

Acts 10:24-48

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²⁴ The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. ²⁵ As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. ²⁶ But Peter made him get up. "Stand up," he said, "I am only a man myself."

²⁷ Talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. ²⁸ He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. ²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?"

³⁰ Cornelius answered: "Four days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me ³¹ and said, 'Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. ³² Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.' ³³ So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us."

³⁴ Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism ³⁵ but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. ³⁶ You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. ³⁷ You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached— ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

³⁹ "We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, ⁴⁰ but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. ⁴¹ He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. ⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. ⁴⁶ For they heard them speaking in tongues^[a] and praising God.

Then Peter said, ⁴⁷ "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." ⁴⁸ So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

Footnotes:

- a. [Acts 10:46](#) *Or other languages*
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Was there ever a time in your life when you felt the sting of prejudice? Someone looked down on you and made you feel small or unacceptable. Maybe it was a sporting event, and you were the visiting team. You were wearing your school colors, someone called out to you, and they said something that wasn't flattering. (That never happens at the Texas/OU game, does it?!)



Or perhaps it was when you were overseas on a trip, and you experienced anti-American sentiment. I remember being in the Dominican Republic on a mission trip, and as we drove by a wall that had graffiti on it I read the words, "Yankee go home!" Spray-painted underneath were the words "and take me with you!"

Maybe you experienced discrimination because you weren't dressed right for an event, or you grew up in the wrong part of town, or you didn't like the right kind of music. Then there is the obvious prejudice which is based on race, and there are people in this congregation today who know what it feels like to be judged simply because of the color of their skin or the shape of their eyes.

The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ breaks down the barriers of prejudice and discrimination. It opens a way for people of all races and backgrounds to come together and be joined into one family of faith. The 10th chapter of Acts is one of the most important chapters in the whole book, if not the whole Bible, because it tells how a gospel that was originally thought of in exclusively Jewish terms came to be good news for the whole world.

Last week we learned of the way God prepared for a meeting between Cornelius and Peter in a miraculous way. The Lord gave both men separate visions which set the stage for this historic encounter. You will recall Peter was hesitant and even resistant to go, because it went against everything that he had ever been taught. The Jews had no dealings with Gentiles, and they regarded them as dogs. But Peter's new willingness to make no distinction between people, regardless of their race, made this meeting possible.

Here we see the apostle put aside his preconceived ideas about people. He went beyond his comfort zone, traveled to the home of a Gentile and accepted Cornelius' hospitality, something that was strictly forbidden by Jewish custom. Peter came to see that the heart of the gospel goes beyond tradition and what people think is "appropriate" and "respectable," and it breaks down barriers and reaches across the things that divide us.

When Peter met with Cornelius, along with his family and friends, the apostle said he learned through his experiences of the previous few days that God does not show favoritism or partiality. He understood that God's attitude toward people is not determined by external things like one's appearance, race, nationality, or class. Instead, the Lord accepts people as they are whenever they try to honor Him and do the right thing. Prejudice and favoritism have no place in the Christian life.

After the introduction regarding Peter's meeting with the Roman centurion, Luke goes on to summarize the message the apostle gave that day in which he talked about the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Peter concluded his message by saying the Lord would come again someday, and that everyone who believes in Him can find forgiveness for their sins. The apostle presented Jesus as an historical person, in and through whom God was at work to save the world.

Here we see the central core of the message of the gospel presented by the early followers of Jesus. Biblical scholars and theologians use a little Greek word to describe this core message. It is the word *kerygma*. The word literally means "preaching," and it represents the essential witness, the core message concerning the gospel of Jesus Christ in the NT. The message of the grace of God was at the heart of the Gospel.

It is easy for us to get distracted with extraneous matters that aren't really the heart of the gospel, and we tend to get sidetracked with secondary issues which are not the core of the message of grace. We add things to the list of what a person needs to do to be accepted by God.

I remember a number of years ago seeing an example of this when I was on that same mission trip in the Dominican Republic. We were there to construct a small cinder-block building in a remote village where previously there was no church at all. We were also there to share our faith. There was a young



teen-aged girl we met who was obviously interested in what we were doing, and she was drawn to what we had to say about Jesus. She was a beautiful young girl, and she had such a zeal for life. As we shared the gospel with her, it was obvious she wanted to accept it, but there was hesitancy on her part. She would not come to the point of making a personal commitment herself.

When we pressed to discover why, we learned that if she committed her life to Christ she would no longer be able to wear make-up, and she couldn't go dancing – two things that were very important to her at her young age. Those were two of the cultural taboos that Christians in that part of the world required of all believers. We tried to explain that those things didn't matter, but her response was, "You don't understand." The day we left the village for the last time, there were tears in her eyes as we said good-bye, and I could tell she wanted so much to give her life to Christ, but the restrictions were just too great for her at this young age.

Christians in that village muddled the heart of the gospel. They applied extraneous standards of behavior which were not central, and we could even add unbiblical, to the message of the Good News of Christ. That young woman was reluctant to come to the Lord because of false barriers others erected.

It is easy for us to write off this situation and take comfort in the fact that we don't do anything like that. However, do we? In what ways are we critical of other people who don't approach life and faith just the way we do? How do we allow secondary matters creep into the message of the gospel and allow them to displace the singular note of God's love and grace? Do we have our own litmus test to determine who's in and who's out? Each of us should make a careful examination of our own hearts before we are so quick to condemn others.

As Peter was delivering his message to Cornelius and those gathered in the house, the Holy Spirit fell upon all of them. They began to speak in tongues, just as believers had done on the day of Pentecost and as had happened again in Samaria when the gospel was proclaimed there. The Jewish Christians who accompanied Peter were amazed by the fact that these Gentiles received the Holy Spirit and the same sign which marked the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost, and the gift of tongues authenticated that these Gentiles were also recipients of God's grace in the very same way as the Jews had received it in the beginning.

Peter responded by saying that since these new friends had been given the gift of the Holy Spirit, then they, by right, should also be baptized and welcomed into the covenant community of faith. In baptizing these Gentile believers, Peter and his companions acknowledged that God could bring Gentiles directly into a saving relationship with Christ without any prior involvement in Judaism. This would be revolutionary for the early church, and history would never be the same again. Later on, when others heard about this experience, they saw that the conversion of these Gentiles was accomplished entirely by God, and no one could revert to old prejudices and relegate these new converts to a role of being second-class Christians. They realized everyone comes to God on equal footing – as sinners saved by grace through faith in Christ.

Last week you will recall we talked about the story of Ruby Bridges. She was the brave 6-year-old African American girl who helped integrate the public schools of New Orleans in 1960. Norman Rockwell painted a picture of her with the four U.S. Marshals which appeared in *Look* magazine back then.

A few years ago, I came across a remarkable book by Ruby Bridges titled *Through My Eyes*. It tells her story in greater detail, and it has some amazing photographs. There's a picture of Ruby with the U.S. Marshals mounting the stairs of the school. There is also a disturbing photograph of the crowd of white people who demonstrated outside the school in New Orleans. They look so normal, like they were on their way to church. One little girl is holding a cross. Christians were at the center of this



demonstration. And in the middle of the picture there is a little coffin with a black doll inside it. How disturbing and sad.

However, there is one last picture that appeared in the book. It is a photograph of Ruby with some of the other students playing together at the end of the year at the Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans. Gradually, white kids returned to the school, and folks started to change. God made a breakthrough, and the power of the Holy Spirit transformed people's hearts.

This picture in Scripture of Peter standing with Cornelius and his family was as surprising in its day as this photograph of Ruby and her new white friends was back in 1960. Both are a picture of grace, and they show what can happen when we realize that with God there is no favoritism, and He shows no partiality.

Acts 10 marked a turning point in the history of salvation when the walls of racial separation were broken down for the first time in the church. God invites us to continue that work of transformation.

As we close this morning, let me ask you, who is the Cornelius in your life? Who is there that is either hard for you to love, or who makes you very reluctant to reach out to them? They are Cornelius for you, and God wants you to take the message of God's love to them.

Maybe your Cornelius is a person of another race, and God wants you to break down barriers and treat everyone with dignity and respect. Or maybe it is a child who has wandered away, and they have caused you a great deal of pain. Perhaps your Cornelius is a spouse who cannot get free from their addictions, and you are afraid of their black hole of need. Maybe your Cornelius is a co-worker who bugs the heck out of you. They appear to be as far away from God as a person can be, and there are so many things about them that just drive you crazy.

Maybe your Cornelius is a Hispanic kid who is at risk, and she needs a mentor to help her in school. Maybe you're reluctant to go on a short term mission trip because you think, "I don't want to be in a situation where I'm not in control. And besides, I don't speak the language, and you can't drink the water there." Cornelius needs you to go.

If we push past our prejudice and fears and reach out in love to those who need Christ the most, God can take our feeble efforts and work a miracle. We may be reluctant, we may not want to go, but if God is in it there is a miracle waiting for us. Amen.

