

# Pride and Prejudice

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 07 April 2024

Preacher: Jonathan de Groot

[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, one of my favourite authors is George Orwell, and I love his book Animal Farm, which is one of those books that in high school, in English class, you have to study animal farm. I think every generation of students has to look at it. And it's good because it's a political fairy tale, and it's set on a farmyard with animals, especially pigs. And it's really just brilliant satire, as it depicts the corrupting influences of power, and how they are played out in politics.

It speaks of the dangers of totalitarianism, and it's summed up, I think, most famously in the popular statement or phrase from the book, which is, all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others. And it's said by the pigs in the farm who control the government, they are in charge of all the other animals. But this quotation, all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others, I think actually sums up the attitude of many people in our world today. Because whilst there is continual talk about diversity and inclusivity and equality in our society, all the time, on the news, every day, yet there's still this underlying assumption that some people are better than other people, that some people are superior to other people. And of course, it's never going to be explicitly stated in such terms, and yet it does pervade our culture. You see it in education, you see it in employment, you see it in politics, or in economics, it has to do with race, it has to do with class. And it's what creates division, it's what contributes to the culture wars in our society, and it's what results in hatred between different groups of people. And this comes whether in lived experience or all over social media.

The attitude that some people are better than others is always there. And yet you can even find it in the church, which is what we see in these Bible readings we've been looking at in recent weeks in Acts chapter 10, and now into chapter 11. Because there was this huge cultural division back in the early days of Christianity between the Jews and the Gentiles, two different people groups.

But as the early church gathers momentum, we see how God welcomes Gentiles into the church as well as Jews. And so last time, if you were here just before Easter, in Acts chapter 10, we saw that God has no favorites. God shows no partiality. And so the Gentiles have the same access to the Jews of salvation in Jesus Christ. And so here in Acts chapter 11, we get that message that God has no favorites, that the message of Jesus Christ is for all, both Jew and Gentile. It comes again. So Luke repeats it for a second time, and then it actually comes back a third time in Acts chapter 15. So we're being told how crucial this message is, the message of God's grace towards all people in Jesus Christ.

And so God may have sent the good news to the Jews first, the good news about Jesus, but God wants everybody to hear it. And so whilst there's a division between different groups of people, whilst that has been an issue since the very beginning, and it still is an issue today, and I guess it will always be an issue that people will be divided, it is only the good news of Jesus Christ that can truly resolve those divisions between people.

[ 4 : 02 ] That's what the church is all about. That's what we see in the book of Acts. And that's why Christianity is not just relevant for you as an individual and your life, but Christianity is relevant for our society. It is the answer. And so I'd like us this afternoon to look at three simple points all about God's grace. First of all, scandalized by grace. Secondly, saved by grace.

And then thirdly, surprised by grace. So first of all, scandalized by grace in verse 1 to verse 3. So in terms of the context, the church is advancing, and the message of Jesus Christ is reaching new people. So verse 1 says, the apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God, becoming followers of Jesus Christ. And so the Holy Spirit had also been poured out on them. And it's indicating that God has welcomed the Gentiles into his family, where they now belonged to the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, shoulder to shoulder as brothers and sisters in Christ with the Jews. And yet there was a group of Jews who weren't exactly celebrating this inclusion.

So look at verse 2 and 3. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, you went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them. So the news of what had happened reached Jerusalem faster than Peter did. And so when Peter shows up, he's criticized by the Jewish believers for eating, having a meal with Gentiles. And so this isn't just sad, this is also sinister, because God was advancing his work of growing his church using Peter. And yet Peter gets this pushback from a group within the church who take issue with Peter's actions. And so Luke calls those who were criticizing the circumcised believers, sometimes they're referred to as the circumcision party, indicating that their big thing was circumcision, because they believed that to be a proper Christian, if you were a Gentile, the ritual of circumcision had to be performed on you before you could be a true Christian. It's like they're single issue voters who couldn't see past this ritual of circumcision. And so they seemed more interested in keeping certain people out of the church than they were of welcoming people in. And so it's clear that they hadn't fully grasped the extent of God's grace, where God's salvation plan included Gentiles as well as Jews. And so these particular Jews forgot that circumcision was a sign of God's blessing on them. And it was given to them so ultimately they could be a blessing to all the other nations around about them, like those Gentiles. And it comes all the way back from God's promise to Abraham in Genesis chapter 12. And so rather than play their part in God's great mission to the world, what we see happening is that they're proud of their own privileged position as God's people, the Jews, and they're prejudiced towards people of other nations. And so yes, they were chosen, but they also saw themselves as superior. And so they were scandalized by Peter's behavior towards Gentiles, that Peter would eat with them, that Peter would socialize with them. But the Gentiles had the same access as they did to salvation in Jesus Christ. And so circumcision had absolutely nothing to do with it because their identity, their privileges, their ritual keeping wasn't what made them, or in fact anyone, acceptable to God. It's faith in Jesus that is the basis of our acceptance with God.

And that's why God gives Peter this vision of a sheet from heaven with all of these unclean animals on it. It was God's visual aid to say that Jews should no longer regard Gentiles as unclean when it comes to the offer of salvation in Jesus Christ. Because Peter and his fellow Jews needed this deeper grasp of the gospel of God's grace. And we all need to deeply grasp God's grace towards us because God's grace tells us God doesn't accept you or me because of who you are or because of what you do.

So it's not about your cultural identity. It's not about your good living. It's not about your religious performance. And that's a massive shock if you've lived your whole life believing that you are good enough for God by the things that you do. And that's where these circumcised believers who were criticizing Peter, that's where they were coming from. And so if we apply this to ourselves today, it doesn't really matter if you've gone along to church for your whole life. And it doesn't really matter if you've just started coming to church like I know some of you have. Because no one is more deserving of God's salvation than anyone else. God's grace is the great leveler of all people.

[ 9 : 54 ] It reminds us that God accepts us not because of who we are or because of what we have done, but because of what God has done for us in Jesus. And so God's grace, in a sense, cuts us all down to size, telling us it's not about you and what you can do, but it's about Jesus Christ and what he has done.

And I think that's why so many people today, if you were to ask in our society, they resent God's grace because it wipes out that sense of pride that we like to have because of what we can achieve in our own strength. And it makes us all the same before God. And that's why the Pharisees in Jesus' day, when you read about them in the Gospels, they were the ultra-religious people and they were scandalized by Jesus. They were mad because Jesus spent his time with the lowlifes of society, called the tax collectors and the sinners. And they were annoyed because they thought they were more worthy of Jesus' time than all of these other people were. And that's why these criticizing Jews have a problem. And so the challenge for us is about whether we have grasped God's grace in our hearts.

Because if we profess to be a Christian, we've got no right to feel superior to anybody else. Because we're no more than a sinner who has been saved by grace. So that's the first thing, scandalized by grace. Our second point is saved by grace, there in verse 4 to 17. And what happens here is that Peter basically explains how God wanted the good news of Jesus to reach out to the Gentiles.

And it was something that Peter didn't get first time. He didn't understand it immediately. And so here in verse 4 to 17, Peter is describing the chain of events that led to him grasping this.

So first there is Peter's vision of the sheet that comes down from heaven with all of these unclean animals on it. And then Peter hears the voice, get up, Peter, kill and eat. And then Peter refuses by saying, verse 8, surely not Lord, nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.

[ 12 : 19 ] And so then next, verse 9, the voice spoke from heaven a second time, do not call anything impure that God has made clean. This happened three times and then it was pulled up to heaven again.

So there was a time when the laws about clean and unclean foods along with all the other ceremonial laws were needed and they were needed so that Israel could be a distinctive people set apart from all the other nations. But these laws and ceremonies were simply temporary things because the reality that they proclaimed had now come in Jesus Christ who had fulfilled them. And so the laws that identified Israel as God's people could no longer separate them, Jews, from Gentiles. And so this wasn't just about the food. The food was like a visual aid, a picture. This was about the people. Because while Peter lived his life thinking that certain foods were unclean, he also thought that certain people were unclean. And so there was a prejudice towards Gentiles which came from the pride of being Jewish. And so God was teaching Peter about his grace towards all people. And that's why the next stage was the Spirit telling

Peter to go to the Gentiles. Verse 11 and 12, Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying.

The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me and we entered the man's house. So God hadn't just been preparing Peter here to understand grace, the grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He'd also been preparing this man who was a Gentile. This man who was called Cornelius and who knew nothing about this message.

And so it was through this that God was using Peter to take the good news of Jesus to the Gentiles. And so verse 13 says, And so all of this is saying that God has a plan, a salvation plan, that he revealed to Jews, but also includes Gentiles. It's for everyone. And so there's no room for pride. There's no room for prejudice. And so Peter knew that God had led him to the Gentiles who were once regarded as unclean to preach this gospel of grace to them so that they also could be saved.

[ 15 : 22 ] And they were. Verse 15 and 16 tell us what happened. As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered that the Lord had said, John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

And so this is God's way of showing that the Gentiles belong to the church as full members. So the Holy Spirit was poured out on them, just as the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Jews at Pentecost.

So we're being told here that there is one people of God, one people, Jew and Gentile, together with one Holy Spirit. And so the Gentiles were told also received salvation and were equal members of God's family. They belonged in the church. And not because of their religious background, because they didn't have any, and not because of their religious performance, because they had never performed religiously at all, but because they too were saved by grace.

And that's why Peter reaches this obvious conclusion in verse 17. So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?

So God was advancing his salvation plan for Jews, for Gentiles, for everybody. And Peter is saying, who am I to stop what God is doing? Nobody can stop what God is doing.

[ 16 : 58 ] And so Peter's words here were a warning for his fellow Jews. They needed to be careful. They didn't stand in God's way. Because if God was opening up the door to Gentiles, then nobody had the right to put a barrier like circumcision in their way. But that was then. But I think there's a warning for us now. Because we have got to be careful that we don't stand in the way of God's work. And of course, we never do this deliberately, but we might do it unconsciously. Because pride and prejudice can lurk deep within all of our hearts, can't it? Either because we feel that we're superior to other people or because we limit who we think can be part of God's family. And we too quickly write some people off. And yet God welcomes all sorts of people into his family. And nobody, of course, ever gets in on the basis of their own merits. It is only by God's grace as we believe in the Lord

Jesus Christ. That's our second point, saved by grace. Scandalized by grace, saved by grace, and then thirdly, surprised by grace. So Peter's explanation of what happened silences his critics.

So look at that last verse, verse 18. When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God saying, so then even to Gentiles, God has granted repentance that leads to life. It's brilliant, but there's an element of surprise in what they say. So then even to Gentiles, God has granted repentance that leads to life. So the gift of God's salvation was even for the Gentiles. That's why they're surprised they're surprised that this has actually happened. But while they seem surprised by it, of course, it had always been part of God's salvation plan all along. And that's why God granted them the repentance that leads to life. It's saying to us that salvation was all God's doing because it always is. Only God can wake up those who are spiritually dead and give them life. God's salvation is by grace.

It's a gift to us. And even the repentance itself that leads to that salvation is a gift from God. But repentance is a turning away from unbelief and a turning towards God. And so what's being said here in Acts is that the initiative in salvation is all God's. And so what that means is if you're here today and you would call yourself a Christian, it's because of God. It's not because of you or me.

You have done nothing, nor could you ever do anything to attain God's salvation. There's no way it can be earned. It is unmerited. It is a gift from God to you if you believe in Jesus Christ. And so we can only receive this gift of salvation because God grants us repentance that leads to life. And it is such a good thing.

[ 20 : 38 ] Because we can never be sure of our salvation if it was up to us. I mean, how would we ever know if we'd done enough or been good enough in God's sight for him to accept us? Put it like this. Just imagine three swimmers who are all on the west coast of Scotland and they're trying to swim across the Atlantic Ocean to get to Florida. Because when you live in Scotland, you want to be in Florida. And so the first swimmer might be a really good swimmer, an Olympic swimmer. And they managed to swim 500 miles before they die. Second swimmer might be not so good, but still pretty good. And they managed to swim 25 miles before they die. Third swimmer, not such a great swimmer at all, but they managed to swim one mile before they die. You might say that the Olympic swimmer is 500 times better than the third swimmer.

But who's more dead? Well, they're all dead. None of them are good enough to make it all the way across the Atlantic to get to Florida. They can't get there on the basis of their swimming ability.

It's just not enough. It's not good enough. They all fall short. And so it doesn't really matter how good the first one is compared to the second one compared to the third one. And so when it comes to God, nobody can get to God on the basis of their own efforts, no matter how good they are.

The message of Christianity is that you can only get to God, not by your effort, not by your good works, but by the sheer unmerited grace of God. Because God has come to us in the person of Jesus Christ. So the only way to get to God is by believing in Jesus and what Jesus has done for us at the cross.

And so in Acts chapter 10 into chapter 11, the church grew and advanced towards the ends of the earth because God himself is the pioneer missionary. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost because God saves sinners by his grace. He needs to do it because we never can. And so for over 2,000 years, God has continued this mission of saving sinners by his grace through the good news of Jesus Christ.

[ 23 : 19 ] And so we should never underestimate the grace of God. It is amazing. And yet even this momentous moment here in Acts chapter 11 didn't end the pride and the prejudice in the early church because this issue of Gentile membership exploded into a major controversy a few years later in Acts chapter 15 because some were teaching that circumcision was a requirement for salvation. You needed to have it done before you could be saved. And so can you see how it is possible to have this concept of God's grace in our heads? We can understand that we can grasp it. And yet this idea of grace doesn't quite sink deep enough into our hearts. Because if our knowledge of God's grace doesn't change our attitude towards other people, then it probably shows us that we've never really grasped God's grace for ourselves. Because

God's salvation plan is to save a people for himself. And so God is working towards the time when there will be a great multitude of people that nobody can count from every nation, tribe, people, and language. And they will all be standing before the throne and before the Lamb, Revelation tells us, crying in a loud voice, salvation belongs to our voice, salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.

Salvation belongs to God. It is by his grace and it is for his glory. And the amazing thing is that he gathers people in to receive his salvation, people like you and me. And that's what we want to celebrate today as we welcome our first members to Christ Church Glasgow to celebrate God's grace at work in our lives, in him drawing us to himself and giving us his salvation. And so as a church we are moving towards this glorious future, a future where there is a great multitude of diverse people all worshipping God in the new creation. And if that's the case, if that's what we're heading towards as Christian believers, then it means every form of pride and every form of prejudice is bang out of order in Jesus's church right now. And so whilst our fallen and broken world will always be characterized by pride and always be characterized by prejudice, and it will result in all kinds of division and distinctions and disparity between different groups of people, the church of the Lord Jesus Christ is to be an alternative society in this world, an alternative community of people who reflect the beauty of heaven here on earth. The church ought to be a visible foretaste to this world of the world that is to come, the world that God has promised. And so as we close, don't we need to rid ourselves of all pride and prejudice?

How do we do that? It's impossible actually, because by nature we can't stop being proud of who we are and what we've achieved. In every area of life, every human being likes to take pride in how well they've done.

And so what's the solution? Well, it's not by trying harder, because if we try harder and do better, doesn't that only just swell our sense of pride in our own achievements?

[ 27 : 15 ] Well, instead, it is by remembering the one who has done the work for us and who has accomplished everything on our behalf, the Lord Jesus. Because the Lord Jesus Christ was enthroned in heaven, and yet he humbled himself in coming to this earth. And not only did he humble himself, he came to die on a cross for our sins so we could be welcomed into God's everlasting family. So Jesus took on our uncleanness so that we could be made clean. And unless and until we realize we need him to do for us, do this for us, because we can never do it for ourselves, then we'll never be able to rid ourselves of pride and prejudice. Because it's only through Jesus' work that God grants us that repentance that leads to life. And so it's only when we see what Jesus has done for us will our hearts be freed from pride and prejudice. And we'll treat people with love and respect and a lack of superiority because of the Son of God who came and gave himself for us.