

**A Global Gift**  
**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
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**Acts 11:1-18**  
**April 24, 2016**

My name is Simon Peter.

One day, a long time ago, a man stood by the lakeshore. I was cleaning my nets, and as I did, he hopped into my boat, and he said, “push out a little ways.” I did. And once we were out in the water, he said, “cast your nets to the right of the boat, and out into the deep water.”

I said, “Look dude, I appreciate the advice and all, but my partners and I have tried this about forty times today, and as you can see by our empty nets, we haven’t had any luck. It’s been a long day, and I’m tired.”

“Indulge me,” he said.

I did. Next thing I knew we’d caught so many fish the nets were bursting at the seams, and our boats were about to sink. I’d never seen anything like it. I fell to my knees, and I said, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”

But he just smiled. And looking at me and James and John, he said: “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people. Follow me.”

And so we did. Of course, I was young back then, and stubborn too. I was foolish enough to think that I could hinder God, and the plans God had for me.

Boy was I wrong! God has worked through me, and many times in spite of me.

For three years, my friends and I followed this man, a teacher named Jesus. He clarified for us what it meant to love God and love neighbor. And we fought him every step of the way. We wanted him to define God's kingdom on our terms: we wanted God's realm to be a place where the first were first and the last were last. We'd left our homes and our families, and when the banquet he promised finally came, we wanted VIP seating.

And truth be told, we wanted to keep him for ourselves.

But who were we to hinder the plans God has for this world?

One day, Jesus told us it was time from him to go. He was ascending back to the place where his Father dwelled. But he said he wasn't leaving us altogether. "Stay here in Jerusalem," he said. "The Holy Spirit will fill you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the Earth."

At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came like a flash, it filled us up, and empowered us to continue the work Jesus started. It freed us to visit places we were once too-afraid to go. And it filled our hands with a healing touch.

But for some reason, we still assumed the gift of the Holy Spirit was regional in nature. We knew that our dozen couldn't stay a dozen forever. Our witness was meant to expand throughout our city, and through all Judea. But surely not further than a people group, right? Surely, God's plan didn't involve Gentiles? God cannot be for the Godless, right?

But who were we to hinder the plans God has for this world?

I took to my new ministry with enthusiasm. We were spreading the story of Jesus to new Jewish neighbors every day. One afternoon in Joppa, I was praying in my home, and for some reason, I suddenly became very hungry. As my supper was being prepared, I fell into a trance, and saw a vision:

A sheet was being lowered to the ground, and there were all kinds of animals – four-legged things, beasts of prey, and reptiles, and birds. And a voice said, “Get up Peter. Here’s your supper. Kill and eat.”

I said, “By no means, Lord. For nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.”

The voice responded: “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

This back-and-forth continued three more times. And then, all of a sudden, the sheet was pulled up, and my vision subsided.

At that very moment, three strangers from Caesarea appeared at my door. They were not Jewish, but the Spirit told me not to worry, but instead to follow them. They brought me to the home of Cornelius, a Roman centurion. And Cornelius told me that he’d seen a vision, whereby the angel had told him to send for me, so that I might bring his household a message from God.

And so I began to preach the same news that Jesus had preached to me. And in that very moment, the room was transformed. The same spirit, the same energy that fell upon this sinful man on the lakeshore, the same spirit that fell upon my friends and me at Pentecost, it fell on the household of Cornelius.

God's spirit is not confined to a place, or a people group, or to any other boundary. And as I saw God's spirit fill Cornelius' home, I remembered the words Jesus spoke to me:

"John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

I framed those words in my head. I read them over and over again. And as I did, I realized that I was given the Holy Spirit by believing in the redemptive power of Jesus Christ. And what I saw on this day, was the same process happening for Gentiles. God had given then the same gift I'd received.

And I have to be honest. This was a shocking discovery. After all, I am a practicing Jew. My diet. My prayers. My lifestyles choices. All of these practices are observed in an attempt to remain righteous and clean and whole for God. And for whatever reason, I just assumed God would only work through the people of Israel, and specifically those who adhered to the standards of Leviticus. I just assumed the gift of the Holy Spirit was regional.

But I was wrong. The Holy Spirit, God's gift to us, it's global! And the truth is, I would have never known the bounds of God's powers, nor the reach of God's grace, if I'd never been allowed to share God's story with people who were different from me.

My fears. My misconceptions. My limited imagination. Who am I, and what are they, that we can hinder God?

And so I tell my story to all who will listen, and even to those who won't. For God has given EVERYONE a gift that can transform ANYONE in ANY PLACE in ANY TIME.

Peter told his story more than two thousand years ago. And it's funny, the dualistic nature of his testimony is still alive and well in the present.

Like Peter, most of us would define ourselves as people of faith, people with lives devoted to God's good purposes. But like Peter, most of us have days when we feel more righteous, more called, more in possession of God's truth than others. We're the good kind of Baptists, the ones that took the best notes, and went to the proper schools, and emphasize the proper teachings of Jesus, and strike the perfect balance of tradition and innovation. We're the ones who God intended to receive the spirit.

Of course our claim to exclusivity is not without company. At last count, Wikipedia notes that there are more than 33,000 officially-sanctioned denominations of Christianity – all keepers of truth, all keepers of a special gift from God.

Like Peter, sometimes we too need to be shaken from our desire to claim exclusive ownership of the Holy Spirit.

We convince ourselves that we are holy, and therefore anything that is the opposite of us is un-holy. Not so!

God is working in each of us here today. That cannot be denied.

But God is also working in people we can't even imagine. God's just that big. That means God is working in someone who looks different than you, someone who votes different than you, someone who sees the world in a different way than you, someone who sets different priorities than you, someone who you imagine to be profane.

God has created everyone and everything. And God has given everyone and everything access to a global gift.

Like Peter, let us tell this good news. For in the telling of this good news, we may be delighted to see God's global gift presented to people we never imagined in places we never dreamed. And like Peter, we too can proclaim with sincerity: "Who am I to hinder God?"

Amen.