

Opening the doors to the Nations

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: 25 October 2020

Preacher: Nick Louw

[0 : 00] Well, good morning, everyone. It's nice, isn't it, to start to get back into services like there were, where we can sing our praises to God. I certainly enjoyed playing drums and singing, and I'm sure you did too. What a privilege it is to gather together, but especially to gather together under God's Word, and that's where we're going to turn to now, to God's Word. So keep your Bibles open at Acts 11.

All right. So I want to tell you about when I used to travel to work when I lived in London. Some of you know I used to live in London, and normally when you travel to work, you go by train. The commuting culture is very big there, and they have a very big, good, well-running public transport system. Anyway, I took the train to work every morning, and the journey was very much the same every morning. It would be going into the city from the outskirts of London, and it would start very pleasantly. It would start with just a few people on the train, and they would be the same people pretty much every morning, and you would know them, and eventually you would develop a bit of a nodding relationship with them, you know, like, hello, in the morning. And then maybe even exchange a few words and have a bit of a conversation. And there weren't a lot of people on the train. You could choose where you want to sit, and there was enough space. You could look out the window. It was a very pleasant journey, until we got to Clapham Junction. Clapham Junction is one of the biggest train stations in the south of London, and when we get to Clapham Junction, the doors of the train open, and suddenly it's like the whole city gets on board, the commuting masses. And suddenly everybody's cramped up, and it loses that familiarity, and it loses that comfort it had, and then you've just got to sit there with the rest of the crowds going into the city. Now, why am I telling you about my morning commute years ago? Well, because I want you to understand, my job is to help you to understand what's going on in Acts chapter 11 in this part of the Bible, and what's going on here is very similar to my journey to work with regards to the kingdom of God. It's getting full for the first time. New people are coming in, and it's making the people who are already there quite uncomfortable. Okay, now the whole Bible really, I think this is why the train idea works well to describe what's going on here, because the whole Bible is a story, is a journey. It describes a journey. It describes a journey of humanity from a place of curse, and sin, and death, to a place of blessing, and righteousness, and life. That's really what the whole Bible is about, this journey of humanity that God is making possible for humanity to go on. From Genesis chapter 3, where we learn about the fall, and we learn about the entering of sin and death into this world, to Revelation chapter 21, where we get this amazing vision of the new creation. That is, and everything in between, is how God is going to take people there. Okay, so you can understand the Bible story as a journey from curse to blessing, and God has provided a vehicle that people can get on to go there, to complete this journey, because we could never get there by ourselves. Okay, we can never get to a restored world, and restored lives, and a place of righteousness, and life, eternal life, by ourselves. Just as much as I could never walk to work in London, I had to catch the train. We have to get on the vehicle God has provided. What is that vehicle? Well, you wouldn't be surprised to hear that it's the covenant. All right, so you've heard that word before, when we preach through Genesis, God provides a covenant. It's a way that people can, something that people can get on board with, and then He will use that to work on them, and take them to where He wants them to be.

[3 : 55] That's pretty much, if you understand that framework, that the train on a journey is God providing a vehicle to take us from one place to another. If you understand that framework, you'll understand pretty much the whole of Scripture, and how it fits together. But up until this point, Acts chapter 10 and 11, in the Bible story, it's only included Jews. That vehicle has only been Jews, and not a lot of them, and a lot of those Jews on the way, Israelites, children of Abraham, jumped off the

train on the journey by disobeying God's laws and joining the nations and worshiping idols. That's what we see in the Old Testament. But up until this point, there have been a few people on board this train, and here, this is why, Dylan said earlier, this is a foundational part of the Bible. The reason it's such a foundational and critical part of the Bible, Acts chapter 10 and 11, is because for the first time in history,

God is opening the doors of His covenant to the nations, to people who aren't Jews, to people from all nations, and all tribes, and all languages, and all cultures. Now, as we heard in that reading from Isaiah earlier, that's not a new idea. God didn't just come up with that. In fact, right from the beginning of His plan to save you and me, thankfully for us, because most of us here are not Jews, if any of us, are not descended from Abraham, God has planned to bring the nations into His saving plan, and to provide them a way to get to His plan for this world, the new creation. And we see that in, when He first speaks to Abraham in Genesis 12, He says, through you the nations will be blessed.

And then throughout the prophets, we read about God's plan to bring people from every tribe and tongue and nation into His saving community, into the vehicle that is going to carry us from this broken world to a new creation. And this is the first time that He's opened those doors to the nations.

And this mixed group, now we read about in Acts 12, they form a church in Antioch. This is the first church with a mix of Jews and Gentiles. And what's really interesting, when I was reading this chapter, is that this is the first time in the Bible that we come across the word Christian. And that is no mistake. There in verse 26, if you have a look, Acts chapter 11, 26, at the end, the disciples were first called Christians at Antioch. Now that the doors have opened, the Gentiles have come on board, God's plans for the nations are starting to see fulfillment. Now, we see this new word in the Bible, Christian. And so understanding this point of the Bible story, understanding where we are in the Bible and what this means and what is happening in this chapter, which we're going to go to in a bit more detail now, helps us to understand what Christians really are.

And what I want to do this morning is just from this story of what happens, Peter has this discussion with the Jewish Christians, and then we learn about the planting of the church in Antioch and what they do. That's what chapter 11 is about. I just want us to see two marks of what Christians are, two marks that characterize Christians from this chapter, seeing that this is the first time we come across that word. Okay, that's where we're going. The first mark of Christians is that there are people who are different from one another. By definition, there are people who are different from one another. So let's look at how the story develops. Peter comes to, well, we see there, he went up to Jerusalem. It's interesting, he's at the north, but they say he went up to Jerusalem.

[7 : 51] Now that's not talking about north and south, it's actually talking about the elevation of the country. Jerusalem was built on elevation. That's why it says he went up to Jerusalem and he went and reported what happened to these Jewish Christians. But look what they say in verse 3, you went to uncircumcised men and ate with them. They were shocked that Peter was, let alone socializing with Gentiles, he was eating with them. Now, the first thing we need to understand is what a shocking thing that was for a Jew.

Because, and it wasn't because Jews were racists, by the way. That's not why they didn't like the Gentiles. It was because of their laws in the Old Testament that were designed deliberately to keep them separate from Gentiles, and there was a reason for that. But that's what the laws in the Old Testament and the Jewish laws that then for hundreds of years they built upon those laws were all for the purpose of keeping the Jews separate from the Gentiles. Basically, you can understand it like a form of spiritual social distancing. And we all know what that's like. Social distancing, making sure we keep separate from people so we don't get infected by a virus that they might have. Well, that's exactly what the Jewish laws were about. They were designed because the Jews didn't want to get infected with the sin and the wickedness of the nations that didn't have God's law and hadn't had God's law revealed and God's purposes revealed to them. They were just caught up in sin. And they were really bad. Like, you know, if you look back in history and you look at what some of these ancient pagan cultures got up to, sacrificing their children, and it was disgusting. In the past 2,000 years, we've had the privilege of living in a culture, even though it's secular, it's founded on biblical principles. But those pagan cultures never had that. Only the Jews had that. And that's why they were adamant to make sure they didn't get infected by the nations. Their dietary laws made sure that they couldn't eat with the

Gentiles. Because when you eat with someone, you socialize and you share ideas and stuff. No, the Jews must stay away. So they had special dietary laws. They had special clothing laws. They had circumcision laws just to make sure that they couldn't mix families either. Deliberate ways of keeping the Jews apart from the Gentiles. One of the ways you can understand the laws in the Old Testament was that it's, if you use this train idea, is that it's not so much the way that the Jews got on the train. It's the way they stayed on the train. It wasn't the ticket to get on the train and to be part of God's people. It was the doors that stopped them from jumping off. Okay, that's essentially a way of understanding what the Old Testament laws were about. And there was another reason that we read in Galatians that God gave the law and kept the Jews separate from the Gentiles.

And that is because he had a plan to send his Messiah to the world through the Jews. And therefore, he wanted there still to be a people of God, a covenant people when the Messiah came. And so he gave those laws to make sure that they didn't get absorbed into the nations. But now, this is why this part of the Bible is so critical. Now that the Messiah has come, that law is no longer needed.

Those laws to keep God's people separate from the nations were no longer needed. Why? Well, look down at verse 15 of chapter 11. Look what's happening at this part in history. Peter's reporting about his conversation with the Gentiles. And he says, and this basically is him reporting what happened in chapter 10 with Cornelius the centurion. He says, as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came down on them just as on us at the beginning. I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. If then God gave them the same gift that he also gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, how could I possibly hinder God?

[11:55] Okay. So he's saying the reason that the law now is no longer applicable is because Jesus has sent his Holy Spirit to the Gentiles. And that is a vital thing. It was what the prophet said would happen, that God would pour his Spirit out on all nations. But now Jesus is pouring out the Spirit on the Gentiles. He's giving them tickets to the train that they never had before. And he's allowing them to step on board. And the Jewish Christians seeing this, they understood, therefore, that if Jesus, the Messiah and Lord, who has been ascended and is sitting on the throne, has seen fit to justify the Gentiles, who are they to argue? And so that was their attitude. You can see how they ended up in verse 18. When they heard this, they became silent and they glorified God, saying, so then God has given repentance resulting in life, even to the Gentiles. Okay. So now the social distancing of the law is not only unnecessary, but it's actually something that'll prevent the Gentiles getting on board if the Jews carried on following it. Because if God's opened the doors to the train, to the vehicle that's going to take people to the new creation, and the Jews are inside and the Gentiles are coming on board, but the Jews think they've still got to keep separate to the Gentiles, what are they going to do?

They're going to stop them from coming. They're going to get to the doors and barrier them up and bar the way. In fact, some of the early Jewish Christians try to do that. And Paul writes to them, the Galatian Christians, Paul writes in Galatians, you can check that yourself. And he says, you guys, stop it. You foolish Galatians. He's very, very cross with them. And he says, stop trying to keep the Gentiles from coming on board. Stop trying to conform them to Jewishness. Because the law of God is no longer necessary, and it's actually counterproductive. So now what we see here is instead of trying to stop people getting on the train, the Jews had to welcome them. And they did, because they understood what was going on. That verse 16, I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. Jesus was talking to the Israelites, his Israelite disciples. You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. But then Peter says, Cornelius and his household were baptized with the Holy Spirit, so now they are part of us. And so that's what they realized. It's not like God is doing something different with the Gentiles. He's bringing the Gentiles into the family of Abraham. And that's what he meant there when he said, they have become part of us. They have the same ticket as us. Faith in Jesus Christ. And that faith in the Messiah is what justifies both Jew and Gentile. But this was difficult for the Jews to get. And it took them a long time to understand that God had opened the doors to the world in this Antioch church. But that is a foundational aspect of the church, is that it necessarily is made up of people who are different from one another. Okay? And I wanted you to see that.

I wanted you to see why it's happening here, because it obviously has a lot of effects for how we do church and how we see other people as Christians and other Christians, people in the covenant.

But we'll get to that in a bit. But what I wanted you to see so far is that God's kingdom is necessarily made up of people who are different from one another. But they are also profoundly united together. So despite their differences, we go on to read in this chapter something amazing, something that you wouldn't have expected. Look at the end of the chapter from verse 27. Some prophets came from Jerusalem. One of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a famine throughout the Roman world. This did take place. So Luke's actually saying here, because he's writing after these facts, after the famine took place, but they predicted it would before it took place. And Luke's saying it actually did happen during the reign of Claudius. So they were absolutely right.

[16:11] It was a true prophecy. But look what happened. Look what these Gentile, previously pagan believers did. Each of the disciples, according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brothers and sisters who lived in Judea. And they did this, sending it to the elders by means of Barnabas and Saul.

This is amazing. The nation of Israel was, in Solomon's day, the one that the Gentiles relied upon to provide for them. That's what was happening. They were an economic powerhouse in Solomon's day.

And here we see the opposite happening. The Jewish church is about to undergo a famine sent by God to make them rely on the Gentiles to support them. Remember when we did 2 Corinthians? We see a similar situation where Paul in 2 Corinthians 9 and 10 is telling the Gentile Corinthians that the Jewish Christians need their help and to send money. And God created a need amongst the Jews to connect these people together, to solidify this previously, this thing, this barrier, this connection, where there was previously just this barrier. God is creating... Now that's quite profound, isn't it? God is creating a need to bring Christians together. Think about that. You know, often we might go, God, why have you put me in this situation? Why am I in need? Well, look what he does.

He created and he put the Jews, the Christians in Jerusalem in a dire need in order to have them rely on the broader church as a way God is unifying the church. God has a much bigger plan at play here.

[17:59] And so when you are going through difficulties, remember this might be a way that God is drawing you to rely on other Christians. It might be a way that he is solidifying the church. It's the way he keeps the church together. Anyway, that's just an aside. I wanted you just to see how despite their differences, they were profoundly unified and partnered together. And this leads us to the second distinguishing mark of Christians from this passage. And that is that Christians are people who obviously belong to Jesus. And it's obvious. Look at verse 26 again. This is quite cool. At the end, the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch. They were called Christians. That word Christian is a very interesting one. It's the word, the English word Christian is just a transliteration of that Greek word, which is Christianos. Now that ending, lanos, is most often used of something that is owned by the name it's attached to. So if someone owns something, and you put lanos in the end of their name, that's the thing that they own. So for example, Alex's Lego and books in his room would be called the Alexianos.

And he would make sure that Amy knows that these are the Alexianos. These belong to me. And so in the same way, the Christianos are those who belong to Jesus. The Christianos are the property of Jesus.

And here's the thing. They didn't call themselves that. They knew that. They knew that they belong to Jesus their Lord. It was the non-Christians who called them the Christianos. There was something so obvious that these people belonged to the Lord that they coined that term for this group of disciples.

And everywhere else we read this word, the Christianos, in the New Testament, it's used as a derogatory term from non-Christians. Those are the possessions of Christ that crucified Carpenter. How pathetic. So that term, the belongings of Christ, was used to insult them. But they didn't mind. They took it on as a badge of honor. They were proud of it. Luke was proud of it. When he wrote here, they were called the Christianos. They all, Jew and Gentile, were happy to belong to Christ because they knew who he really is. In fact, it was a relief given what they knew was going to happen when he comes back in judgment. Because no matter how derogatory that term is used for you or for any Christian, when Jesus comes back, everyone will want to be a Christianos. But it'll be too late for many. And so never be ashamed of it. Never be ashamed of being called a belonging of

Christ. Because, yeah, there's no greater thing to be.

[21 : 10] But what I want you to see here is that it was something about them that made it obvious to the world around them that they belonged to Jesus. And this was important because before this point in the Bible story, you could tell who the people of God were. They were the Jews. They were the people who wore the funny clothes and were circumcised and did the funny laws and ate the funny food. But now you couldn't. Now, with the law being abolished because of what Jesus did on the cross, how do you tell who the people of God were? Well, they couldn't be told apart by the law of Moses, but that wasn't needed because everybody knew who they were. They were the ones who couldn't stop talking about Jesus and couldn't stop living for Jesus. And an immediate example? Well, we see their generosity. It was because of how they used their money. It was because of their focus in their life of what was important that was obvious to the world around them that they belonged to Jesus. Because they said they gave of whoever had surplus. They gave according to their ability determined to send relief to the brothers. They were working for

Christ. Their money was Christ. The most obvious way to see whether someone really belongs to Jesus is to see if their money belongs to Jesus. You know, a lot of people call themselves Christians, but their bank account doesn't. And what we see here, these early disciples, they put their money where their mouth was.

And that's how people could see they belonged to Jesus, because their money obviously belonged to Jesus. Okay, so that's in a very summarized form, Acts chapter 11. And I hope you can see why it's such an important part of the Bible story, and why we can see what the distinguishing marks of Christians are. The distinguishing marks of Christians are a diverse group of people who are nonetheless united by their shared allegiance to Christ as their owner, which is obvious to outsiders. That is what Christians are. So, let us now evaluate ourselves at St. Mark's by that measure.

Okay. Let's start with the second one. Is it obvious to people that we belong to Jesus Christ? Is it obvious to people outside when they look at our lives? If you are a Christianos, what is it about you that makes it obvious to outsiders that you belong to Christ enough that they'll mock you for it? Can people see that your life belongs to Jesus? People at work, people in your life around you, in how you speak, in how you act, in how you spend your time and your money. Hey, are you coming to the clubhouse this Saturday? We're going to have a blast. Oh, sorry, I'm actually helping out at my church. We've got a work party on. What? Your church? What a waste of time.

[24 : 09] These Christians, they always spend their time at church with these, in their little Christian group. Or your investment advisor says, I've looked at your money and I think you should invest your surplus funds in this equity portfolio that I'm going to propose. Well, I'll stop you there. I'm actually going to invest that surplus in some Christian work we're starting at my church. What?

That's a bit of a waste of money. You won't get any return on that. Well, you just wait and see. What conversations do you have that make it obvious to people that you belong to Christ?

And if it's not obvious, then the question is, how do we make sure that it becomes obvious in our lives? How do we make sure people know we belong to Jesus, that we are truly Christianos, that they will even mock us for it? Well, let's look at what happened in this church and what Barnabas did and what he said, because it's quite important to help us to know how we can make sure we belong to Christ.

And that's obvious to people. Pick it up from verse 23. When he arrived, this is Barnabas, he was sent by the Christians in Jerusalem to go check out this apparently new church plant of Gentiles. And so he went on his mission to check them out. When he arrived and saw the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged all of them to remain true to the Lord with devoted hearts. Your translation might read something slightly different. But what he did there is he told them they need to remain true to the Lord with devoted hearts. Literally, that means remain faithful to the Lord in the direction of your hearts. That was his message. He went and did a bit of a guest preaching series at their church, and this was the summary of his message to them. Remain faithful to the Lord in the direction of your hearts. Now, our hearts are what give us direction. In the Bible, our hearts are more than just the muscle that pumps blood through our body. They are the, our hearts are the, the seat of our emotions, our desires, and the things that drive us towards certain directions in our lives. And we all have drives towards certain directions in our lives, what we want to get out of life, what we're being driven towards. Well, for a Christianos, each day we wake up. Our job is to ensure that the direction of our heart lines up with what our Lord is doing in this world. That is what a

Christianos is, that we, we are people who deliberately make sure that every day we line up the direction of our hearts with Jesus and what is he, what he is doing in this world. What is he doing in this world? Well, you find out in the Bible. And so that's why we come to church and sit under sermons, because this helps us to know what we must line up our hearts to, to make sure we are heading in the same direction as Jesus. And when we are, people will notice, and we will be united, like these early Christians were. And we will start to get along despite our differences. When we are all lined up in the same direction. Put a whole bunch of people who have nothing in common, and they're all heading in different directions and want different things.

I've seen churches like that. It's a disaster. But when we line up our hearts and what we want with what Jesus is doing, that's when, that's when we are united in a way that you can see nowhere else in this world. And that's the second thing. So the first point is the second application, is us being united as Christians. That's the mark of a Christian, getting along despite our differences.

[27 : 51] Because you see, just as the Jews had boundary markers before this moment, these markers of lifestyle to keep them separate from the non-Jews, so do we. Not as Jews, but we put boundary markers in our lives, certain ways of going about life, certain lifestyles, maybe certain cultures.

And we construct boundary markers, especially in such a polarized world we live in today, where we only get on with those we agree with. Have you noticed that? It's in this generation.

In the polarized world we live in, especially through social media, which is designed, by the way, to get you only to be exposed to people who you agree with. It polarizes us. And what do we do?

We set up our own boundary markers. We're now only going to relate with and get on with people that totally 100% agree with us. And so you see how we put our own boundary markers up, like the Jews had?

Our own things that keep us separate from people? And that's why we need this morning to get what the Jewish Christians needed to get. That Jesus welcomes people who are different to us into his people.

[29 : 09] And so what right do you have to hold anything against them and not welcome them into your life if Jesus forgives and welcomes them? And that is why Christians, we are called to get along.

We are called, you see it throughout the New Testament, to work on being united and being at peace with each other. It's why Christians cannot be a people who hold things against each other and bicker about each other behind backs. That is, that is, we are above that. Paul, in his writings, is vehemently against the wickedness of slander and gossip because it puts barriers up that Jesus died to take down. Jesus died to take down the dividing walls between us. What right do we have to put up dividing walls by talking about each other behind our backs? It's evil. It's wicked. It totally undermines what Jesus did for us. Because despite our differences, we are one people because we are owned by the same Lord. And the more we line up, our lives with Him, not only will it become obvious to outsiders who we belong to, but the more we will be lined up with each other. And as the early church was, the more we will be of one heart and mind, giving ourselves to God's mission together. And it's when we do that, that we will be the church

God wants us to be. Let's pray that that will be the case. Lord, we thank you for your amazing plan of salvation to create a way to take us from the curse of sin and death and to bring us to life.

We thank you, Lord, that you have opened the doors through Jesus Christ and what he did for us, that anybody may come in. And we pray, Lord, that we would therefore learn to overcome the differences between us, to be at peace with each other, to be in open, honest relationships with each other, and to line up our lives with Jesus Christ. So that every day we would live lives that are obviously owned by Jesus and that the world around us would see. And use this church, Lord, as we are united in a common goal together. Use this church to be an amazing witness to our surrounding people who are still outside of your saving plans. And Lord, use us to bring them in, to bring them through the doors, to proclaim Christ, to bring them into your covenant, that they might be saved. And we pray for your Holy Spirit to be with us in Jesus' name. Amen.