

What Makes You Think ‘Your Kind’ Go To Heaven?

1. Warm-up Question: Jeff began Sunday’s sermon with an example of how, for centuries, Christians thought left-handedness was of the devil. This view was based on passages such as Ecclesiastes 10:2, “The heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of the fool to the left,” and Psalm 118:15, “The right hand of the Lord does valiantly; the right hand of the Lord is exalted.” If God is right handed, people reasoned, we should be too.
 - a. As you heard about the history of Christian persecution of left-handed people, what thoughts or feelings arose within you?
 - b. In your own life, what’s something (other than being LGBTQ) that you were always taught was evil, but ultimately came to realize wasn’t?
 - c. Over the centuries, Christians have dramatically changed their interpretation of what the Bible says about slavery, the role of women in the church and society, biracial marriage, suitable hairstyles and clothing, etc. How could we have been so wrong on such important issues? What should we learn from these examples?
2. In our own time, a debate rages about whether LGBTQ people should be admitted to the church as they are, instead of being required to renounce their sexual orientation or gender identity. The debate often focuses on arguments about the meaning of certain Greek or Hebrew words or microscopic exegetical analysis of a handful of scripture passages. That can be problematic for reasons we’ve already discussed. Words are slippery things; different people can hear or read the same words and draw very different conclusions. But that’s not how the early Christians resolved their differences about who should be admitted to the church. They took a much more straightforward, common sense approach. In the early church, the big debate was whether to admit Gentiles without requiring them to renounce their lifestyle in favor of Jewish religious rules and customs. Read Acts 15:1-21, as found on p. 3.
 - a. Verse 2 indicates that the debate about whether to admit Gentiles resulted in “no small dissension and debate.” Describe what you imagine it was like being a room where the subject was being debated. How do you suppose the Gentiles in that room felt?
 - b. Many first century Jews referred to Gentiles as “dogs.” Eating with them made Jews “unclean.” Marrying them was forbidden. Gentiles were commonly viewed as impure, disobedient, and destined to be destroyed by God. Where do you think all that antipathy came from?
 - c. At the summit meeting of the apostles and elders in Jerusalem, we’re told there was “much debate” (vs. 6) about whether to admit the Gentiles. It’s not difficult to imagine the back-and-forth that took place about how to interpret various scripture passages regarding the Gentiles. But all that seemed to lead nowhere. Then Peter stood up and simply told a story about a time when God called him to

enter the house of a Gentile and share the Gospel. To get the full story, read Acts 10:34-48, as found on pp. 3-4.

- d. What happened in this story that convinced Peter that he should baptize Gentiles without requiring them to embrace the Mosaic Law? (When pondering this question, re-read what Peter said in Acts 15:8-11.)
3. Jeff summarized the lesson of Acts 15 this way: “This is the ultimate biblical example of how Christians should decide who gets into the church. The decision of James, Peter, and Paul didn’t ultimately turn on scholarly argument about interpretation of Scripture or analysis of the meaning of Hebrew or Greek words. Instead it boiled down to a simple common sense question: Do we have clear evidence that the people in question have received the same Spirit as the rest of us? If so, they’re in.” Do you think that’s a fair summation of the lesson we should take from Acts 15? Why or why not?
 4. In the New Testament, there are two primary ways people demonstrate that they are full of the Holy Spirit. One way is to display the “Fruit of the Spirit.” Galatians 5:22 says, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” The other way is to display the “Gifts of the Spirit.” I Corinthians 12:28 gives examples of the kinds of gifts the Holy Spirit gives. “God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues.”
 - a. Suppose someone asked you, “What’s the difference between the Fruit of the Spirit and the Gifts of the Spirit?” How would you define and differentiate these two different ways the Spirit expresses itself through us?
 - b. Tell us a story about an LGBTQ believer who has shown themselves to be full of the Fruit of the Spirit.
 - c. One of the Gifts of the Spirit is tongues. That was the particular gift that the Gentiles exhibited in Peter’s story in Acts 10 that had such an impact on him. Have someone in your group who has observed tongues explain what it is. Personally, what do you make of the practice of praying or speaking in tongues? Why do you think so many modern Christians are leery of tongues?
 - d. As I Corinthians 12 makes clear, the Gifts of the Spirit take many different forms, not just tongues. Tell us a story about an LGBTQ believer you know who has exhibited one or more Gifts of the Spirit.
 - e. Based on what we’ve read in Acts 10 and 15, if “practicing” gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender believers are repeatedly exhibiting both the Fruit of the Spirit and the Gifts of the Spirit, should that end the debate about whether they belong in the church? Why or why not? Based on what we see in Acts 10 and 15, what’s the best way to convince skeptical Christians that LGBTQ believers should be embraced?

Acts 15:1-21

Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." ²And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders. ³So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers. ⁴When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. ⁵But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, "It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses."

⁶ The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. ⁷After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. ⁸And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; ⁹and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. ¹⁰Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

¹² The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. ¹³After they finished speaking, James replied, "My brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴Simeon has related how God first looked favourably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. ¹⁵This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written, ¹⁶'After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up, ¹⁷so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called. Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things ¹⁸known from long ago.'¹⁹Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, ²⁰but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. ²¹For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues."

Acts 10:34-48

34 Then Peter began to speak to [the Gentiles gathered in Cornelius' house]: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. ³⁷That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: ³⁸how 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. ³⁹We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; ⁴⁰but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, ⁴¹not 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. ⁴²He 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. ⁴³All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

44 While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. ⁴⁵The circumcised [i.e., Jewish] believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, ⁴⁶for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, ⁴⁷"Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" ⁴⁸So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.