which set apart the people of Israel as his own special people. And as strange as some of the requirements might sound to us today, they were all in some way or another connected to the religious life of the people or something in the religious life of the ungodly nations. God summed up all his requirements by saying, "*You shall not walk according to the religious practices of the nation which I am casting out before you, for I was disgusted with them because they did all these things*" (Le 20:23). Not every Israelite kept all these requirements. Even Moses himself failed to circumcise his son and almost died on account of it. But the requirements were honored by God-fearing believers. And that meant keeping up with all God required.

Peter and the apostles kept all these ceremonial rules. For this reason, Peter had avoided contact with all things considered unclean. That meant that someone like Peter would not enter the house of a Gentile. Doing so would have been seen as an even greater social taboo than someone in a far-left political group going to a mansion house-party of a far-right political figure. It just wasn't done! Breaking a ceremonial law was a serious offense!

What about the new converts to Christianity? Did God require them to keep all the old ceremonial laws for Israel? Peter was about to learn just what conditions God wanted to place on the nations. In fact, Peter was going to learn what God now required of the people of Israel now that Christ had come. And we will learn an important truth about how we talk about God's requirements.

It was about eight years after Jesus' resurrection. The apostles and evangelists had spread the gospel all throughout Judea and Samaria. And God's gospel reached everyone in Israel from rich to poor, from priest to plowman. Yet Peter and the apostles knew God had told them they would witness to the ends of the earth. Yet nobody was willing to ask, "What are the requirements for sharing the gospel with non-Jews?" It was just too controversial to even discuss!

God, however, made it a part of the conversation. He gave a vision to a Roman centurion who was living in Caesarea. This was a port city and headquarters of Pontius Pilate who was still governor and the main staging area for the Roman occupation in Israel. His name was Cornelius, and he was a Gentile living in a very Gentile city. But he was also a devout and god-fearing believer. Even though he wasn't a circumcised or ceremonially clean Jew, he was still a believer. In his vision he was told by God's angel to send for Peter who was staying at a town in the area.

Peter, meanwhile, received a vision from God that told him he was no longer to consider unclean things unclean if God called them clean. Peter was wondering what the vision meant when messengers came from Cornelius. The Holy Spirit told Peter to go out and go with them back to Cornelius' home. Peter went.

By the time Peter arrived at the house of Cornelius, it was full of his friends and family. As Peter stepped inside he said, "You know how it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or enter the house of a non-Jew? But God told me that I am no longer to call anyone impure or unclean." Then he asked why Cornelius sent for him. Cornelius basically told him, "God sent you here and we are all here to hear what you have to say." That is every evangelist's dream audience! God brought Peter there. God had them all attentive and ready to listen to Peter's message. Cornelius was a devout and god-fearing believer. He just needed to hear that the Messiah he had been waiting for was fulfilled in what Jesus of Nazareth had done by his life, death, and resurrection. Peter got it.

"I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism..." God doesn't look at the outward requirements when sharing the gospel of forgiveness. God doesn't look at the ethnicity of who gets to hear the gospel. God doesn't weigh in the culture of who gets to hear the gospel. He doesn't even favor those who observe all the ceremonial laws given to ancient Israel. Don't misunderstand. Those laws served his purpose to keep Israel apart from other nations so that they might carry his Word. But his Word was always meant to go out to all nations. *"God does not show favoritism."* It took Peter a lot of time and instruction to fully grasp what that meant. But there he was preaching to Gentiles.

What about us? We know that God wants his gospel to go out to all people. But might we ever begin to show favoritism or put requirements on hearing the gospel which God does not? Is the gospel only for upper and lower middle class white native-born Americans, or is it also for others? Of course, we know the answer, but do we fully grasp what that means in our evangelism? Do we reflect it? Or do we make it feel like there are certain requirements? We may not have the same culture as ancient Israel, but do we make observing our own culture a prerequisite to hearing and receiving our Evangelical Lutheran heritage? Does God accept the worshipper who doesn't sing with traditional organ or keyboard accompaniment? We know he does. But do we ever make it controversial to suggest otherwise? Some Christians enjoy Christian rap and hip hop music. Shouldn't that be alright? Or is it required to adopt your favorite style? When Peter got back home, he had to explain his actions to other Jews. Do you sometimes feel like you have to explain your method or mode of sharing the gospel?

I'm not here to comment on the best style or culture of Christian expression and worship. But ought there be any controversy over culture and style when it comes to sharing the message of peace through Jesus?

And don't misunderstand. God did not change his "recruitment requirements" in the way a modern military might adjust its entrance standards. God had always shared a gospel of forgiveness based on faith and without condition. Peter was preaching a gospel without condition! There are believers all over who are god-fearing and devout. They are not accepted on account of their deeds. By the power of the gospel, they fear and love God, no matter what their culture or background. There is no entrance requirement for God's kingdom. There is only grace without condition.

And it is a gospel of grace centered on the work of Jesus. *"You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all."* Yes, God in grace favored Israel as his spokesperson to the nations. He set requirements for them to serve him as his messengers. Then the message began in Galilee. Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit in his baptism. Jesus carried out his Father's will. He showed signs and his power over the devil and sin's curse. Finally, Peter preached about Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus kept the requirements!

The requirements were not easy. They were impossible for all but one. But Jesus met the standard! Jesus perfectly fulfilled the holy law! Jesus gives forgiveness and peace to all who trust in him. Jesus is the good news for all nations! He is Lord of all nations! By his perfect life and death and resurrection all hear the good news that they belong through faith!

God's requirements for receiving the gospel and belonging to him are clear. His message is to go out to all. All belong to him through faith in Jesus. Cornelius believed. Just like the non-Jewish Magi had believed years before. Just like the many people outside of Israel would believe. Just as you -whatever your culture or background- have believed. Jesus is Lord of all. He brings good news of peace without condition to all. It comes to all through the gospel.