

# Can I Be Included?

*Text: Deuteronomy 23:1, Isaiah 56:7, Acts 8:37*

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*Transcription of the spoken sermon*

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*“The eunuch shall not be permitted to the assembly of the Lord.” Deuteronomy 23:1*

*“...for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” Isaiah 56:7*

*“What is to prevent me from being baptized?” Acts 8:37*

Jesus had promised that if the disciples would wait in Jerusalem they would be empowered from on high. He charged them to begin at Jerusalem and go through Judea and Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth, and to tell the good news of God's wonderful grace. It would have seemed that on Pentecost when indeed the Spirit was poured out that Peter, at least, got the message. For he said, “This is what the prophet Joel was speaking about when God promised through that prophet. He said the days would come when old men would see visions, and young women would have dreams, and young people would prophecy.” He preached a great sermon. He got all caught up in his own rhetoric, and concluded with that wonderful promise “that the promise was to you and to your children, your seed after you, and to all those that are afar off.”

Stephen definitely got the message. He understood what Jesus had shared with that woman at the well of Samaria, “that neither in Mount Gerizim, nor at Jerusalem, but the day was coming and now was when the true worshiper would worship in Spirit and in truth, that the Spirit would push the true worshiper beyond all of the concrete forms of human religion.” But though Peter seemed to have gotten the message on Pentecost, when it came to the implementation—that was another thing. It's one thing to preach and it's another thing to do anything about it. It took a vision. Finally the Spirit of God had to say to Peter, “Go. Go to the house of Cornelius.” So Peter went—and told the story of Jesus. To his amazement the Spirit of God fell while he was preaching.

The message of the fire of Pentecost seemed irrepressible. Philip, who had been appointed with Stephen to administer the community that was growing, heads to

Samaria. He is preaching in Samaria, and there is tremendous response. The Samaritans are turning to Jesus, hearing the Gospel, believing it, and responding to it. And the Apostle Paul is spreading the Good News as well. Well, of course, to get through to Paul, God had to knock him off his horse. But once he got the message, Paul went everywhere, as far as Rome itself bringing the Good News of Jesus. Before long that Christian movement had spread far beyond Jerusalem, beyond Judea, beyond Samaria, up to Antioch, and indeed was sweeping the ancient world, the Roman Empire like a spreading flame.

Ah, and nothing succeeds like success, you know. Yet the very success of that mission created the great crisis for the early church. It was THE crisis of the early church, and it was a crisis of major proportions. It was crisis created by the key question: What Does It Take To Belong? As long as it was this Jesus Movement within the Jewish temple there was no problem. Even though there might be hundreds and thousands of Jews who believed that Jesus was the Messiah there was no problem. Because this was not the Christian Church, this was the Jesus Movement within Israel. This was just the people who believed in the God of Israel and worshiped in the temple. They simply believed that God had indeed, fully invested Jesus, that Jesus was the anointed one, the Messiah. They shared common heritage, common tradition, common background, common comfort levels, common language, common everything with their Jewish sisters and brothers. But now you move that out. You get to Samaria and you have already got some tension. Then you get to Gentile Antioch and you've got a real problem. You have Paul going all over the Ancient World preaching the Gospel and saying to the people, "Repent. Believe and be baptized in the name of Jesus and you are one of us." There were others back in Jerusalem who said, "That's not enough." Finally the crisis was so severe that they had to call a council. We call it the Jerusalem Council. You can read about it in the 15th chapter of Acts.

Probably the premier preacher today in this country is a man named Fred Craddock, who has a great sense of humor, and who pictures the Jerusalem Council as a typical church synodical meeting. He says, "Church meetings can be the most incendiary of them all, you know." He envisions the people coming with great fear and trepidation knowing that this was going to be a hot session. He says, "You know you knew you were in for trouble when you came into the assembly hall and there was a forest of microphones. So the meeting was called to order and someone stood up at microphone #2." All over the country in the synods and general assemblies of the various denominations you will see all these microphones, and suddenly somebody was recognizing the speaker at microphone #2. He said, "As far as this issue about who can be included is concerned, I just wanted to say that back home in our congregation we've been studying Ezra. Ezra made it very clear, 'Get the foreigner out, even if you are married to one, divorce her. Get rid of her. No foreigners in the assembly of God's people.' Thank you very much."

Then a rather quiet voice from the other side of the room at microphone #5 stood up. Some lady from Berea, who said, "Well, we have this Bible class that meets Tuesday mornings at 9:30 a.m. Wonderful fellowship. We have been studying the Book of Ruth. Ruth was quite a woman. As a matter of fact, did you know she was an ancestress of David and, therefore, of our Lord. She had Moabite blood. She was a Moabitess. So our Lord has Moabite blood, so it would seem that the first speaker is out of line to make the limit so narrow."

Then there was somebody up in the balcony who couldn't stand for that who stood up at Microphone #9. He said, "If you read Amos it says, you of all the people of the earth, you alone, you the Jews, you alone. Not you alone, etc., etc. You alone. That's all I want to say." Then someone else with a kind of tremor in their voice stood up and said, "I can remember back in Sunday School I memorized a verse, I can't quite remember it right now, but it went something like, 'The mountain of the house of the Lord will be exalted above all the mountains and all the nations. All the nations will flow into it.'" Obviously they weren't going to settle it in this session. They were going to have an extended session. It was pretty tense. Tempers were about to explode. There was a lot of electric in the air. They broke for lunch, and over lunch somebody at one of the tables said, "Whose fault is this anyway?" Somebody said, "I know whose fault it is: Stephen's. After all he made that speech about the temple. He sort of denigrated the temple. That's what started it all." Someone else said, "No. No. Peter. Peter isn't admitting to it. He's trying to keep it quiet, but do you know the word is out. I've got a sister that lives in Caesarea and she says that Peter actually ate with some Italians." (Laughter) Somebody else said, "Nah, it's Philip. What's he doing in Samaria anyway? You know Samaritans have always been irresponsible. You can't count on them. Any time you let the Samaritans in you're in trouble. You know, there goes the neighborhood." (Laughter) Another one pops up and said, "Ah, come on. That's all child's play. What about Paul? Paul has gone everywhere—Galatia, Ephesus, Rome itself. He just says, 'You all come. You all come.' Why, they don't know what circumcision is. They never heard of Moses. They don't know anything about the Law. He just says, 'Come on in. You can even be baptized. It's okay, just come on in.' What is this going to come to? We had such a good thing going. There was such unity. There was such power. There was such verve. There was a sense of community. We had such a good thing going and now it's going to split us wide open."

Well, you may think I am kidding, but I'm not kidding at all! I haven't exaggerated a bit. The tension was that sharp and the issue was that clear-cut. What did it take to be included? Would the promise of Pentecost finally break out beyond those narrow limits or would God's Spirit once again be managed? Somebody at the table who had not spoken and had not gotten into the debate finally said, "You know whose fault it is? It's not Stephen's or Peter's or Philip's or Paul's. It's God's fault. The Spirit of God pushing and shoving. The Spirit of God never satisfied with any boundary lines, with any barriers. Look. None of us would be out there except that there was a kind of compulsion, the compelling of

the Spirit of God. It's the Spirit of God. That's why we're in trouble. And that's why we had better take seriously this thing that is before us." That's what Luke is telling us about the early church. If we think we have got tensions today. If we think we've got issues today—that was an issue that involved the total turning upside down of everything they had ever believed. But Luke knew. As long as you could talk about issues in the abstract, as long as you can talk about theoretical cases, you can all sit around all day and debate, argue...get nowhere. But Luke knew that if you really want to deal with an issue, what you have to do is focus on one concrete individual.

So for just a little bit he turned the camera on a strange sort of person, an Ethiopian eunuch. Philip had been carrying on a great evangelistic crusade in Samaria and Samaritans were being saved by the thousands. He had his picture on the front page of the newspaper almost every night, interviewed on the evening news, and suddenly the Spirit of God says, "Philip, go south...the road to Gaza." Then he finds himself next to an Ethiopian eunuch. An Ethiopian. Well, it's not the modern day Ethiopia, but there was such a place south of Egypt. On the other hand, in that ancient world in classical discussion and literature, an Ethiopian was somebody who was from beyond the end of the world. Sort of like we sometimes say, or I used to say, "Where's he from? I don't know. Timbuktu." Or, "She can go to Timbuktu." That means beyond nowhere—Ethiopia. This Ethiopian was a very powerful person in a great position, and he was a eunuch. A eunuch is a male rendered sexless by accident or by surgery. They were very valuable in the Ancient World and often commanded high posts in the palace. The kings liked them because they created no problems with the harem. The queens liked them because they minded their own business. Everyone liked to hire a eunuch for a key position because the eunuch would stay late at the office every night. The wife never complained, "Dinner's cold again." The eunuch never got interrupted with his duties by having to take care of the car pool. They were valuable, often commanding powerful, prestigious posts. Deuteronomy 23:1 (Read it tonight after you put the children to bed. It's a little more explicit than I have in the bulletin.) says, speaking about a eunuch through accident, "They have no place in the assembly of God's people." They are excluded.

Now this eunuch had been to Jerusalem on pilgrimage to worship. Maybe he was a proselyte. Maybe he was a God-fearer. We don't really know, but obviously he was serious, searching, longing, yearning, and going to Jerusalem on pilgrimage to worship. But if he had just read Deuteronomy 23:1 he would have known there's no place for a eunuch in the house of the Lord, in the assembly of God's people. So what's he doing anyway, making his way to Jerusalem? What does he want to do? Does he simply want to make himself feel more miserable? Does he want to feel more sharply his exclusion? Or maybe, does he want to start a civil rights movement or a sacred rites movement as the case may be? In any case, he goes to Jerusalem to worship even though Deuteronomy 23:1 clearly excludes him. I wonder why people go where the door is closed? I wonder why people bloody their knuckles rapping on a gate that is locked?

He was reading his Bible when Philip caught up with him. Maybe Isaiah 56 caught his eye. “Do not let the foreigner say, ‘The Lord will surely separate me from his people.’” The foreigner not separated. Who is this prophet? Ah, this was Isaiah 2. This was the one who had this magnificent universal vision, this vision of salvation for all people. He says, “Do not let the foreigner say, ‘The Lord will surely separate me....’” This caught his eye, “For thus says the Lord: ‘To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, and choose the things that please me and hold fast to my covenant—I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons or daughters.’” That was the problem of the eunuch, no sons and daughters to carry on the family name, which was so important in that day. No one to remember. No generations to follow. But here in book of the prophet Isaiah the Lord says, “I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name...a name. In the house of the Lord, a name better than sons and daughters. I will give an everlasting name.”

About the time Philip got to him he was in the 53rd chapter, about the lamb led to the slaughter. “Sheep before its shearers silent.” The one who was cut off with no generation. What's he doing? He's looking for his name. He is trying to find himself. He wants to find himself in the story. He wants to find himself in God's story. He's looking for his name. He reads about this one who is cut off, who leaves no generation. He says to Philip, “Who's he talking about? Is he talking about himself or some other one?” Philip says to him, “He's talking about Jesus.” “Well didn't he have any seed?” “No. He was taken up out of the land of the living. He left no heir. But God gave him a name. Like the prophet says in a couple of chapters over—a name better than sons and daughters...an everlasting name...and they shall not be cut off.” Looking for his name. Jesus went up to Jerusalem with a yearning in his heart. The Torah had said he couldn't belong, there was no place. But he went anyway.

I wonder why people go where they are not wanted? Why do people try to force their way in where the gate is obviously locked? Blacks? I remember when I came back from Europe after the tumultuous 60s. It must have been the summer of '71. My first gathering with my extended family. I made the mistake of engaging an aunt in conversation, (which is a euphemism) (Laughter) about the whole civil rights thing, African-American ascendancy. This is the aunt, I've talked about her before, she's not always right, but she's always certain. (Laughter) I think she got the sense that I was winning the argument so she cut it off at that point. She said, “You may be right, but I will still say to my dying day, they were better off when they knew their place.”

Why do people bloody their knuckles rapping on doors that are locked? Women, trying to get into ministry, scaring the likes of myself, threatened by what that might mean. (Laughter) Let them take care of the kitchen for God's sake! (Laughter)

Gays in the military! What do they want to get in the military for? Don't they know they are odd? Wonder why people always try to barge in, crash walls, break down barriers? I suppose it's just like this eunuch. Just looking to find his name. Looking to find if he could belong.

I was in Minneapolis this past week for a couple of days with Churches Uniting for Global Mission (CUGM), the kind of thing that Bob Schuller keeps talking about on the Hour of Power. Tuesday evening, after all the festivities were over, Bud Ritter and I were invited to his room for some conversation—just the three of us. He told of his experience in Africa a couple of weeks ago— it must have been an absolutely shattering experience for him—Dr. Leon Sullivan, the African-American leader who started the program Teachers for Africa, this outstanding leader from Philadelphia who has a sense that part of the problem in our world today, is that the leaders (in this case African-American and black African leaders) are not talking to each other. So he organized a black summit and he got the leaders from this country, Governor Wilder from Virginia, Jesse Jackson, Lowry, etc. to attend. He chartered two 747s and went over to Africa. It wasn't going to be in New York or L.A. or Chicago, it was going to be in Africa. Got the leaders of the sub-Saharan nations together. They met on the west coast of Africa. He invited one white man and that was Bob Schuller. Bob Schuller with all of these black leaders. Bob told about sitting in his hotel and watching the Atlantic wash the shore of Africa, becoming cognizant of the fact it was his Dutch forbearers that brought their ships there to load up 20,000,000 blacks, enslaving them and bringing them to America. Later he was eating breakfast and the Chief of Protocol, of Lewis Farrakhan, the head of the Black Muslim nation, who are militant in the style of the early Malcolm X., the one who makes the statements that make your blood run cold, he came to Schuller and said, “Lewis would like to speak with you.” The next morning for two hours at breakfast they spoke together and Bob's summary of it all was simply this: He wants in. I had heard that he was seeking to move toward the middle where he might be a part of the genuine dialogue instead of firing from the periphery. Lewis Farrakhan wants in.

Schuller was given no duties at this summit, but in one session Dr. Sullivan said, “We'd like to hear from you.” And he stood up and he couldn't speak. He began to weep. On Tuesday evening when he told the story he wept again. He said, “It was the most dramatic experience of my life. In those moments I was ashamed I was white.” As he stood there weeping a black man got up from the audience and came and stood next to him. Just stood there. At one point Schuller looked at him and he smiled. Bob said it was as though he was saying, “I forgive you.” Eventually Bob stammered a few things and sat down. But he said, “You know, it shatters everything I've always thought or believed. The man who stood next to me and gave me forgiveness was a Muslim.” Bob said, “You know all the boundaries are dissolving.”

I shared with him what we have been talking about these weeks, that, indeed, I was going to talk about the next morning to the CUGM group, that the

boundaries are dissolving. That maybe there was the period of the Jewish Church and maybe the period of the Christian Church, and maybe because of the blindness of the Jewish leadership there had to be a Christian Church. Maybe because of the blindness of the Christian Church there needs to be something out here which the Spirit of God will shape and form, because you see it's really finally God's fault. God's Spirit will not tolerate barriers. God's Spirit will not tolerate walls. God's Spirit, the Spirit that Jesus promised, the Spirit of Jesus, the Spirit of the God of Israel, the Spirit of the one true God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth will break down every barrier and will make all God's people one. That's maybe where we are in the world.

The eunuch said to Philip, "Look, there's water. Can I be included?" I suspect that's probably everybody's question and heart's desire. Can I Be Included? Can we say 'No' to those to whom God has said 'Yes'?

God forbid!