



SUNDAY SCHOOL MAY 18, 2025

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NEW TESTAMENT

Acts 11:1-18

PETER'S REPORT TO THE CHURCH OF JERUSALEM

Now the apostles and the brothers and sisters who were in Judea heard that the gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So, when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?”

Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance, I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners, and it came close to me.

“As I looked at it closely, I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord, for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’

But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven.

“At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house.

“He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’

“And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?”

When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”

OVERVIEW

Acts 11:1–18 recounts Peter's defense of his actions after visiting Cornelius, a Gentile. The early Jewish believers in Jerusalem were critical of Peter for eating with uncircumcised men. In response, Peter explains the vision he received from God (Acts 10) and how the Holy Spirit fell on the Gentiles just as it had on Jewish believers. **This moment marks a significant turning point: the official inclusion of Gentiles into the Christian movement without requiring circumcision or full conversion to Judaism.**

BIBLICAL CONTEXT

Connection to Acts 10: This passage is a continuation and explanation of the events in Acts 10, where Peter has a vision of a sheet filled with "unclean" animals and is told not to call anything impure that God has made clean.

Early Church Struggles: The Jewish Christian community was still grappling with how (or if) Gentiles could be included in the covenant promises.



Key Themes:

God's initiative in including Gentiles

The role of the Holy Spirit in breaking boundaries

Unity and universality of the gospel

HISTORICAL / NON-BIBLICAL / POLITICAL CONTEXT

Jewish Identity and Purity Laws: Jews maintained strict dietary and social separation laws to preserve religious identity, especially under Roman occupation.

Circumcision Controversy: Circumcision was central to Jewish identity. Many early Christians believed that converts must become Jews first.

Roman Occupation: The Jews were under Roman rule, and tensions were high. Gentiles were often seen as unclean or idolatrous.

Cornelius as a Centurion: He represents a Roman military officer—a symbol of the occupying force—making his inclusion radical and controversial.

See Addendum on Cornelius.

HISTORICAL TIMELINE / BIBLICAL TIMEFRAME

Date of Event: Likely occurred around **35–40 AD**, within a few years of Jesus's resurrection and ascension.

Place: Begins in **Caesarea** (Cornelius' home) and continues in **Jerusalem** where Peter reports to the other apostles and believers.

Church Development Phase: This is during the **early expansion phase** of the Christian movement, transitioning from a Jewish sect to a multi-ethnic faith.





SCHOLARLY METAPHORICAL INTERPRETATION WITH MODERN-DAY CONTEXT

Metaphor: The Gospel as a Table with No Barriers

The sheet with animals symbolizes all people being invited to God's table.

Peter's eating with Gentiles prefigures the breaking down of social, ethnic, and religious barriers.

Modern-Day Parallels:

Inclusivity in the Church: Just as the early church had to wrestle with who was "in" or "out," today's church must confront issues of inclusion—race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and nationality.

Institutional Resistance: The criticism Peter receives mirrors resistance faced by reformers or inclusion advocates today.

Divine Initiative: The Holy Spirit takes the lead, often outside human control or institutional approval—a challenge to top-down ecclesial structures.

SUMMARY

In Acts 11:1–18, Peter defends his ministry to Gentiles by recounting his vision and the Holy Spirit's clear work among non-Jews. This marks a pivotal moment in Christian history—the formal recognition that Gentiles, without converting to Judaism, can receive the gospel. It sets a precedent for a global, inclusive Christianity, emphasizing that God shows no favoritism and that salvation is a work of the Spirit, not human tradition.

NEW TESTAMENT (GOSPEL)

John 13:31-35

THE SIGN OF JONAH AND RETURN OF THE UNCLEAN SPIRIT

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you."

But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth.

"The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and indeed something greater than Jonah is here! The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and indeed something greater than Solomon is here!

"When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it wanders through waterless regions looking for a resting place, but it finds none. Then it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' When it returns, it finds it empty, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and brings along seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and live there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So will it be also with this evil generation."



OVERVIEW

John 13:31–35 occurs during Jesus’ final hours with His disciples, commonly referred to as the **Farewell Discourse**. After Judas departs to betray Him, Jesus speaks intimately to the remaining disciples. This passage contains the **"New Commandment"** — that the disciples love one another as Jesus has loved them. It is a turning point where Jesus shifts focus from public ministry to preparing His closest followers for life after His death.

BIBLICAL CONTEXT

Immediate Setting: This passage follows Jesus washing His disciples' feet (John 13:1–17) and predicting Judas’ betrayal (John 13:18–30). Judas has just exited the scene in verse 30, marking the beginning of the Passion narrative.

Thematic Focus:

Glorification: Jesus speaks of His glorification through the cross, a theme emphasized in John’s Gospel where Jesus' death is seen not as defeat but as divine exaltation.

Love Commandment: Introduced here and echoed in later chapters (e.g., John 15:12), this “new” commandment anchors Christian ethics.

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

Connection to the Gospel’s Purpose: John's Gospel aims to show that Jesus is the Son of God and to inspire belief that leads to eternal life (John 20:31). This teaching on love is core to that mission.

“But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

HISTORICAL / NON-BIBLICAL / POLITICAL CONTEXT

First-Century Palestine: A Roman-occupied region under tight control, where tensions among Jews, Romans, and various Jewish sects (Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots) ran high. Radical messages, especially those seen as politically subversive, were dangerous.

Jewish Religious Climate: The Mosaic Law emphasized love for neighbor (Leviticus 19:18), but it was often interpreted within a tribal or national framework. Jesus redefines this command with universal scope and self-sacrificial love.

Christian Communities Later on: Early Christian groups, living under Roman persecution, found in this command a moral and spiritual identity that distinguished them from both Jewish and pagan communities. “See how they love one another” became a notable phrase describing Christians by outsiders like Tertullian (c. 200 AD).

HISTORICAL TIMELINE / BIBLICAL TIMEFRAME

Approximate Date of Event: Circa **30–33 AD**, during the week of Passover, just before Jesus’ crucifixion.

Date of Gospel Composition: Most scholars date the Gospel of John between **90–100 AD**, written by the Johannine community reflecting on Jesus' teachings several decades after His death.

Sociopolitical Environment When Written:



Jerusalem had been destroyed by Rome in 70 AD.

Christians were increasingly separating from Judaism and facing marginalization.

The message of love served to unify communities experiencing internal and external threats.

SCHOLARLY METAPHORICAL INTERPRETATION WITH MODERN-DAY CONTEXT

Metaphorical Focus: “Glory” Through Sacrificial Love: Jesus’ concept of glory is paradoxical—He is glorified not through conquest but through **humble, self-giving love** culminating in the cross.

This challenges modern assumptions that glory comes through power, status, or victory.

The “New Commandment” as Ethical Revolution: The command to “love one another as I have loved you” transcends typical reciprocity. Jesus loved those who betrayed, denied, and abandoned Him — and still washed their feet.

Modern Parallel: In an age of division, polarization, and transactional relationships, this radical, unconditional love is countercultural and socially transformative.

A Community Identity Marker: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples...”

Contemporary Application: Not theology, doctrine, or political alignment, but **love** is the true hallmark of discipleship. For churches today, this serves as a litmus test: are we known by our love?

What Does “Believing” Really Mean in John’s Gospel?

In the Gospel of John, "believing" isn't just intellectual agreement — it's relational trust and active allegiance.

It means: Trusting in who Jesus is, embracing what He taught, and living in response to that truth.

So, when John 20:31 says, “that by believing you may have life in his name,” it’s not about just saying “*Yeah, I think Jesus existed*” — it’s about trusting Him with your life, following His way of love, and living in the reality of His resurrection power.

Simple Analogy: *Believing in Jesus is less like agreeing He’s real — and more like sitting in a chair you trust will hold you. It’s resting your weight in Him.*

See Addendum on Believing.

SUMMARY

In John 13:31–35, Jesus begins His final discourse after Judas leaves to betray Him. He speaks of His imminent glorification—paradoxically pointing to the cross as His moment of divine exaltation. In this sacred moment, He gives His disciples a **new commandment**: to love one another **as He has loved them**. This love is to be the distinguishing mark of the Christian community. Amid betrayal and impending death, Jesus calls His followers to embody the selfless love that He Himself demonstrates—setting a standard that transcends time, politics, and religious systems.



ADDENDUM

Thematic Connections Between Scriptures

John 13:31–35	Acts 11:1–18
Jesus commands His disciples to love one another as He has loved them — a love that crosses boundaries, forgives betrayal, and involves humble service.	Peter recounts his vision and defends the inclusion of Gentiles, realizing that God shows no partiality and gives the Holy Spirit even to outsiders.

1. Love as the New Defining Marker (John 13)

Jesus says: *“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”*

This is not just affection — it’s a **radical reorientation** of identity, based on **sacrificial love**, not on heritage, law, or ritual.

At the Last Supper, Jesus models humility by washing feet and preparing to give His life — including for those who will fail Him.

2. Love Breaks Down Boundaries (Acts 11)

Peter’s vision (from Acts 10, retold in 11) and his defense before the Jerusalem believers show a key shift: **Gentiles can receive the Holy Spirit too.**

What prompted this shift? A vision, yes — but also a growing recognition that **God’s love isn’t bound by dietary laws or ethnic lines.**

Peter says: *“If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed... who was I that I could hinder God?”* (Acts 11:17)

3. Jesus’ Love Sets the Standard for Peter’s Transformation

Peter, who had once argued against Jesus washing his feet, now accepts that **his old assumptions about purity and belonging were wrong.**

In John, Peter is present when Jesus says “Love one another.” In Acts, Peter begins **living it out** — extending love and community even to the Gentiles.

4. Modern-Day Metaphorical Interpretation

John 13 sets the foundation: love without exclusion or pride.

Acts 11 shows the application: the community wrestles with whether to love and accept people previously seen as “unclean” or “outsiders.”

Today’s Church faces the same question: Will we define ourselves by doctrine, tradition, or purity boundaries — or by the expansive, inclusive love Jesus commanded?

5. Summary of the Combined Message

Jesus’ command to love one another (John 13) becomes the practical engine that drives Peter to embrace outsiders in Acts 11. Love is not theoretical; it expands the boundaries



of who is included. What begins in the upper room moves outward into the world, through the Spirit, drawing all people into God's redemptive embrace.

Who Wrote Acts?

The **Book of Acts** was most-likely written by **Luke**, the same author traditionally credited with the **Gospel of Luke**.

Key Points about Luke and Acts:

Same Author, Two Volumes: Acts is the second part of a two-volume work—**Luke-Acts**—written by the same person to provide a continuous narrative of Jesus' life (in the Gospel) and the birth and spread of the early church (in Acts).

Recipient: Both books are addressed to **Theophilus**, possibly a real person or a symbolic name meaning “lover of God.”

Authorship Tradition: While Luke does not name himself, early Christian tradition (from the 2nd century onward) consistently attributes both books to **Luke**, a companion of Paul (see Colossians 4:14; Philemon 1:24; 2 Timothy 4:11).

Profession: Luke is described by Paul as a **physician**, suggesting he was well-educated.

Style and Language: The Greek in Luke-Acts is polished and sophisticated, indicating a learned Hellenistic author familiar with both Jewish and Greco-Roman traditions.

Who was Cornelius?

Position: Cornelius was a **centurion** in the **Italian Cohort** (Acts 10:1), a Roman military officer typically in charge of about 100 soldiers.

Location: He lived in **Caesarea**, a major Roman port city and administrative center on the Mediterranean coast of Judea.

Ethnicity: He was a **Gentile**—not Jewish—but described as a “**God-fearer**”, meaning he worshiped the God of Israel and lived a morally upright life, though he had not fully converted to Judaism (e.g., wasn't circumcised).

Character: Acts 10:2 says he was:

Devout

God-fearing

Generous to the poor

Regular in prayer

Cornelius is the **first Gentile** in the New Testament explicitly recorded as receiving the Holy Spirit. His story is crucial for showing that God's salvation and Spirit are available **to all people**, not just Jews. His vision and Peter's vision together show **divine orchestration** to break down social and religious boundaries.



Believing

What Does “Believing” Really Mean in John’s Gospel?

In the Gospel of John, “believing” isn’t just intellectual agreement — it’s **relational trust** and **active allegiance**. It means:

Trusting in who Jesus is, embracing what He taught, and living in response to that truth.

So, when John 20:31 says, “that by believing you may have life in his name,” it’s not about just saying “Yeah, I think Jesus existed” — it’s about **trusting Him with your life, following His way of love, and living in the reality of His resurrection power.**

Simple Analogy:

Believing in Jesus is less like agreeing He’s real — and more like sitting in a chair you trust will hold you. It’s resting your weight in Him.

Believing is central throughout the New Testament, but **John's Gospel emphasizes it in a distinct way** — often more **relational, existential, and life-centered**, while other parts of the New Testament may focus more on **belief's connection to obedience, repentance, or community practice.**

Key Distinctions in “Belief” Across the New Testament:

1. John's Emphasis:

Greek word: *pisteuō* (πιστεύω) – used nearly **100 times** in John.

John rarely uses the noun *faith* (*pistis*); he prefers the **verb** “to believe” — implying **ongoing action**.

Belief is not just doctrinal — it is **intimate trust**, tied directly to **relationship and eternal life**.

Examples:

John 3:16 – “Whoever believes in Him shall not perish...”

John 6:29 – “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.”

John 20:31 – “That you may believe... and by believing have life...”

2. Paul’s Emphasis (e.g., Romans, Galatians):

Belief is tied closely to **faith and grace**, often in contrast to **works of the Law**.

Example: Romans 10:9 – “If you declare... and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.”

Paul expands belief into a **justifying faith** — belief that results in being made right with God.



3. James's Clarification:

James 2:19 warns: "Even the demons believe—and shudder."
His point: belief without **works of love or obedience** is dead.

So, true belief must manifest in action.

4. Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke):

Faith and belief are mentioned, often in context of **healing, obedience, or responding to the Kingdom**.

Example: Mark 9:24 – "I believe; help my unbelief!"

Shows faith as dynamic and growing, not fixed.

Conclusion:

Belief is a rich, multifaceted concept across the New Testament. John's Gospel elevates it as an **invitation into a relationship that gives life**, while Paul grounds it in **grace and justification**, James stresses **authenticity through action**, and the Synoptics show it as **a response to God's power and message**.

From Last Week: Casting Lots

Casting lots was an ancient practice used to make decisions, determine God's will, or assign responsibilities—something like drawing straws, tossing dice, or flipping a coin today, but often with a **spiritual or sacred purpose**.

Biblical Definition of Casting Lots

"Lots" were physical objects—possibly stones, sticks, or shards with markings—thrown or drawn to produce a **random outcome**, which people believed was **guided by God**.

Proverbs 16:33 – *"The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord."*

Uses in the Bible

Determining God's Will

Leviticus 16:8: Lots were cast to choose the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement.

Jonah 1:7: Sailors cast lots to find who was responsible for the storm—Jonah was chosen.

Assigning Duties or Land

Numbers 26:55 & Joshua 18:10: Land divisions for the tribes of Israel.

1 Chronicles 24:5: Assigning duties to priests.

Choosing People

Acts 1:26: The apostles cast lots to choose Matthias to replace Judas Iscariot.

Unjust Use

Matthew 27:35: Roman soldiers cast lots for Jesus' clothing during the crucifixion—this was **mocking**, not spiritual.

Modern Understanding



While casting lots had a sacred function in ancient Israel (especially before the Holy Spirit was given at Pentecost), it is **not a Christian practice today** for decision-making. After the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2, believers are encouraged to rely on **prayer, Scripture, and spiritual discernment** instead of random chance.

Summary

Casting lots = drawing random results to reveal God's decision.

It was common in the Old Testament and early New Testament.

Seen as a legitimate way to discern divine will before the Holy Spirit's guidance became central.

Not equivalent to gambling or superstition when done properly in biblical context.

From Last Week: Queen of the South

Jesus is referring to the **Queen of Sheba**, a real historical figure mentioned in the Old Testament. The story comes from:

1 Kings 10:1–10 and

2 Chronicles 9:1–12

She was a powerful and wealthy queen from the region of **Sheba**, often thought to be in modern-day **Yemen** (in southern Arabia), which is why she's called the "Queen of the South." **She traveled a great distance to meet King Solomon because she had heard of his wisdom and connection to God.** When she arrived, she asked him many hard questions and was amazed by his answers, his court, and his worship of the Lord.

Why Does Jesus Mention Her?

In **Matthew 12:42**, Jesus says:

"The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now something greater than Solomon is here."

He uses her as an example of a **Gentile woman** who **recognized God's truth and sought it out**, even though she wasn't part of Israel. In contrast, Jesus's own people (especially the religious leaders) were rejecting **Him**, who is greater than Solomon.

Summary

She represents someone **outside the faith community** who still recognizes God's wisdom and acts on it. Jesus uses her to highlight how **outsiders can sometimes be more faithful** than insiders who are spiritually blind.