



Acts: The Church Unleashed- Session 6

10.14.18

INTRODUCTION

At New Vision, one of our measures that we ask is, “Who is someone that I know that is far from God but close to me?” This measure is intended for each one of us to look at our lives and see the people around us that may know of God or not at all, and how we can intentionally seek to share Jesus with them that it brings them to a point of recognizing Jesus as Savior and Lord. The struggle that we sometimes face in our lives is that we put personal barriers up to sharing the gospel, that were never meant to exist.

Why do you think a church for all people is so crucial to the message of the Bible?

What boundaries have you seen or experienced that separated Christians from one another? How did these points of separation hinder the gospel going forward?

Transition: The gospel resists and tears down the boundaries that often separate people in the world, and the writers of the New Testament were often at pains to confront the church when it failed to unite around the gospel and break these walls down. Peter, who struggled with such issues himself, learned the importance of calling the church to brotherly unity, but his journey toward unity took the Holy Spirit paving the way in the heart of a Gentile and then in his own heart. With God, there is no favoritism, and salvation is offered to people from every tribe, tongue, and nation.

UNDERSTANDING

1. God cultivates a Gentile’s heart to receive the gospel- Acts 10:1-8

Have a volunteer to read Acts 10:1-8

¹ There was a man in Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment. ² He was a devout man and feared God along with his whole household. He did many charitable deeds for the Jewish people and always prayed to God. ³ About three in the afternoon he distinctly saw in a vision an angel of God who came in and said to him, “Cornelius.”

⁴ Staring at him in awe, he said, “What is it, Lord? ”

The angel told him, “Your prayers and your acts of charity have ascended as a memorial offering before God. ⁵ Now send men to Joppa and call for Simon, who is also named Peter. ⁶ He is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea.”

7 When the angel who spoke to him had gone, he called two of his household servants and a devout soldier, who was one of those who attended him. 8 After explaining everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.

1. Who was Cornelius?

Cornelius is someone who had revered God for a long time. He was a Roman living in Judea and overseeing several hundred Roman soldiers stationed at Caesarea. He was not a foot soldier but more like a battalion commander, a person with political and military power at his disposal.

It's likely that Cornelius had been strongly influenced by the Jewish culture surrounding him. When Luke tells us, he was devout and feared God, most commentators agree that this means he was in some way worshiping the one true God as revealed in the Old Testament Scriptures. This meant he was attending the synagogue and participating in Jewish religious and cultural practices. He was certainly moved enough by his religious efforts to do "many charitable deeds for the Jewish people."

He was also someone of great influence. Luke says his "whole household" feared God. His own religious piety and practice had rubbed off on those around him, and this household included his family and the families of a number of servants. So, in Caesarea, we have a little enclave of God-seeking Gentiles, led by Cornelius.

2. How does Cornelius' story compare to today's culture?

In our day, we could find many people who are seeking after God but don't know Jesus. We live in an age where, alongside rigid secularism, religion abounds. There's a feel-good "God is love" religion whose concepts of God are vague and simplistic. There's new age spirituality that takes its form in yoga and meditation. And there's a power-of-positive-thinking religion that shows up in many different forms. As Christians, we can certainly find elements of these religions that are objectionable, but we should be careful not to dismiss the people who practice them *too* quickly and not to be *too* simplistic in our thoughts about them.

If we pay attention to what motivates and attracts people to their various religious practices, we might discover hearts that long for truth. We might even discover people with an awareness of their spiritual poverty, people who are looking under every leaf for the possibility of a meaning spiritual encounter. We know those folks won't find what they're looking for apart from God's own miraculous intervention to draw them to Himself. Moreover, we shouldn't expect them to find God apart from the evangelistic ministry of His church.

That's one of the most surprising things about Cornelius' story. As pious as he was and as much as his heart seemed to be in the right place, he needed more than good motives to find God. He needed the church, the community of faithful saints who are filled with the Spirit and telling the world about Jesus.

When we encounter people like Cornelius, we have a similar opportunity. We should pay attention to the ways their hearts are seeking God, and when we see good things at work in their hearts, such as humility, brokenness, love, and charity, we can applaud them. But we can't stop there; we must also invite them to think about Jesus, and we can invite them to come to know him in the community of His church.

Why do you think God chooses to use Christians to spread the gospel? How does that encourage you to know that God desires to use you? How can that challenge us?

What are some ways you see non-Christians in the world around you seeking to have a spiritual encounter? What are ways that the church can step in to help guide these people to Jesus Christ?

Transition: Meanwhile, the apostle Peter had a vision of his own that would challenge his understanding of God and His image-bearers.

2. God condemns His people's sense of superiority- Acts 10:9-16

Have a volunteer to read Acts 10:9-16

⁹ The next day, as they were traveling and nearing the city, Peter went up to pray on the roof about noon. ¹⁰ He became hungry and wanted to eat, but while they were preparing something, he fell into a trance. ¹¹ He saw heaven opened and an object that resembled a large sheet coming down, being lowered by its four corners to the earth. ¹² In it were all the four-footed animals and reptiles of the earth, and the birds of the sky. ¹³A voice said to him, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat."

¹⁴ "No, Lord!" Peter said. "For I have never eaten anything impure and ritually unclean."

¹⁵ Again, a second time, the voice said to him, "What God has made clean, do not call impure."¹⁶ This happened three times, and suddenly the object was taken up into heaven.

1. What was in the vision?

In the vision God gave him, he saw something coming down from the heavens, lowered by "four corners." More than describing the geometrical shape of this sheet, this phrase indicates that something with big implications was happening. The sheet with four corners recalls the four corners of the earth (see Isa. 11:12; Rev. 7:1); whatever God was revealing to Peter had world-spanning consequences.

Peter, who lived according to the rules and traditions of Jewish culture, would have been scandalized by this sight and even more scandalized by the command to "kill and eat." Dietary laws were integral to Jewish national and cultural identity. God gave the law to Israel as a way of distinguishing them from the pagan culture of their neighbors and breaking with this pattern was seen as dishonoring to God, family, and nation.

2. What was Peter's response?

So, Peter's response to the voice of the Lord was a firm no. Peter thought he was being tested—was his hunger so strong that it could overcome his convictions about the dietary laws he had kept from birth? The voice responded by telling him that God had made these animals clean and Peter must not call them impure anymore.

Peter's vision marked a turning point in the life of the church. Luke tells the story in a way that shows us God's providence at work. Cornelius' heart was being drawn to God just as Peter's heart was being opened to new possibilities. Something was about to change; some expectation, some sense of Jewish identity, was about to shift.

3. Jesus disrupts expectations.

In some ways, this was nothing new for Peter. Like most of the Jews of his day, he was eagerly anticipating the coming of the Messiah, and when he started following Jesus, he thought he was about to witness a social and political revolution. This was why he and so many of the other disciples would bicker about who would sit next to Jesus on His throne, and this was why Peter was eager to draw his sword the night Jesus was arrested in Gethsemane.

Jesus disrupted all of these expectations, walking a path of suffering and hardship rather than war and glory, defeating the spiritual enemies of Israel—Satan, sin, and death—rather than their political enemies, such as Rome. In Acts, Jesus disrupted Peter's expectations again.

The command to ignore Israel's dietary laws and "kill and eat" indicated that the time of Israel's being separate from the rest of the world on account of the Law of Moses had come to an

end. What would set them apart from the world now was their faith in Jesus, not their cultural and religious traditions. Peter would soon discover that in this new reality, he had more in common with a Gentile centurion who trusted in Jesus than with a Jewish brother or sister who didn't believe. Christians today have more in common with believers from the Middle East or Russia than they do with their unbelieving neighbor next door. See how unity in Christ is more important than cultural experiences!

What are some ways that God has surprised you or disrupted your expectations?

How should we reconcile the details of this story with the truth that God never changes?

What traditions might we need to reject or hold loosely so we don't call impure what God has made clean?

Transition: As Peter was contemplating his vision and its meaning, the three men Cornelius sent arrived at Simon the tanner's house. They invited Peter to come to Caesarea to meet Cornelius, recounting his visit from an angel, and the next day they set out. It's telling that Peter went along with them. As he later explained to Cornelius, "You know it's forbidden for a Jewish man to associate with or visit a foreigner" (10:28). He only went because he understood his vision—God was telling him that Gentiles are no longer unclean and should not be excluded from the good news of the gospel.

3. God calls His people to welcome all who believe the gospel. Acts 10:34-48

Have a volunteer to read Acts 10:34-48.

³⁴ Peter began to speak: "Now I truly understand that God doesn't show favoritism, ³⁵ but in every nation the person who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶ He sent the message to the Israelites, proclaiming the good news of peace through Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. ³⁷ You know the events that took place throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John preached: ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how he went about doing good and healing all who were under the tyranny of the devil, because God was with him. ³⁹ We ourselves are witnesses of everything he did in both the Judean country and in Jerusalem, and yet they killed him by hanging him on a tree. ⁴⁰ God raised up this man on the third day and caused him to be seen, ⁴¹ not by all the people, but by us whom God appointed as witnesses, 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 appointed by God to be the judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that through his name everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins."

⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came down on all those who heard the message. ⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were amazed because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. ⁴⁶ For they heard them speaking in other tongues and declaring the greatness of God.

Then Peter responded, ⁴⁷ "Can anyone withhold water and prevent these people from being baptized, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" ⁴⁸ He

commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay for a few days.

Peter preached the gospel, covering the entire story of Jesus' life and ministry, His death, and His resurrection, and while he was still speaking about these things, the Holy Spirit descended upon all those who heard the gospel message. Cornelius' whole household no longer just feared God but believed in Jesus, and as the Spirit was poured out on them, they erupted in ecstatic expressions of His presence and gifts. As with Philip and the Ethiopian in the previous session, Peter couldn't think of any reason to withhold baptism from this Spirit-filled community comprised of Gentiles.

We should consider how this story might be reframed in our own contexts. For any number of cultural, political, racial, and social reasons, Christians throughout the history of the church have had to wrestle with the temptation to write off certain people as improbable Christians, if not impossible. We assume "that person" would never get saved or "that group" is too hostile to the gospel. We assume those who are different from us would be unwilling to hear us. We assume that those who differ from us on politics are too ideologically different to hear us. And sometimes we just assume that certain people are too evil, too stupid, or too prideful to hear us.

It is always a mistake to think this way. God has long been in the business of surprising His people. Seeing that pattern so clearly in Scripture—from David becoming king, to Jesus being the Messiah, to a gruff fisherman being the catalyst for the conversion of a Roman centurion and his entire household—we ought to be eager to see that pattern in our ordinary lives. The gospel once surprised us with grace. Through us, we might just get to see it surprise us (and the world around us) again and again.

What groups of people might we be prone to write off as too resistant to the gospel?

What are some specific ways that this story should change our perspective?

APPLICATION

1. While the story of Peter and Cornelius might be familiar, we may still be unaware of the way implicit biases have taken up residence in our own hearts.

Spend some time of personal reflection of what biases exist in your heart that you have used as excuses to share the gospel. What can you begin to do in your personal life to tear those walls down?

2. God challenged Peter's tradition of "clean" and "unclean" foods in order to further challenge his perspective of "clean" and "unclean" people.

Think about actions in your life both inside and outside the church that you have used as traditions that hinder you from sharing the gospel. Spend time in prayer evaluating your priorities and things you may value over sharing the gospel and how that can change.

Quotes/Illustrations

Acts 10:1-8

“As a typical Roman he had been exposed to the Roman gods – Jupiter, Augustus, Mars, Venus, etc. – but found they had been exposed to the enlightened concepts of Judaism and had become devoutly monotheistic.” (Hughes)

“Angels may help to connect men with God’s appointed preachers, they are never allowed to do more.” (Lenski)

Acts 10:9-16

“This assurance and certainty [that a movement is of the Holy Spirit] consists principally in four things or reasons. First is love for God and granting my neighbor what God has granted and given to me, for his praise and the salvation of my soul. Second is to count it as loss and to give up life to the point of death, to suffer for the sake of Christ and the gospel in all patience. Third, to realize when God unlocks or opens a door, that one enters the same with the teaching of the gospel...Fourth, that one be free and sound in teaching and judgments and in truth, in order that none speak unless Christ works through his Holy Spirit.”⁵

–Pilgram Marpeck (1495-1556)

“So the voice of the Lord came down, not only because God was rebuking him but also he was saying clearly, ‘What God has cleansed, you must not call common.’ Then [Peter] immediately understood that the time had come when the shadows had to be transformed into truth...As I have said, the law was figures and shadows that remained ‘until the time of correction.’ ”⁶

–Cyril of Alexandria (circa 375-444)

“The Gospel is open to all; the most respectable sinner has no more claim on it than the worst.”^z

–Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981)

Acts 10:34-48

“These words of Peter have one sense or meaning...namely, that whether they are Jews or Gentiles, circumcised or uncircumcised, the important thing is that they fear God, believe in Christ Jesus and do right. Thus they are God’s children, well pleasing to him and heirs of his kingdom, according to the promise which he gave to Abraham saying, ‘In your seed’ (which is Christ) ‘shall all the heathen be blessed.’ ”⁹

–Dirk Philips (1504-1568)

“The preacher should not preach [the Messiah] as silver and gold, but as peace. This is the beautiful, magnificent sermon: that no one else but he himself has established peace between God and us—as well as all creatures! What is all the wisdom, knowledge and power on earth if we are not one with God? If this peace stands, I will not be pestered much by the devil, death, sin and hell. They can be as evil as they want; I have grasped hold of the Word and am at peace with God. But if the devil does not want to leave me in peace, what do I care? For my heart stands in the true assurance of God’s peace. The man named Jesus of Nazareth—Lord over everything—is *my* Lord, so you cannot devour me!”¹¹

–Martin Luther (1483-1546)

Further Commentary

Acts 10:1-8

“To date the gospel had been well established in Jerusalem and was extending throughout the Jewish territory (9:31). It was only a matter of time, therefore, before the limits of that territory would be reached (both geographically and demographically), and the problem of Gentile eligibility would have to be faced. What was needed was a test case—something to show clearly what God’s will was in the matter—and the case of Cornelius met that need. Of course, Luke had the advantage of hindsight. He saw a far greater significance in the admission of Cornelius and his friends into the church than anyone could have at the time. At first, it was probably seen as something exceptional, certainly not a precedent by which to establish a rule, much less an incentive to actively seek other Gentiles to bring into the church. And Luke himself understood this.”²

–David John Williams

Acts 10:9-16

“The four corners of the sheet in the vision correspond to the four points of the compass—north, south, east, and west. The sheet’s contents indicate the swarming millions that populate the earth. Cornelius, all his soldiers, all his servants, all the Roman people, all other nations on the face of the earth—all mankind were bound up together in one loathsome bundle. And Peter was standing above them, surveying them all and spitting out revulsion and rejection. Peter was about to see in living color his cold attitude toward the world—or at least toward non-Jews. Teeming millions were stone-blind spiritually, and yet Peter’s callous reply was, ‘Surely not, Lord!’ But once he really understood what it all meant, Peter would never forget this strange vision! In fact, he spoke of it over and over again.”⁴

–R. Kent Hughes

Acts 10:34-48

“Peter announced his newly acquired understanding that, in matters of race or ethnicity, ‘God shows no favoritism’...He ‘accepts,’ or rather ‘welcomes’ from every ‘nation,’ including the Jews, those who reverence him (Deut. 10:12) and ‘do what is right’ (lit. ‘produce righteousness’). ‘Nation’ points to any racial, ethnic, or cultural grouping by which humans distinguish themselves. Peter and Luke are seeking to avoid two extremes here: the Jews’ ethnic pride and prejudice, which saw no Gentile as a fit object of God’s saving call, and the view that the religions of all cultures are equally valid bases for being acceptable to God.”⁸

–William J. Larkin