

## I. Introduction

Good morning! In Brazil, there is a huge statue of Jesus on a mountaintop overlooking the city of Rio de Janeiro. This statue is 30 meters tall and Jesus' arms stretch out 30 meters wide, inviting the whole city to Him. The wide-spread arms of this statue illustrate how Jesus invites all people to come to Him and be saved. Just as this statue shows, in our Bible passage for today we will see how Jesus opens His arms wide to welcome all who come to Him.



Let's read **Acts 11:1-18**.

## II. Scripture Reading Acts 11:1-18, (NIV, 1984)

1 The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. 2 So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him 3 and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them." 4 Peter began and explained everything to them precisely as it had happened:

5 "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. 6 I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles, and birds of the air. 7 Then I heard a voice telling me, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.' 8 "I replied, 'Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' 9 "The voice spoke from heaven a second time, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.' 10 This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again.

11 "Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. 12 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. 13 He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. 14 He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.' 15 "As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning.

16 Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 17 So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?" 18 When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."

## III. Teaching

Most of this passage is a review of the events of Acts 10. After his visit to Cornelius' home in Caesarea, Peter returned to Jerusalem and told the brothers how God had spoken to him through a vision to teach him (**Acts 10:15**), **"Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."** After God gave Peter the vision, God made it clear that the vision was not just about food, but rather it was a message revealing how God accepts and blesses people of all nations. In Caesarea, God made His acceptance of the gentiles very clear by pouring out His Holy Spirit on Cornelius and his household.



Truly, Jesus opens His arms wide to all people and welcomes us all into His family, as **Romans 10:12-13** tells us, **"For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile--the same Lord is Lord of all and**

**richly blesses all who call on him, for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’”**

This is wonderful Good News! But, at first this message was difficult for the Jewish followers of Jesus to accept. Instead of rejoicing and giving thanks for God’s grace, their first reaction was negative. **Acts 11:2-3** says, **“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.’”** The Jewish teachers of that time taught that Jews should never enter the home of a gentile or eat at the same table with a gentile. The first disciples of Jesus were Jews and they had learned these rules from childhood. As a result, their first reaction when they heard what had happened in Caesarea was to criticize Peter. They rejoiced and gave thanks only after they had heard Peter’s careful explanation.

What about us? Are we also quick to criticize and slow to give thanks? Some people seem to enjoy criticizing. They are always pointing out real and imaginary problems in the lives of others. You may even meet Christians who seem to think that criticism is a spiritual gift. If you mention the name of a famous Christian teacher or church to them, they will immediately tell you something they think is wrong with that person or that church. If the name of a brother or sister comes up in a discussion, they will say something negative about that person.

Friends, brothers and sisters, if you have the gift of criticism, check the return address. The Holy Spirit does not give us toxic gifts that tear down our brothers and sisters. Those kinds of gifts come from other spirits. The devil is always looking for ways to cause trouble in the church and encouraging people to criticize one another is one of his favorite strategies. We all need to guard our hearts and our tongues so that we can make sure that we are slow to criticize.



The devil offers us many toxic gifts: criticism, anger, jealousy, bitterness, lust, sexual immorality, gossip, arrogance, etc. - the list goes on and on. But, consider Paul’s words in **Ephesians 4:31-32**, **“Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”**

The toxic things the devil sows into our lives are sins and temptations. We all have some of these toxic things in our lives at least sometimes, but Jesus shows us a better way. Jesus teaches us the way of forgiveness, kindness, and compassion for others. We want to learn from Jesus’ example and imitate Him. Then we can leave behind toxic things that drag everyone down and help no one.

However, we will not be able to imitate Jesus without first repenting of our sins. Most people do not like to talk about repentance from sin, but the Bible talks about it a lot. In the Old Testament, the prophet Jonah was sent to Nineveh where he preached (**Jonah 3:4**), **“Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.”** The people of Nineveh heard the message and they all repented. Even the king of Nineveh took off his royal robes and sat in the dust. God saw their repentance and had mercy on them, even though Nineveh had been a very wicked city.



In the New Testament, first John the Baptist and then Jesus preached repentance. From the beginning of His ministry, Jesus urged the people to repent. Right after John the Baptist was thrown into prison, **Matthew 4:17**, tells us, **“From that time on Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.’”** The nearness of God’s rule is good reason for us to consider our lives and repent of our sins.



Concerning the people who stubbornly rejected His message, Jesus had strong words. In **Luke 11:32**, Jesus gave this warning, **“The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here.”**

The importance and necessity of repentance is easy to see in Scripture. But for people who are new to the Bible, the meaning of repentance may not be clear. I think there are two common mistakes that people make in their understanding of Biblical repentance.

The first mistake that some people make is to think that they have to reform their life before they can go to God. People who make this mistake sometimes say things like, “*Once I get my life cleaned up and stop sinning, then I can become a Christian.*” This is a big mistake because none of us have the power to stop sinning and clean up our lives without Jesus in our life. Trying to stop sinning before becoming a Christian is like trying to get well before you go to the hospital. The order is backwards and it won’t work. When we give our lives to Jesus, then we receive the Holy Spirit. And, it is the Holy Spirit that helps us to draw near to Jesus and live more holy lives. We need the Spirit to help us to turn away from sin.

The second mistake that some people make is to think that repentance is the same as regret. People who make this mistake think that if they feel sorry and regret their sin, then they have repented. But true repentance is much more than just feeling sorry. True repentance involves a change of heart, a change of attitude, and a change of direction in our lives. Take a look at what Paul wrote to the church in Corinth in **2 Corinthians 7:10**, “**Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.**” There is a worldly sorrow and worldly regret, but these things do not lead to salvation.

True repentance involves a change of mind and heart. True repentance leading to salvation involves changing our mind concerning who we are and who Jesus is. The worldly man is sorry for his sins because his sins have brought trouble and pain on himself. The spiritual man is sorry for his sins because his sins have caused sorrow to Jesus. If we have truly repented, then Jesus is our Lord and our lives are centered on Him. We may fall back into sin and repent again many times, but for the Christian, the basis of our repentance is our desire to please Jesus our Lord. True repentance leads us back to Jesus and results in a renewed and deeper relationship with Him. True repentance leads us to rejoice in the salvation Jesus has provided at the cross and to be more and more thankful to Jesus for His love, mercy, and grace.

Along with the change of heart and mind that true repentance brings, true repentance also brings a change of direction and actions in our lives. The man or woman who has experienced real repentance comes to hate sin and to love God. True repentance changes our identity; it leads to being born again as a new person, a child of God.

We need spiritual rebirth. We need to be made new in Christ. Without the light of Christ, we cannot even realize the seriousness of our sin. Take a look at this photo of a wedding dress. Can you see the ink stain? Of course you can. Now imagine for a moment that this room was pitch-black, completely dark with no lights at all. If someone came in wearing this dress, would you see the ink stain? No. When it is dark, even a black ink stain on a white dress cannot be seen.



In a similar way, before we come to Jesus, we live in a dark world and we cannot see our own sin. The eyes of the world are blind to most sins, because the world is dark. In **Jeremiah 17:9 (NKJV)**, the problem is explained in this way, “**The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked; Who can know it?**” Apart from Jesus, we cannot even know how sinful we really are.

Pastor Chuck Smith of Calvary Chapel sometimes uses an example from early American culture to explain the problem of the sinful heart. First let me give you some context and a bit of fun. There is an American institution that was founded in the state of Massachusetts in 1810 and that has been in operation since that time. Recent members of this organization include President Reagan, President Bush, Pope John Paul II, Mikhail Gorbachev, Raquel Welch, and many other famous people. What venerable institution could survive so long and claim such members? The organization is, *The Society in Dedham for Apprehending Horse Thieves*.



These days, the society is just a dinner club that meets once a year. But the original purpose was very serious. In the days before the invention of the railroad and the automobile, horses were an essential part of daily life. A man's horse was his car, his job, his recreation, and his safety all rolled into one. With a horse, you could travel, work a farm or a ranch, have a bit of fun, and escape when danger threatened. Horses were essential, and because of this, stealing a horse was considered to be the most despicable of all crimes.



With this context, let's consider how Pastor Chuck Smith explained the problem of the sinful heart. Pastor Chuck said, "*A man is not a horse thief because he steals a horse, a man steals a horse because he is a horse thief.*" Do you see the point? The horse thief is a horse thief in his heart. It is his identity.

The core problem of sin is not the outward action; the core problem is that in our hearts we are sinners. When we think of the problem of our sin, we tend to think of a list of sins that we have committed. But the problem is much more serious than the list of sins. The problem is a problem of identity; the problem is who we are in our heart. Apart from the new birth that faith in Jesus brings, in our heart we are sinners. It is our identity. It is who we are. As Jesus said in **Matthew 15:19**, "**For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.**"

True repentance involves a change of heart, because that is where our sins come from; they come out of the heart. True repentance brings us into right relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. Then He gives us a new heart and we are born again as new men and women with hearts to love Him and do His will.

When we repent of our unbelief and trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior, it is like being in a dark room when the lights are turned on. We see things in a new way and we are led by the Spirit to follow Jesus. **Ezekiel 36:26-27** explains this new birth in these words, "**I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.**"

#### IV. Conclusion

In closing, I would like to share one more thing. The salvation that God gives us when we believe in Jesus is a free gift, given from the Lord. We cannot earn it, but we can ask for it, crying out to the Lord for salvation. It is God's work, from the beginning to the end, even repentance is His gift. Take a second look at **Acts 11:18**, "**When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, 'So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.'**"

Cornelius and his household believed in Jesus and received the Holy Spirit when Peter preached to them. But the disciples knew that this was only possible because God had given His grace to them as a free gift. It was His grace that led them to repentance. Are you struggling with some heavy burden or the guilt of some sin? Have you tried to change your own behavior and actions and failed? If so, I have good news and bad news for you. The bad news is that you will continue to fail as long as you try to reform yourself in your own strength. The Good News is that if you cry out to Jesus for salvation then He will give you the gift of true repentance and faith unto salvation. Trust in Jesus and He will give you a new heart.

Let's pray.

#### V. Prayer