

It's Not What You Know, It's Who!

Acts 10:34-44

By

Rev. Karen W. Berns, Associate Pastor

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San Marino Community Church
1750 Virginia Road
San Marino, CA 91108
(626) 282-4181 • Fax: (626) 282-4185
www.smccpby.com • smcc@smccpby.com

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

As many of you know, caring for vulnerable children in the developing world, especially Africa where I've had the privilege to travel and minister twice, is one of my passions, as well as a commitment of this congregation.

Through the years, San Marino Community Church has cared for the needs of children at risk in Africa through Ministry of Hope in Malawi, and recently through Project Education, Inc.

For several years, the congregation has joined numerous others in contributing to Discover the World's Shepherd's Homes orphans. Through this organization, Don and I have the joy of helping support an outstanding young lady, Judith Akinyi, in Kenya. So when there was a recent Discover the World golfing fundraiser, those of you who know that after the Lord and family and ministry, Don's passion is golf, you probably guessed that he yearned to play in that event. However, the ticket for four was \$2,000.—too steep for our budget.

Wouldn't you know that there was to be one 'free' foursome with Co-Founder and Executive Director, Rev. Dr. Doug Millham! What a gift! We've known the Millhams since the 1970's when we were all at Fuller Seminary, and since I serve on Discover The World's U.S. Board, Don was invited to play -- for free! Then we could make a gift of an amount that worked for us!

It's not who you are or what you know, but who you know! Though at times, this truism may seem exclusive or like favoritism, today we'll see how this truth works in our favor. In the tenth chapter of Acts, the Apostle Peter had a vision that changed his entire outlook on life. Like most Jews of his day, Peter had always believed that God chose the Jews because of something in them, rather than God's character. In the vision, however, Peter saw heaven open and a large sheet brought to earth, filled with all kinds of animals, reptiles, and birds. A voice told him, "Get up Peter, kill and eat." Peter was taken aback. "Surely not," he said. "I have never eaten anything impure or

unclean.” Peter had always adhered to the strict Jewish dietary laws, which forbade eating things like shrimp, pork, catfish, and so on.

The voice then said, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” Peter had this same vision three times in a row; it was obvious that God was teaching him something new. Soon afterward, Peter was invited to speak to the household of Cornelius, a God-fearing Gentile - a non-Jew. Cornelius said to him, “We are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.”

Now listen to God’s Word to us from our scripture lesson in Acts 10:34-43: “Then Peter began to speak to them:

‘I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.’”

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

Suddenly Peter understood the meaning of the vision. He preached a brief but powerful message highlighting that: Jesus was sent by God, equipped by God’s Holy Spirit power. Jesus is God’s gift to every person. Jesus healed the hurting, fed the hungry, physically and spiritually, and taught staggering truths about God and himself. Jesus was crucified. God raised Jesus from the dead. God sent people like us to tell the story of Jesus Christ. God’s work in Jesus Christ is to forgive sins.

It can be summarized with the statement, “It doesn’t matter who you are, it only matters who you know.”

Peter described the all-encompassing love of God, which is available to everyone, regardless of race, nationality, or social status. He told them and he tells us that God loves every one the same. Let’s take a look at Peter’s message and see how it affects our lives today, our relationship with God and how God accepts everyone the same.

When I visited Texas, I saw pickup trucks with bumper stickers that read, “Texan by the grace of God.” That just about sums up how most Texans feel. They are proud of their home state, and they’re proud of the Dallas Cowboys. Texas Stadium, where the Cowboys play, is built almost like a dome, but it has a huge opening at the top. The seats in the stadium are under a roof, but the field itself is under the open sky. You know why that is, don’t you? They say, “It’s so God can watch his favorite team play.” Another bumper sticker you will see occasionally in the Lone Star State is “It’s hard to be humble when you’re from Texas.”

This is the kind of attitude many religious elitists had during the First Century. In the Hebrew Scriptures we read how the Jews were designated as God’s chosen people. Some interpreted this to mean they were God’s favorite people as well... that God loved them more than others. To put it bluntly, they believed that God had no use for anyone who was not a Jew, — Gentiles — meaning us. Though a Gentile could convert to Judaism, at best they would attain only a “second-class” status in their religion. I’m sure you know the prayer of a religious Jewish man? The rabbis taught a three-fold daily prayer: “Blessed be God who did not make me a Gentile; blessed be God who did not make me a boor (an ignorant peasant or slave); blessed be God who did not make me a woman.”¹ Those were the truly second class citizens to the Jews of Jesus’ day. It was this kind of caste system and prejudice, that I think God wanted Peter to overcome. Peter’s mission was to tell the world good news: God is not only the God of the Jews, God is the god of all creation and God loves us and accepts us all the same.

¹ The prayer is quoted here by Peter Schemm Jr in *Journal of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, Vol. 8 #1, as it appears in Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1990) pg. 157. According to Longenecker, the prayer is “credited to R. Judah ben Elai (c. 150 A.D.) in t. Ber. 7.18 and j. Ber. 13b, but to R. Meier (his contemporary) in b. Menah. 43b.”

Verses 34-35 read, “Peter fairly exploded with his good news. It’s God’s own truth, nothing could be plainer: God plays no favorites! It makes no difference who you are or where you’re from—if you want God and are ready to do as God says, the door is open.”

Our U.S. Declaration of Independence proclaims that all men, (hopefully meaning people in 2010) are created equal. In theory this may be true, but it hasn’t worked out that way in our society, has it? All people are not created equal in the US. Some are born with greater opportunities than others, more money, more talent, more intelligence, or more resources. We have not created a society where all people are equal. Sadly, the same can be said about the Church. Martin Luther King once said, “The most segregated hour in America is 11:00 on Sunday morning.” This is a mistake that many churches have made in the past; today we must strive to show others that God accepts everyone, and so do we.

God doesn’t show favorites. God doesn’t favor America over all other nations. God doesn’t favor one race over all other races, nor men over women, nor the rich over the poor. It doesn’t matter who you are, God loves you as much as every other person created in God’s image — everyone. And Jesus died for all, for everyone.

When we say, “it is level at the foot of the cross”, that’s good news, because what really matters in life is a relationship with God, and it’s equally available to anyone, thanks to Jesus Christ. What does it really mean? Anyone can know God. How? Take a fresh look at Jesus Christ. Invite him into your life. Anyone can talk with God in prayer, as Jesus taught and invites us. Anyone can experience God’s love. Let Jesus, who enfleshed God’s love, live in you in new and deeper ways. Anyone can be forgiven, because of Jesus’ death in our place, but this forgiveness must be appropriated. It’s a gift to be opened. Anyone can live a life that brings God glory, as we open ourselves to God’s Spirit working in and through us. In light of all the inequality that exists in our world, it is good to know that in the most important aspect of life, true equality exists. It doesn’t matter who you are, God accepts everyone the same.

God offers salvation to everyone the same. If you stood before the throne of God today to face judgment based on your own merit, how did you think you would fare? When we think about the judgment of God, some of us probably begin to feel uneasy. Even if God judges everyone fairly, I know the feeling. No one wants to stand before the judge when they’re guilty. And without exception, we all are guilty.

The Apostle Paul wrote, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of the God.”² The Lord judges us impartially. The Lord won’t let you off the hook just because you are who you are, but, here’s the good news, God will let you off the hook because of who God is.

“There is only one place where true equality exists: in a relationship with God.”³ God loves and accepts everyone the same. And as we were reminded on Good Friday Jesus died for all of us. “All of us have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”. Paul’s words in Romans 3:23-26 is translated in *The Message*, “Since we’ve compiled this long and sorry record as sinners (both us and them) and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us, God did it for us. Out of sheer generosity he put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we’re in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus Christ.”⁴

God sacrificed Jesus on the altar of the world to clear that world of sin. Having faith in him sets us in the clear. God decided on this course of action in full view of the public to set the world in the clear with himself through the sacrifice of Jesus, finally taking care of the sins he had so patiently endured. This is not only clear, but it’s now—this is current history! God sets things right. He also makes it possible for us to live in his rightness. God’s purpose for sending Jesus into the world was to save us from our sins. Peter said, “Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”⁵

You and I will never be able to earn good standing with God based on our own merit. Nothing you or I will ever do will make us worthy enough to stand in the presence of God. But Jesus died on the cross for us and God raised him from the dead that first Easter Sunday! We are Easter people, forgiven, cleansed, and empowered to live new lives. There is more grace and forgiveness in God’s heart than there is sin in your life – that’s the character of God.

If you believe in Jesus, you experience God’s forgiveness, you live in God’s presence, and God’s power dwells in you every day of your life. It doesn’t matter who you are, it only matters who you know. This is how you begin the Christian life—by know-

² Romans 3:23-26

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Acts 10: 43

ing and believing in Jesus. Believing is more than mental assent — it's committing as much of you and your life to Jesus Christ as you release to him. He accepts you no matter who you are; he will show you mercy no matter who you are; he will forgive your sins no matter who you are or what you've done.

Recently, giving gift cards instead of a present has become popular. People enjoy getting them because they can choose whatever they want. Gift cards often come with expiration dates, however. I have slid one into my wallet and forgotten about it. A gift card can be worth \$100 one day, and then the next day you might as well throw it in the garbage because it's expired. You've missed the opportunity to spend it! Also, with today's economy, we've had the experience of being given a gift card to a particular store, and before we can get there, it has closed and gone out of business, like the Lighthouse in Pasadena.

God's gift of forgiveness is like a gift card in that's more valuable than anything we can imagine. Because God loves you and me, God paid for it with Jesus' life. God is holding that priceless gift card out to you, waiting for you to take it. If we don't accept it and use it, however, then it's of no value to us. A gift card is only plastic unless it is redeemed. Don't wait until it's too late. Coming to Christ is a matter of responding to God's free gift of grace; continuing in Christ is a matter of God's grace, too. When we open our lives to Jesus — that is, put our faith in him — we are forgiven, cleansed, made new. As we grow in living the Christian life from day to day, we will make mistakes along the way. As we pray through Christ, our sins are forgiven and we strive to live as God would have us live, growing to be more like Jesus in our own unique way.

Every year Apple sponsors a computer convention called MacWorld where thousands of dealers and distributors and software developers come together. One year a scheduled speaker was Steve Jobs, one of the founders of Apple Computers. In order to get into the convention, every person was required to have an I.D. badge. Steve left his badge at the hotel that day and didn't realize it until he got to the convention center. "No problem," he thought. "After all, I'm Steve Jobs." Unfortunately, the security guard at the door didn't recognize him and refused to let him in without a badge. One of Jobs' assistants offered to let him use his badge. When the security guard heard this, he threatened to have them both arrested. After a flurry of frantic calls on their cell phones, the Mac people were finally able to locate the security guard's boss, who came to the main entrance. Steve Jobs knew this man, and he was finally let in to speak at his own convention.

It didn't matter that he was founder of the company, if Steve Jobs had not known the security guard's boss he never would have gotten in the door. It doesn't matter who you are, it only matters who you know. This is good news. Most of us are painfully aware of how short we come in comparison with God's perfection. Some have tried again and again to do right, and have failed each and every time. There is hope for us. Sin is a serious matter and must be dealt with in a serious way. God has already done this for us. God offers you the free gift of forgiveness and freedom, at the high price of Jesus' death.

It doesn't matter who you are or what you know, it only matters who you know.

Please pray with me. "Holy and merciful God, we thank you for Jesus' perfect selfless life, his death on our behalf, and your resurrection power. Help us to receive that gift card you offer us, so we might know Jesus and You and live lives of faith, forgiveness and freedom by your power. It's in Jesus' name I pray, Amen."

Unless otherwise noted, biblical references are to the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible, copyright 1946, 1952, 1971 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.