

“Lord of All” (Acts 9:32-11:30)

May 1, 2016

Brian Watson

Acts 11:1-18 (ESV)

¹ Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, ³ “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.” ⁴ But Peter began and explained it to them in order: ⁵ “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me. ⁶ Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. ⁷ And I heard a voice saying to me, ‘Rise, Peter; kill and eat.’ ⁸ But I said, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ ⁹ But the voice answered a second time from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, do not call common.’ ¹⁰ This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. ¹¹ And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. ¹² And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. ¹³ And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; ¹⁴ he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.’ ¹⁵ As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. ¹⁶ And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷ If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” ¹⁸ When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.”¹

From the beginning, human beings have had trouble getting along. Instead of singing in perfect harmony, we are often divided. And many times people are divided along the lines of religion, ethnicity, gender, and the color of our skin. From the beginning, people have had a hard time getting along with those who are different, who look different, who speak different languages, who believe different things. One issue that keeps reemerging in this country is the issue of racism. I don’t like talking about “race,” because there’s one human race. But it’s clear that some people dislike or even hate others simply because they look different, because their skin is a different color. There are many people who hate others simply because they’re from a different country.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Though racism, xenophobia, and ethnocentrism are lamented by many, we should ask ourselves: What is the solution? How can these problems be fixed? Is there a political solution? Do we just need better laws? Do we need more education? Or do we need something else?

I would argue that the only way to fix racism is to have a changed heart. The only enduring solution to racism is a compelling belief that all human beings are inherently valuable. And I would argue that Christianity is the only belief system, the only worldview, that gives us a good reason to love and value people who are different from us.

Today, as we continue to learn from the book of Acts, we're going to see Gentiles, non-Jewish people, come to faith in Jesus. To the earliest Christians, who were Jewish, this was a very big deal. They had to learn that what mattered was not whether someone was Jewish or not, or whether someone followed the dietary laws of Israel. What matters is whether someone knows Jesus or not.

But before we see Gentiles enter into the one people of God, we're going to go to the end of chapter 9 and get reacquainted with Peter. So let's turn to Acts 9:32-35:

³² Now as Peter went here and there among them all, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda. ³³ There he found a man named Aeneas, bedridden for eight years, who was paralyzed. ³⁴ And Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your bed." And immediately he rose. ³⁵ And all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord.

Here, we see Peter doing what the apostles often did. In addition to preaching about Jesus, they also performed "signs and wonders." Lydda was a city northwest of Jerusalem, closer to the Mediterranean. While there, Peter encountered a man named Aeneas, who was paralyzed. Peter healed him simply by saying, "Jesus Christ heals you." This healing reminds us of the way Jesus healed people. It also is a picture of the gospel: Jesus brings healing and life to people. I've said before that these miracles are unique. They don't happen all the time. And we're not promised that all Christians will experience these miracles. But they do occur, even today. I've been reading a bit of Craig Keener's large, two-volume book on miracles, in which he chronicles miracle accounts from all across the globe. He describes eyewitness reports of healings of people who couldn't walk. Here's one brief story:

A friend of mine has worked closely with Carlos Alamino, a Baptist pastor in Cuba. Carlos recounts that in his youth he was run over by a tractor, paralyzing him. As doctors were about to operate, he cried out to God, and movement suddenly began returning to his arms and legs; he got up and began to walk,

astonishing the doctors. He went on to play baseball until God called him to ministry.²

Another story involves a young man in Chile. This young man had a fracture in his leg that required surgery to fix. Pins were going to be inserted into the bone. Before he had surgery, on Easter Day in 1998, he attended church and was prayed for. He came on crutches to this meeting and left not needing the crutches. Keener writes, “Because after the service he was now walking without crutches, however, the doctor took new X-rays, only to discover to his astonishment that the bone had completely mended.”³

Next, Peter moves to the coast, to a city called Joppa. While there, he performs an even more remarkable miracle. Let’s read verses 36-42:

³⁶ Now there was in Joppa a disciple named Tabitha, which, translated, means Dorcas. She was full of good works and acts of charity. ³⁷ In those days she became ill and died, and when they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room. ³⁸ Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, hearing that Peter was there, sent two men to him, urging him, “Please come to us without delay.” ³⁹ So Peter rose and went with them. And when he arrived, they took him to the upper room. All the widows stood beside him weeping and showing tunics and other garments that Dorcas made while she was with them. ⁴⁰ But Peter put them all outside, and knelt down and prayed; and turning to the body he said, “Tabitha, arise.” And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up. ⁴¹ And he gave her his hand and raised her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive. ⁴² And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.

In Joppa, a Christian woman named Tabitha died. (Tabitha is Aramaic for “gazelle;” Dorcas is Greek and also means “gazelle.”) This woman was beloved by the church, in part because she made clothing for others. Peter is able to bring her back to life, something that helps more people come to faith in Jesus. Again, this shows the power of Jesus. And it also shows that Peter is walking in the footsteps of Jesus (cf. Mark 5:21-24, 35-42; Luke 7:11-17).

Again, this may be hard to believe. But there have been many people who have reported similar events. These are not resurrections, because the people who were raised back to life later died. Only Jesus has had a resurrection: He came back to life in a body that can never die again. Earlier, I said that Craig Keener reported many eyewitness accounts of miracles. He even writes about people who were raised from the dead. One of those accounts involves his own sister-in-

² Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 1:533.

³ *Ibid.*

law, who, while a child in Africa, was bit by a poisonous snake and stopped breathing. The child didn't breathe for three hours, during which time her mother traveled with her daughter on her back to an evangelist. The evangelist prayed for the girl, and she started breathing again.⁴

After this miracle, we read this in verse 43: "And he stayed in Joppa for many days with one Simon, a tanner." What's significant about this is that tanners were regarded as unclean by Jews because they worked with dead animals.⁵ Peter was willing to stay with a tanner of leather, who was considered unclean because he worked with animal carcasses. And this gives us a hint of what is to come.

Now, before we look at chapter 10, I'll have to explain this clean and unclean business. After God rescued the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, he brought them to Mount Sinai and he gave them the law. And among the laws that God gave the Israelites are many that regard what is clean and what is unclean, or what is holy and what is unholy. You can find these laws in the book of Leviticus. Some of the more important laws concern clean and unclean animals, which are mentioned in Leviticus 11. Israelites were able to eat certain animals but not other ones. These laws, along with the requirement for men to be circumcised and for all to observe the Sabbath distinguished Israel from the nations that surrounded them. It seems that some of these laws were designed to keep the Israelites from associating with these other nations and therefore being tempted to worship their gods or engage in their immoral practices. So Jews could not eat certain things, like pork. If you can't eat certain things, then you can't eat with other people who do. And eating is a very intimate thing. You don't eat with your enemies. Eating together means spending time together and talking together. But God wanted Israel not to be influenced by these other nations who worshiped false gods and did wicked things.

So Israel's dietary laws kept them from associating with other countries. And since Gentiles didn't follow Israel's dietary laws, Jews didn't eat with Gentiles. Jews didn't even go into Gentile homes for that very reason. That's why when Jesus is brought to Pontius Pilate before he is crucified, the Jews did not go into Pontius Pilate's headquarters, because he was a Gentile (John 18:28). Gentiles couldn't enter into the innermost courts of the temple complex in

⁴ Ibid., 557-558.

⁵ According to Ben Witherington III (*The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998], 333), "tanners, because of their contact with the hides of dead animals, were considered unclean by more scrupulous Jews. In fact the Mishnah and Talmud suggest they were despised because of their ongoing uncleanness caused by their trade, not to mention the bad smell associated with the tanning process (cf. *m. Ketub. 7:10; b. Pesah 65a; Qidd. 82b*).

Jerusalem. There was a wall separating the inner courts from the outer courts of the temple and on the wall, it said, “No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the temple and enclosure. Any one who is caught trespassing will bear personal responsibility for his ensuing death.”⁶

The dietary laws had been a barrier to people entering into the one people of God. If people wanted to become part of God’s people, men had to be circumcised and all had to observe the law, including the dietary laws. But Jesus had already said that it’s not food that makes someone unclean. It’s what’s inside a person that makes them unclean in God’s sight. Jesus said to his disciples,

“Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him,¹⁹ since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” [Then Mark gives us this parenthetical comment:] (Thus he declared all foods clean.)²⁰ And he said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles him.²¹ For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery,²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person” (Mark 7:18-23).

Peter heard these words from Jesus, but he hadn’t learned his lesson yet. So God gave him a powerful vision to show that there has now been a change: The old dietary laws are out, and Gentiles who put their trust in Jesus are now in.

So now let’s read Acts 10:1-8:

¹ At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort,² a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God.³ About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, “Cornelius.”⁴ And he stared at him in terror and said, “What is it, Lord?” And he said to him, “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God.⁵ And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter.⁶ He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea.”⁷ When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those who attended him,⁸ and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.

Caesarea was a significant city further north on the coast from Joppa. It was built by Herod the Great and it was the capital of the province of Judea. And in that city was a Roman soldier named Cornelius. He worshiped the God of Israel, but he didn’t know about Jesus yet. An angel

⁶ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, rev. ed., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 409.

appeared to him and told him to send men to find Peter, who was still in Joppa at Simon the tanner's house.

On the next day, as those men approached Joppa, Peter had his own vision. Let's read verses 9-16:

⁹The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. ¹⁰And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance ¹¹and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. ¹²In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³And there came a voice to him: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." ¹⁴But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." ¹⁵And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has made clean, do not call common." ¹⁶This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.

While Peter was praying, he was hungry, and he had a vision of a sheet—perhaps a tablecloth—with all kinds of animals on it. It seems that all kinds of animals were there: birds, quadrupeds, and reptiles (essentially the three divisions of animals mentioned in Gen. 6:20). Among these animals must have been unclean animals, because Peter was told to kill and eat the animals and he says he's never eaten anything unclean in his whole life. And Peter was told, "What God has made clean, do not call common." The point is that these animals are no longer unclean. This happened three times before the vision ended.⁷

Peter didn't understand the vision immediately. He had a reputation of being a bit thick-headed. He also had a reputation of doing things in threes: Peter denied knowing Jesus three times (Luke 22:54-62); and when Peter was reinstated, Jesus asked him three times, "Do you love me?" (John 21:15-17). The point of the vision was not only that these animals were all clean, but that anyone who eats these animals is clean. In other words, Gentiles are not defiled by what they eat. The reality was that there was nothing inherently wrong with pork or shellfish, or the many other animals singled out as unclean. Yet God gave Israel temporary laws not to eat these foods. Now that Jesus has come, the law is no longer in force. (See Galatians for more.)

Again, Peter didn't understand all of this immediately. And that's understandable, but this is a big change in the way that people relate to God.

⁷ Perhaps all these visions seem strange and unbelievable. Yet visions are reported today. In particular, many Muslims have come to faith in Jesus by having a vision of him. These visions lead to them to seek out more information about Jesus, by going to a church or finding a Bible. These visions are not sufficient to bring someone to faith, but God uses them as the beginning of a process of bringing those whom he pleases to himself.

Let's see what happens next. We'll read verses 17-29:

¹⁷ Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision that he had seen might mean, behold, the men who were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry for Simon's house, stood at the gate ¹⁸ and called out to ask whether Simon who was called Peter was lodging there. ¹⁹ And while Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you. ²⁰ Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them." ²¹ And Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one you are looking for. What is the reason for your coming?" ²² And they said, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say." ²³ So he invited them in to be his guests.

The next day he rose and went away with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa accompanied him. ²⁴ And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. ²⁵ When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. ²⁶ But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am a man." ²⁷ And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered. ²⁸ And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. ²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me."

The men from Cornelius come to Peter. While they come, the Holy Spirit tells Peter that these men were coming for him, and that he should follow them. The visions and this word from the Holy Spirit show that God is the one who is directing all of these events. In other words, it's God's revelation to Peter. God wants Peter to go to Cornelius.

So on the next day, Peter, the men from Cornelius, and six others go to see Cornelius. When Cornelius sees Peter, we're told that Cornelius tries to worship him. It's possible that he was just paying respect to Peter, since the word translated as "worship" can also mean genuflect or prostrate oneself. But it seems like he's doing more than that. He thinks Peter is some kind of divine man. But Peter says, "I'm just a man. Stand up. Don't worship me."

Then Peter tells them that it's "unlawful" for a Jew to associate with a Gentile. But now Peter understands the point: "God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean." Peter gets the point: The vision wasn't really about food. It was about people.

But Peter doesn't really understand why he had to see Cornelius. So Cornelius tells Peter about his own vision. Let's read verses 30-33:

³⁰ And Cornelius said, “Four days ago, about this hour, I was praying in my house at the ninth hour, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing ³¹ and said, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. ³² Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.’ ³³ So I sent for you at once, and you have been kind enough to come. Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord.”

Cornelius explains his vision to Peter. And then he says, “we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord.” In other words, Cornelius says, “Peter, we’re here because we’re supposed to hear what God has given you to say.” And from what follows, it’s clear that Cornelius and those in his household need to hear the gospel. That shows that it’s not enough to be a “fearer” of a generic God. It’s not enough to know the Old Testament. If someone is going to relate rightly to God, they need to know Jesus. So Peter starts to tell them about Jesus. Let’s read verses 34-43:

³⁴ So Peter opened his mouth and said: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶ As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), ³⁷ you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹ And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, ⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, ⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Before Peter begins talking about Jesus, he makes an important point: God doesn’t show partiality, at least not in terms of ethnicity. God is concerned not about what country you’re from or what language you speak. He’s concerned about your heart and what you do with your life. All who fear God, who acknowledge who he is and who live for him, are acceptable to God. Jesus is Lord of all: Jews and Gentiles. And this Jesus did good works. He healed people who were oppressed by the devil, by the force of evil in the world. And he was put to death on a tree, the cross, bearing the curse that his people deserve (cf. Gal. 3:13). He is the one who will judge

everyone who has ever lived. The prophets foretold that all who believe in Jesus receive forgiveness. Perhaps Peter has in mind the new covenant promises of forgiveness of sin (Jer. 31:34; Ezek. 36:25).

When Peter is preaching to Gentiles, he doesn't quote the Old Testament. But he makes many allusions to the Old Testament, which is fitting because Cornelius would be familiar with it. Since Cornelius is a God-fearing Gentile, it's not like Peter is preaching to an ignorant pagan. But he's telling him something important. The only way to be acceptable to God is through faith in Jesus, who bore the sins of his people when he died on the "tree" that is the cross. Jesus is the ultimate authority. He is Lord of all and will be the judge of all. That means Cornelius and all other Gentiles need to bow the knee to Jesus.

What happens next shows that Cornelius and those in his household believe Peter's message. Before Peter even finishes, the Holy Spirit comes upon them, confirming that they belong to the people of God. Let's read verses 44-48:

⁴⁴ While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. ⁴⁵ And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. ⁴⁶ For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, ⁴⁷ "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" ⁴⁸ And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.

This is a bit like what happens in Acts 2. The Holy Spirit comes upon believers and they speak in tongues. In this case, it seems that Cornelius and the others who hear this message and believe praise God in ecstatic language. And the Jewish Christians are amazed, "because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles." These Gentiles don't need to be circumcised. They don't need to eat different food. They just need to believe in Jesus in order to be part of the church. And then Peter has these believers baptized.

I'm not going to read the beginning of chapter 11, because we already heard those words. What happens after this is that Peter goes to Jerusalem and when he gets there, some Jewish Christians who insisted on circumcision criticize Peter because he had gone to Gentiles and had eaten with them. Then he tells what happened in chapter 10. This repetition is meant to show us how important this episode is. When Luke repeats something in Acts, it's his way of putting it in bold and underlining it. The main point that Peter makes is found in Acts 11:17-18:

¹⁷ If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" ¹⁸ When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life."

The rest of chapter 11 shows that in Antioch, there was a church that had both Jewish and Gentile Christians in it. Antioch was the third-largest city in the Roman Empire, and it became a very significant church. I'm going to read the rest of chapter 11, just so we see what happens next. Let's read verses 19-30:

¹⁹ Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. ²⁰ But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. ²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. ²² The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³ When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, ²⁴ for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. ²⁵ So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

²⁷ Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). ²⁹ So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. ³⁰ And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

The main point is that Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians were in this church. Hellenists in this case are Greek-speaking Gentiles, and many turned to the Lord Jesus. And when this happened, Barnabas went and got Saul, who was in Tarsus, and together, they taught a number of people in this church. This is where believers were first called Christians. They were no longer regarded as Jews or Gentiles, but as something else.

This business of Jewish and Gentile relations may seem very foreign to us. What does it have to do with us?

First of all, it's important to know that there is only one people of God and there is only one way to be acceptable to God. The one people of God are those who are united to Jesus. In Ephesians 2:14-16, Paul writes,

¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

He goes on to say that this “new man,” the church, has access to the Father in one Spirit through Jesus, that they “are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,” and are “a holy temple” and a “dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (vv. 18-22).

What matters is not what someone looks like. What matters is not certain *amoral* cultural practices, like what food we eat or what clothes we wear. What matters is not what country we’re from or what language we speak. What matters is whether we are united to Jesus because we trust that he is Lord, or King, and he is the only way to be made right with God. What matters is how we love God and love other people.

That leads me to my second point: If you are a Christian, there is no room for racism. It wasn’t that long ago that racism was a real problem in the church. I’m sure there are churches where it still is a problem. Last week, I mentioned I was reading a book by Russell Moore, called *Onward*. In that book, he mentions an incident in his Sunday school class when he was 4 or 5 years old. (This was in Mississippi, roughly forty years ago.) The children in the class had brought little offering envelopes from home to give to world missions. Little Russell Moore was fidgeting in the class and he pulled a quarter out of his envelope and put it in his mouth. The teacher didn’t want Moore to have that coin in his mouth, so she said, “That’s filthy; why, you don’t know whether a black man may have held that coin.”⁸ Moore goes on to say that this woman wasn’t a Klansman and didn’t think of herself as a white supremacist. But out of her mouth came what was in her heart: The idea that people who looked different were unclean. (He also thinks that they might have then sung “Jesus Loves the Little Children” after that; the hypocrisy was evident.)⁹

It should be clear that this is wrong. If any of us have these thoughts, or any similar thoughts, we need to repent. There is no room in Christianity for looking down at others, perhaps people who look different, or people who have less money, or people who aren’t as well educated.

⁸ Russell Moore, *Onward: Engaging the Culture without Losing the Gospel* (Nashville: B&H Books, 2015), 112.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 113.

In fact, all of us start out “unclean” in this life. Isaiah 64:6 says, “We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.” The “we” there is Israel! But it’s true of us, too. Because of our sin, we are polluted. The only way to be made clean is to go to Jesus to find forgiveness. First John 1:9 says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Here’s a third point: In Christianity, there is no room for ethnocentricity, the idea that we are better than people from other nations. After all, what were Adam and Eve? Were they Jews? Gentiles? Americans? No; they were just people, and all of us come from them (Acts 17:26). They probably didn’t look exactly like we do, and they didn’t speak English. And in the end, after Jesus returns and judges the living and the dead, it will just be God and his people living in a restored world. In the book of Revelation, it is said of Jesus, “by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9). All kinds of different people will be there. So we should get along now, on earth as it is in heaven.

Here’s my fourth and final point: At the beginning, I asked what the solution to racism is. And I said that Christianity is the only real, enduring solution to this problem. In order to live rightly in this world, we need new hearts. And this only comes from the Holy Spirit working on us from the inside out. The Holy Spirit dwells in every person who is united to Jesus. We need to be reconciled to each other, that is true. But even more, we need to be reconciled to God through Jesus. And when we are, our hearts start to change. Peter’s views on these matters changed. So did Paul’s. Ours can, too.

Christianity also teaches that all of us are made in the image of God. This belief motivates us to treat others with respect and dignity and love. Other worldviews don’t motivate us to love others in this way. If you assume that we have all evolved from lesser species, that we are the products of blind forces, of undirected mutations culled by natural selection, then there is no reason to believe that every human should be treated well. Charles Darwin, the great proponent of evolution, called the natives of Tierra del Fuego, an island off the southernmost tip of South America, “savages.” These are Darwin’s own words about “the civilised races of man”—in other words, white Europeans—and “savages”:

At some future period, not very distant as measured by centuries, the civilised races of man will almost certainly exterminate, and replace, the savage races throughout the world.¹⁰

Christianity doesn't teach that life is all about the survival of the fittest. Instead, it teaches that God loves the weak and the vulnerable. And Christians are commanded to care for people like that (James 1:27). Jesus even tells us to love our enemies (Luke 6:27-36).

This doesn't mean that we love how other people live, or that we think everyone is right in God's eyes. There are people who are different from us who need to repent of evil things they are doing. But having a certain color of skin or being from a different place is not evil. There's nothing to repent of. But being proud, or greedy, or sexually immoral—those are things to repent of. Those who do not repent and run to Jesus will face judgment when he returns, and those people will be cut off forever from God's presence and anything good. In that way, God does show partiality.

Christians, there is no room in your life for racism. There is no room for hatred for others. There is no room for thinking you're better than people from other countries. God put you in this time and place. Every advantage you have has come from God. So be grateful. And be loving to your neighbor. And if you are tempted to think you are better than others, reflect on your own rebellion against God. Think about how you deserve God's wrath, but he has given you love and grace. If that is the case, then we should love others and be gracious toward them.

¹⁰ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, <<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/2300/pg2300-images.html>>, accessed August 7, 2015. It's worth noting that the full title of Darwin's earlier book is *The Origin of Species, by means of Natural Selection; or, The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*.