



SUNDAY SCHOOL JANUARY 11, 2026

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New Testament: Acts 10:34-43

Context: In this moment, Peter realizes that the gospel he thought belonged to one people has always belonged to ALL people, and he says out loud what the Spirit has already made clear.

GENTILES HEAR THE GOOD NEWS

Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every people anyone who fears him and practices righteousness 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.”

OVERVIEW

Acts 10:34–43 records Peter’s sermon in the house of Cornelius, a Roman centurion. It marks a turning point in the early church: the explicit declaration that God shows no partiality and that Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection are for Jews and Gentiles alike.

This is not Peter *starting* a new theology—it is Peter *catching up* to what God has already done. The speech reframes Israel’s story through Jesus and removes ethnic, religious, and social boundaries from God’s saving work.

See Addendum on parallel to the Centurion Servant

BIBLICAL CONTEXT

Immediately Before (Acts 10:1–33)

- Cornelius, a Gentile and Roman officer, receives a vision instructing him to send for Peter.
- Peter receives a vision of unclean animals declared clean, challenging long-held purity laws.
- Peter resists at first, then obeys, entering a Gentile household—already a boundary violation.

Key tension: Peter does not yet understand that the vision is about *people*, not food.

Immediately After (Acts 10:44–48)

- The Holy Spirit falls on Cornelius and his household *before* baptism.
- Jewish believers are stunned that Gentiles receive the Spirit the same way they did.
- Peter orders baptism, acknowledging God has already acted.



Important note: The church does not authorize God's inclusion—God forces the church to recognize it.

Broader Context of Acts

Acts is about the expansion of the gospel:

- Jerusalem → Judea → Samaria → ends of the earth (Acts 1:8)
- The book repeatedly asks: *Who belongs?*
- Acts 10 is the theological hinge that makes Paul's Gentile mission possible.

HISTORICAL / NON-BIBLICAL / POLITICAL CONTEXT

- **Cornelius** is a Roman centurion—part of the occupying military force.
- Jews and Romans lived in constant tension; Gentiles were ritually “unclean.”
- Entering a Gentile home violated Jewish custom and identity boundaries.
- Rome tolerated religions that stayed ethnically contained—but Christianity does not.

Politically:

This sermon undermines ethnic nationalism, religious tribalism, and power-based hierarchy. Declaring “Jesus is Lord of all” subtly challenges Caesar’s claim to ultimate authority.

HISTORICAL TIMELINE / BIBLICAL TIMEFRAME

- Events likely occur around **AD 35–40**
- After Pentecost (Acts 2), before the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15)
- Roughly 5–10 years after Jesus’ crucifixion
- Still a *Jewish* movement trying to understand its scope

BIBLE TRANSLATION UNDERSTANDING

- **Original language:** Greek
- **Key phrase:** “*God shows no partiality*”
 - Literally: “God does not receive faces”
 - Meaning: God does not judge by status, ethnicity, power, or appearance
- “**Peace through Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all**”
 - *Kyrios* (“Lord”) is the same title used for Caesar
 - The phrase is both theological and political
- “**Everyone who believes**”
 - Greek emphasizes *all* without ethnic restriction
 - Not universalism—but radical availability

Across English translations (KJV → RSV → NRSV/NRSVUE), the core meaning remains stable, but modern translations more clearly preserve the *inclusive force* of Peter’s words rather than softening them into abstraction.

SCHOLARLY METAPHORICAL INTERPRETATION WITH MODERN-DAY & GRANT COUNTY CONTEXT

Metaphor: *The threshold moment*

Acts 10 is about standing in a doorway—between what we have always believed about “us” and what God reveals about “them.”



For Grant County, the “Gentile household” may look like:

- Someone who votes differently
- Someone who left church years ago
- Someone we assume is morally suspect
- Someone who doesn’t “sound Christian enough”

Peter doesn’t *argue* Cornelius into faith.

He recognizes God is already there.

This passage challenges the idea that the church’s role is gatekeeping rather than witnessing.

See Addendum on Gatekeeping.

HOW SHOULD WE ACT AND REACT TO THIS SCRIPTURE TODAY?

- **Name our assumptions**
 - Peter begins by confessing his realization.
 - **Faithfulness starts with humility.**
- **Go where we are uncomfortable**
 - Peter enters a home he was taught to avoid.
 - **Growth rarely happens in familiar spaces.**
- **Watch for the Spirit, not credentials**
 - God moves before theology is settled.
 - **The Spirit is not confined to our categories.**
- **Proclaim Jesus without shrinking the scope**
 - Jesus is not tribal property.
 - **“Lord of all” still means *all*.**
- **Let experience refine doctrine**
 - **The early church did not have it all figured out.**
 - Neither do we—and that’s okay.

Bottom Line

Acts 10:34–43 reminds us that the greatest threat to the gospel is not opposition from the outside, but certainty on the inside.



Gospel: Matthew 3:13-17

Context: Today we witness Jesus stepping into the Jordan to be baptized by John - not because He needs cleansing, but because He chooses solidarity, obedience, and public commissioning as the Spirit descends and the Father names Him "Beloved."

THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw God's Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him.

And a voice from the heavens said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

OVERVIEW

Matthew 3:13-17 is the baptism of Jesus: He comes from Galilee to the Jordan, John hesitates, Jesus insists "to fulfill all righteousness," and then the heavens open. The Spirit descends "like a dove," and a voice from heaven declares Jesus as God's beloved Son, the one with whom God is pleased.

This is a "threshold" moment: Jesus moves from hidden life into public mission. It is also one of the clearest Trinitarian scenes in the Gospels (Father's voice, Son in the water, Spirit descending) - not as a later theological add-on, but as a lived experience in the story.

BIBLICAL CONTEXT

Immediately Before (Matthew 3:1-12)

- **John's message:** repentance, urgency, and preparation: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."
- **Religious leaders confronted:** Pharisees and Sadducees are called a "brood of vipers," warned that heritage is not the same as faithfulness, and told to "bear fruit worthy of repentance."
- **A stronger One is coming:** John contrasts his water baptism with the Coming One who will baptize "with the Holy Spirit and fire."
- **Judgment imagery:** winnowing fork, threshing floor, chaff and fire - a strong warning that real change is demanded.

So, when Jesus arrives, it's in a charged moment: crowds are responding, leaders are being confronted, and expectation is high.

The Passage Itself (3:13-17)

- **John's reluctance** is important: it prevents us from misreading Jesus' baptism as Jesus "needing" repentance.
- **"Fulfill all righteousness"** signals obedience to God's saving plan - Jesus steps into Israel's story and identifies with the people He came to redeem.



- **Heavens opened + Spirit + Voice** is commissioning language. This reads like a prophet's call narrative, but for the Messiah.

Immediately After (Matthew 4:1-11 and onward)

- **Temptation in the wilderness:** the Spirit leads Jesus into testing. The baptism is not a spiritual "mountaintop" to stay on; it equips Him for trial.
- **Ministry begins:** Jesus announces the kingdom, calls disciples, teaches, heals, and redefines power through mercy and truth.

Broader Narrative and Theological Context of Matthew

Matthew is deeply concerned with:

- **Jesus as fulfillment of Israel's Scriptures** (fulfillment citations run throughout).
- **Jesus as the true Israel / faithful Son:** where Israel struggled in the wilderness, Jesus remains faithful; where leaders guard power, Jesus embodies the kingdom.
- **The Kingdom of Heaven:** not just "afterlife," but God's reign breaking into the present.
- **Righteousness in Matthew** is covenant faithfulness lived out - justice, mercy, integrity, and a whole-life alignment to God (think Sermon on the Mount).

In that big picture, baptism is the opening act of Jesus' public identity: Messiah, beloved Son, Spirit-anointed servant.

HISTORICAL / NON-BIBLICAL / POLITICAL CONTEXT

The Jordan and "baptism"

- **Ritual washing** was common in Second Temple Judaism (purity practices, repeated washings). John's baptism is distinct: it's a **public, moral, repentance-oriented sign** aimed at readiness for God's coming reign.
- The **Jordan River** echoes Israel's entry into the land (Joshua). John's ministry there evokes "new exodus / new beginning" vibes.

John as a public figure under political tension

John is preaching in a world dominated by:

- **Rome** (imperial occupation, taxation, military enforcement).
- **Herodian rulers** (regional client kings who keep power by keeping Rome happy).
- **Temple leadership** (religious authority intertwined with politics, status, and social control).

A large movement of people gathering around a wilderness prophet was never just "religious." It was socially volatile. Crowds, repentance language, and kingdom talk could be interpreted as destabilizing - which is why John eventually becomes a political problem.

Messianic expectations and "identity claims"

In that era, "Messiah," "Son of God," and "kingdom" were not neutral phrases. Even if Matthew frames them theologically, they carried political charge in a world where Caesar liked divine titles too. The baptism scene, with a heavenly declaration of sonship, is the story's way of saying: *the ultimate authority is not Rome, not Herod, not the Temple system - it's God.*



HISTORICAL TIMELINE / BIBLICAL TIMEFRAME

- **Setting:** Early first century CE, during Roman rule of Judea and surrounding regions.
- **John's ministry:** typically placed around the late 20s CE.
- **Jesus' baptism:** early in His public ministry, before the Galilean preaching and healing campaign.
- **Matthew's Gospel written:** commonly dated **after 70 CE** (post-Temple destruction), often in the **80s–90s CE** range, to a community wrestling with identity: Jewish roots, Gentile inclusion, and what it means to follow Jesus when the old structures have shifted.

BIBLE TRANSLATION UNDERSTANDING

Original language and dating

- **Greek text:** Matthew was written in Koine Greek.
- **“Like a dove”** (Greek: *hōsei peristeran*) is comparative - the Spirit is not necessarily described as literally becoming a bird; it’s dove-like in manner/appearance.

Major stages of English translation (very brief)

- Early English roots: Wycliffe (from Latin), then **Tyndale** (from Greek), shaping later tradition.
- The **King James Version (1611)** set a long-standing style and vocabulary.
- 19th–20th century: more manuscript evidence + updated scholarship led to translations like RSV, NIV, NASB.
- Modern critical/ecumenical: **NRSV / NRSVUE**, CSB, etc., aiming for accuracy and clarity with careful textual decisions.

Theologically significant translation choices in this passage

- **“To fulfill all righteousness”** (3:15)
“Righteousness” in Matthew can sound like “personal moral goodness,” but it more deeply means **faithful alignment to God’s will/plan**. Jesus is saying: *this is the right/faithful thing in God’s story*.
- **“Heavens were opened”** (3:16)
This is apocalyptic/prophetic imagery: God is not distant; revelation and commissioning are happening.
- **“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased”** (3:17)
“Beloved” carries covenantal affection and chosen-ness. The line echoes themes associated with royal sonship (Psalm language) and servant vocation (Isaiah themes). Translation usually can’t show all the resonance, but the point is: **identity + mission** are being declared together.

SCHOLARLY METAPHORICAL INTERPRETATION WITH MODERN-DAY & GRANT COUNTY CONTEXT

Metaphor: “*The Jordan is the line where private faith becomes public vocation*”

Scholars often read this scene as **commissioning**: baptism here functions like an anointing moment. In metaphor:

- The water is the **threshold** where Jesus steps into the world’s pain rather than hovering above it.



- The Spirit descending is **empowerment for costly love**, not spiritual spectacle.
- The voice is **identity secured before performance begins**: beloved *before* preaching, miracles, or success.

Modern-Day + Grant County angle

Grant County knows the stress points: economic strain, health burdens, family fracture, addiction, loneliness, suspicion across “sides,” and the quiet pride of people who keep showing up anyway. In that setting, Matthew 3 says:

- Real spiritual leadership looks like **stepping into the water with people**, not standing on the bank narrating who deserves it.
- Identity comes first: a lot of folks in our communities are starving for a voice that says “beloved” instead of “burden,” “problem,” or “project.”
- The Spirit doesn’t descend to make Jesus “important.” The Spirit descends to make Jesus **available**.

A helpful metaphor for us: Jesus gets in the water before He gets on the stage. If our faith is always “above” the mess - always commentary, never contact - we’re missing the pattern.

HOW SHOULD WE ACT AND REACT TO THIS SCRIPTURE TODAY?

- **Practice solidarity, not superiority.**

Jesus had every reason to opt out of the repentance line - He steps in anyway. Ask: where am I tempted to stay “above” others?

- **Anchor your identity before you chase outcomes.**

The voice comes before the wilderness. In church life, community work, family conflict, even political tension: start from “beloved” and act from that steadiness, not from panic or ego.

- **Treat baptism as commissioning, not just a rite.**

For the baptized: your life is meant to be an instrument of God’s healing - at work, at home, in civic life. The point isn’t “I got the badge.” The point is “I joined the mission.”

- **Expect resistance after clarity.**

Baptism leads straight to testing. Don’t be surprised when doing the right thing invites pushback - internal or external.

- **Be a “voice” for others the way heaven was a voice for Jesus.**

In practical terms: speak life over people. Encourage the exhausted volunteer. Call out the quiet faithfulness in a struggling family. Be specific. Be generous. Grant County is full of people who rarely hear “I admire of you.”



Addendum

Parallel to the Centurion Servant

There are actually **two versions of that story**:

1. **Matthew 8:5–13**
2. **Luke 7:1–10**

In **both stories**, we see the same pattern that shows up again in Acts 10:

1. A Roman officer (the “enemy”)

- The centurion (Matthew/Luke)
- Cornelius (Acts 10)

These are not just Gentiles—they are **agents of Roman power**, the occupying force.

2. Unexpected faith from the “outside”

- The centurion says, “*I am not worthy to have you come under my roof... only say the word.*”
- Cornelius is described as God-fearing, generous, prayerful—before Peter ever arrives.

In both cases, **faith shows up where it is least expected.**

3. Jesus / God crosses the boundary without hesitation

- Jesus heals without entering the centurion’s home (respecting Jewish purity concerns, yet still acting).
- Peter *does* enter Cornelius’s home—something Jesus never explicitly did, but clearly prepared him to do.

Acts 10 feels like the **church finally catching up to Jesus.**

4. A shocking affirmation

- Jesus says: “*I have not found such faith even in Israel.*”
- Peter says: “*I truly understand that God shows no partiality.*”

Both statements would have landed like a theological gut punch. Just another way to say **ALL ... everyone is included to be loved by God.**

Closing Centurion Servant Parallel

This moment in Acts 10 reminds me of when Jesus healed the centurion’s servant. Once again, a Roman officer—someone outside Israel, someone with power—turns out to be closer to the heart of God than anyone expected.

In other words, Acts 10 feels like the church finally doing what Jesus had already been doing all along.

Why this matters theologically

- Jesus **models inclusion**
- Acts **institutionalizes it**
- What Jesus did *personally*, the church must now do *collectively*

Scripture is having a conversation with itself.



Gatekeeping

Gatekeeping is when religious authority is primarily about:

- Deciding **who is worthy before they're welcomed**
- Policing purity *before* participation
- Standing at the edge saying, "Fix yourself first, then come closer to God"

In Matthew 3, John is doing something unusual already — he's calling *everyone* to repentance, including religious leaders. But notice what happens when **Jesus** shows up:

- Jesus does **not** demand credentials
- He does **not** correct John's theology in front of the crowd
- He does **not** set conditions for entry

Instead, He **steps into the water with the people**.

That act alone undercuts a gatekeeping posture.

What "witnessing" looks like here

Witnessing, biblically, is not primarily verbal policing — it's embodied truth.

In this passage:

- Jesus *witnesses* to God's character by **solidarity**
- God *witnesses* to Jesus by publicly naming Him **Beloved**
- The Spirit *witnesses* by empowering presence, not by separating "clean" from "unclean"

No one is barred from the river.

No one is interrogated before being near the grace of God.

The witness happens **in the open, among the people, without preconditions**.

Why this matters for how the church understands itself

Matthew's Gospel was written to a community wrestling with identity:

- Who belongs?
- Who is "inside" and "outside" after the Temple's fall?
- How do we stay faithful without becoming rigid?

This baptism scene answers that tension **before the Sermon on the Mount ever begins**.

The church's role is not to "guard the water," but to stand in it, point to Christ, and say, "Look — this is what God is like."

Closing on Gatekeeping

This passage reminds us that God's work begins with **presence, not permission**. Jesus doesn't stand between people and God — He stands **with** people before God. The church is called to be a **witness to grace**, not a checkpoint before it.

In Grant County, gatekeeping often sounds like:

- "That's not how we do things here."
- "They need to get their life together first."



- “They don’t belong yet.”

Matthew 3 quietly says: God speaks *beloved* before anyone proves anything. That’s not lowering standards — it’s **getting the order right**.

