

Peter and Cornelius Acts 10:1-48

Introduction

There is an old saying that goes, **“The ground is level at the foot of the cross”**

I tried to find who first uttered that phrase so that I could credit them but I found that it seems to have been said by a number of people but not attributed to anyone in particular as being the original speaker

As I was looking I did find that there is an old hymn by that name and since it isn't in our hymnals I also searched to see if I could find the lyrics and I found several different versions that all have to do with not showing partiality

But partiality and prejudice are very common part of our human existence

We have been conditioned to think of prejudice in terms of race but in reality prejudice is to make judgments about a thing or a person based on some other known criteria – race being just one of those criteria

Some synonyms would be prejudgment or preconception

It's like assuming a man must be good at or even like to play basketball just because he's tall

We all have the tendency to begin to form opinions before we have all the facts –

After all, if we waited until we knew everything, we would never form opinions because our knowledge is always limited and we have to start somewhere

But it's stopping at the level of pre-judging that's dangerous

Because prejudging can result in showing **partiality or bias** – either in favor of or against a person or thing that is **difficult, if not impossible, to overcome**

When applied to experiences or things there is typically little harm except for the fact that exercising negative prejudice could cause us to miss out on some interesting or even enjoyable things

But when applied to people, prejudice and partiality are grossly unfair and in the context of the gospel they are ungodly

Scripture tells us repeatedly that God doesn't show partiality

Romans 2:11 tells us that God doesn't show partiality when it comes to **judging a person's deeds**

We read in **Deuteronomy 10** that God doesn't show favoritism in **his justice**

Then in **Galatians 2** Paul tells us that God doesn't show partiality in the **area of power or influence**

And there are many more passages we could look at that show us the same thing

Back when I was a teen I can still remember some of the comments that were made about young people and the way they dressed or the length of their hair or the music they listened to and the jargon they used

And in the church there was a sense that somehow those young people were not able to properly approach God looking and acting as they did and really they shouldn't even be allowed through the doors of the church in their condition

Now, there is nothing wrong with desiring to maintain a certain level of decorum in the church and in worship services but when we begin to prejudge a person's fitness to worship and serve based on those kinds of criteria we've run afoul of what the Bible tells us as we begin to show prejudice and partiality where God shows none

Churches today aren't immune to these kinds of attitudes and beliefs and we risk alienating entire classes of people if we aren't vigilant in curbing our tendencies

Our biases today can include where a person falls on the political spectrum, their opinions on the issues of the day, where they stand on doctrinal minutiae, their denominational background, and so forth

We likely wouldn't say straight out that anyone isn't worthy of the gospel but do we communicate that feeling in other ways?

Do we, even unwittingly and without malice, place barriers between some people and the gospel in our minds and maybe even in our practices?

As we consider our text this morning we need to ask if there are any prejudices – even ones that we think are proper or ones that we might not yet be aware of – that we need to allow God to remove from us?

As you look at your note sheet the first Roman numeral will be “Two men in need of conversion”

In this section I will endeavor to show how each man needed to have his worldview and self-view changed by God

Roman numeral two is “Two visions and responses”

We will see how both men received commands from God and how they each responded

And Roman numeral three is “Two results”

The effects of this God-directed encounter are nothing but earth-shaking and afterwards nothing would ever be the same again

Please join me in your Bible and follow along as I read **Acts 10:1-48**

It's kind of a long passage but the narrative is rather straightforward and easy to follow

[Read passage]

I. Two Men in Need of “Conversion”

Our passage this morning contains the account of two men who desperately needed to change – even though neither of them knew of their need before God showed it to them

These two were alike in some ways and very different in others as we will see

A. Cornelius

We’ll take them in order of their appearance in this passage and look at Cornelius first

Cornelius was a **centurion** in the Roman military in what was known as the Italian Cohort

He was stationed in **Caesarea** – a port city on the Mediterranean Sea which served as the administrative headquarters for Roman governors

Some members of the Italian Cohort were soldiers from Rome while others were provincial soldiers who would typically be granted Roman citizenship at the end of their careers – either way he was clearly a **Gentile**

A centurion was in charge of 100 soldiers and would have been roughly equivalent to a captain or a company commander in terms of modern American military rank

We also see in **verse 2** that Cornelius was a “**devout man**” which means that he was devoted to proper religious practice

He was a **pious** man who was committed to following God to the best of his knowledge and ability

Then we see that Cornelius **feared God** which means he was **reverent and submissive** in his approach to God

And although Luke doesn’t use the formal terminology, this could mean that the Jews would have considered him to be a God-fearer which was a Gentile who did everything according to the Jewish faith except submit to circumcision

Further we see that he was an **influential** man because it wasn’t just him but his **whole household** was like-minded showing that he was well-regarded by his family and servants to the degree that they worshipped as he worshipped – he even influenced at least some of the soldiers serving under him to follow God

This fact tells us that he was **open with his faith** and that he made it public - faith wasn't a private matter to him

And he was **charitable** to Jewish causes – which is what **verse 2** means where it says he “gave alms generously to *the people*” – Luke meant the Jewish people

Then we are told that he **regularly and habitually prayed to God** – our passage says that he “prayed continually to God”

This likely refers to the three-times daily prayers required by the Jewish faith in light of the fact that we will see that he was praying at the ninth hour which was one of the prescribed times for ritual prayer

According to this description, Cornelius was a very good man – in fact he was a very good, spiritual man

But he was also lost

He was **devout yet doomed** because he had not yet put his trust in Jesus Christ as his personal Savior – and he didn’t even know it – yet

B. Peter

We already know a good deal about Peter even if we don't see the details here in this passage

Peter was a **former fisherman** who had become a **disciple** of Jesus during his earthly ministry

In fact, Peter was **one of Christ's "inner-circle"** that was made up of him, his brother James, and John

Even though Peter was **uneducated in a formal sense** he was a **devout and loyal man**

He was a **bold** man as we have seen him thus far in Acts fearlessly defying the religious authorities as he proclaimed Christ using language that anyone would consider blunt

In **Matthew 16:19** we are told that Jesus gave Peter the "keys of the kingdom" which means he **had the privilege of being the first to share the gospel with all people groups**

And we've seen him do that so far with the Jews at Pentecost and with the Samaritans

Peter was bold, brash, and impulsive but he was also serious about serving his Lord and the message of the gospel

He was also **prejudiced**

As a devout Jew, Peter had no use for Gentiles

He had been brought up to look down on them and would never have willingly associated with them

As we saw last week, the idea that the gospel would be for the Gentiles as well as the Jews would have never occurred to him and he likely interpreted Jesus' command to be a witness to the end of the earth to mean he and the others were to witness to their fellow Jews wherever they found them

Peter's way of thinking was about to undergo a tectonic shift as centuries of prejudicial belief and practice were about to be brushed aside

Cornelius needed to be converted from the practice of Judaism to become a Christ-follower and in order for that to happen, Peter had to first have his thinking converted so that it would be in alignment with God's thoughts

They were two very different men who were united in their need for their own form of "conversion"

II. Two Visions and Responses

In the telling of this account, Luke repeatedly makes statements that reveal that all of it was God's doing
God in his sovereignty takes the initiative in the lives of both of these men as he takes steps that will dramatically change both of their lives and the course of history

A. Cornelius' Vision and Response

Luke tells us in **verse 3** that God sent an angel to speak to Cornelius at "about the ninth hour" which was 3pm
And Cornelius in his telling of the encounter in **verse 30** reveals that the angel addressed him while he was praying and he describes him as "a man in bright clothing" which is a common way for angelic beings to appear
We're told that the angel came to Cornelius in a vision but the vision is so realistic that Cornelius sees the angel as if he is physically present before him

And the angel called Cornelius by name showing that this was an intentional encounter – **a divine appointment**
Cornelius the centurion was understandably terrified but found voice to ask the angel what he wanted

The angel tells Cornelius that God has taken notice of his prayers and his charity

In fact he uses the language of sacrifice as he says they had "ascended as a memorial before God" like the smoke from a burnt offering

This answer contains a relevant truth that we need to take a few moments to recognize

A frequent question that we often encounter is whether God will give credit to a person who is devout and doing all they can to honor God to the best of their knowledge and ability even if they haven't heard about Jesus Christ

Clearly we see here that God honors the person who is steadfastly and sincerely walking according to the light they have

But he honors their devotion to live according to the light they have by giving them the light they need to be saved

Cornelius was living in the light that he had – as insufficient as it was – so God made the necessary light available to him

God recognized the kind of man Cornelius was so he set the wheels in motion so to speak to bring him the gospel message that he was lacking

What is tragic is that far too often those who truly are "good" people don't understand or accept the fact that they are separated from God and that their lifestyle, righteous as it may be, cannot heal the divide that exists

Sadly, their inherent goodness can often keep them from responding to their need

Not so with Cornelius – the angel gives him detailed information as to where to find Peter and commands him to send for him – but notice that Luke doesn't record that the angel told him **why** he should do this

But it didn't matter

As a centurion, Cornelius was used to following and giving orders

This is illustrated by the remark of another centurion to Jesus found in **Matthew 8:9**

For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. And I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

And when the order came from what was obviously a superior heavenly being, Cornelius obeyed without hesitation – in spite of the fact that he had incomplete information

And when the angel had departed he sent two of his servants and a devout soldier to Joppa to find Peter – a trip that would take them some 30 miles south along the coast

B. Peter's Vision and Response

As unsettling as Cornelius' vision was to him Peter's was even stranger

We are told that as the entourage is travelling, Peter heads up to the roof of Simon the Tanner's house to pray. This was about noon and Peter was hungry so someone was in the house preparing a meal for him while he prayed.

As he was praying he fell into a trance and saw a large cloth coming down from heaven.

It's described as being suspended by its four corners which makes me think of something like a hammock.

As it comes to the surface, Peter sees that it is filled with "all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air"

The term "all kinds" likely means that the sheet contained both clean and unclean creatures which would have been repulsive to a devout Jew like Peter.

Especially when a heavenly voice is heard to say, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat"

Peter's response

Notice Peter's response – "By no means, Lord"

We aren't told this directly but something tells me that Peter recognized the voice as being the voice of Jesus himself.

And, typical of Peter, he protests.

I think it's kind of comical that Cornelius, a lost Gentile, obeyed immediately in spite of not really knowing why while Peter an apostle of Jesus Christ, balked even after all he had personally experienced at Jesus' side.

God doesn't seem to speak directly to us in an audible voice any longer now that we have the completed Word but he does speak to us clearly from its pages.

Sadly, we all too often react like Peter when we know we have been given a clear command that goes against all we think we know – or how we think things should be.

But in Peter's defense this voice from heaven is telling him to do a thing which was an essential violation of Jewish doctrine regarding dietary restrictions that had been handed down from God to Moses and from Moses to generations of faithful Jews.

Perhaps he thought it was some kind of test and **verse 17** tells us that Peter was confused.

In any event, the scene is repeated three times before the sheet disappeared having been taken to heaven.

I think it's perfectly understandable that Peter was completely confused by this apparent divine contradiction.

It just doesn't make sense to Peter that he is being told to break centuries of ingrained dietary restrictions.

And while he's still scratching his head trying to make sense of it all – Cornelius' men arrived at the tanner's house and called out from the gate inquiring about Peter.

This time the **Holy Spirit** spoke to Peter and told him to accompany these men without any misgivings or doubts
And having inquired about and been told the particulars of the mission of the delegation from Cornelius, Peter exhibits the common hospitality of the Mid East as he invites the three men in to be his guests for the night as it is too late to begin the trip back to Caesarea

It was far less offensive for a Jew to show hospitality to a Gentile because so much of the division between them was food related and in doing so he would have been in charge of the food and he would be assured of eating a kosher meal

Knowing that he could be heading into uncharted territory and a situation that could result in a religious storm, Peter wisely takes along six fellow believers as witnesses and the expanded entourage started on the trip north to Caesarea the next morning

Somewhere between Joppa and Caesarea Peter made the connection between his vision and his mission in going to visit the Cornelius in Caesarea

This happens in our lives as well

As we are obedient to what we know we often gain further understanding which leads to a need for further obedience

It appears that Cornelius was used to having his way because when Peter and the rest arrive on the following day, Cornelius has a crowd of relatives and close friends waiting to greet them – he believed Peter would come

It was common in those days to consider a messenger of the divine to also be in some way special and worthy of worship

So Cornelius goes out to meet Peter and he fell down at Peter's feet to worship him

Peter was embarrassed by this over-the-top and wholly inappropriate greeting so he took Cornelius by the arm and lifted him up while giving him a terse word of correction – "Stand up; I too am a man"

No way was Peter going to accept worship because worship belongs to God alone so he places himself and Cornelius on even footing as he tells him that there are no "gods" or "dogs" present – only men

As the men entered the home of Cornelius they are met by the crowd of relatives and friends so Peter makes a brief introductory speech remarking on the unusual nature of his visit and he inquires as to the nature of his summons

And it's in this introduction that we see that Peter has made the connection between food and men as he says in **verse 28** that God had shown him that he shouldn't call any person common or unclean

So, he says that even though associating with Gentiles was against Jewish custom he had come to them without objection

Cornelius answered Peter's question as to why he had been summoned by recounting the story of his vision and expressed gratitude for Peter's visit and invited Peter to share what God had laid on his heart to tell them

Once again Luke emphasizes that this entire account is being directed by God alone

God has orchestrated this entire episode as he prepared Cornelius and his acquaintances to hear the message that Peter is about to deliver

And as he has worked on Peter to overcome his natural, visceral prejudice against Gentiles

God began to work on Peter as he sent him to minister to his fellow Jewish Christians among the Gentiles in Lydda and Joppa and caused him to find lodging with a tanner forcing him to accept the ceremonial uncleanness that resulted from that close association

The changes in Peter's life and religious outlook have been huge but God isn't finished yet and what is about to happen is enormous in its impact

III. Two Results

There are two results that came from Peter's trip to Caesarea that we want to explore and both of them are earth-shaking in their own way

A. Peter Shares the Gospel with Gentiles

First, Peter shares the Gospel with Gentiles

That in itself is a really big deal as prior to this Peter never would have even considered doing such a thing

The Samaritans had heard the Gospel and believed in Christ as a result of Philip's ministry before Peter heard about it and came to see what was going on

Peter and John had come and when they saw that the Samaritans believed they prayed that they might also receive the Holy Spirit

That was probably somewhat shocking to his Jewish system but at least they were half-Jewish which probably made it more tolerable and less surprising

To share the message of the good news of Jesus Christ with Gentiles was a quantum leap into the beyond

It would be difficult to over sell the monumental nature of Peter's first sentence as he began to preach

Look with me at **verses 34-35**

"Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

With that sentence Peter reveals his newly acquired understanding that centuries of religious and racial division have been obliterated – God is impartial!

We must be careful to make certain we understand that Peter what Peter is **not** saying as he takes away support for Jewish ethnic pride and the exclusion of the Gentiles

Peter is not saying that adherence to any religion from any culture makes one acceptable to God

Peter is not teaching universalism here – he is not saying that all roads lead to God

He is essentially saying the same thing that the author of Hebrews says in **Hebrews 11:6**

And without faith it is impossible to please him, for **whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.**

Cornelius had demonstrated his **belief that God exists** by turning away from the multiple gods of the Romans to follow after God to the best of his ability

And he had demonstrated his **earnestness in seeking God** by turning away from pagan practices to doing what he knew was pleasing to God within the system spelled out in the Old Testament

However, Cornelius wasn't saved by those actions but rather had shown himself to be a candidate for hearing the gospel

God is impartial when it comes to people groups but he is exclusive when it comes to salvation

A person can only be saved by putting their complete trust in his Son, Jesus Christ and a person remains lost until they do no matter how "good" they might be

Peter's message

What we see in Peter's sermon is pretty typical of what we've seen Peter preach before and he covers all the bases of apostolic preaching in his message

In **verses 39-40** Peter is careful to once again **emphasize the contrast** between mankind's treatment of Jesus in crucifying him and God's treatment of him in raising him from the dead

And he makes sure to tell them of the apostles' **eyewitness testimony** – both of which we've seen to be common themes for Peter's gospel sermons

It's kind of interesting that Peter tells his audience about how **the prophets testify** to the universal nature of forgiveness through believing in Jesus as it seems that up until this time Peter had not seen this truth with the clarity he now sees it

There are numerous Old Testament texts that speak to the impartial nature of God concerning people groups but for some reason their true implication had been opaque to Peter until the vision on the roof

B. Gentiles Receive Salvation

The second earth-shaking occurrence is that the Gentiles receive salvation

Verse 44 tells us – “While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word”

The phrase “heard the word” indicates *effective hearing* – in other words, *belief*

Luke doesn't record how the Gentile audience expressed their faith but somehow God knew and he acted by sending the Holy Spirit to indwell them

Once again, this is all God's doing

Peter hadn't even finished his sermon let alone given an invitation to believe or conducted an altar call

Their salvation was all of God – Peter presented the gospel and God acted when they believed

And God **validated their receipt of the Holy Spirit with the gift of speaking in tongues** just as he had with the Jews who believed at Pentecost

The fact that these Gentiles experienced the same manifestation of the Spirit left no doubt in anyone's mind that the Holy Spirit had come and the door of salvation was open to Gentiles

So they sealed the deal and demonstrated obedience by being baptized

Conclusion

Prejudice is dangerous

God's Word tells us that we don't tend to see things the way they really are – the way God sees

1 Samuel 16:7 says, "the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart"

As Christ-followers we need to strive to see all men as the Lord sees them

When we pre-judge a person and decide that they are unworthy we put them in danger of hell

A question that I've had posed to me several times is "What would we do if a gay person started attending Brick Church?"

I love the fact that I get questions like that because those questions reveal hearts that want to understand in order to do well in God's sight

Now if we were the Westborough Baptist Church we would shove signs in their faces that say "God hates you" and "You're going to hell"

But that's not who we are and my answer has always been that we would welcome them to attend and if they were actively engaged in the gay lifestyle we would deal with that issue as we would any other sin

We would not pre-judge them and exclude them from sitting in our midst and hearing God's Word along with us

Jesus said in **Mark 2:17** "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

And reaching out to sinners should be our mission as well as we carry on with the work that Jesus began on this earth

If we seal ourselves off from any people for any reason how can we ever hope to reach them

Each of us individually and all of us collectively need to examine whether we have let prejudice get in the way of our opportunity to witness and minister to those who are perishing

Being prejudiced **against** someone is dangerous because it keeps us apart

But it's also dangerous to be prejudiced **In favor of** someone

By all appearances Cornelius was a good guy – in fact he was a godly guy in the eyes of the Jews who associated with him

Remember, he was not only a Gentile; he was an officer in the army that was oppressing the Jews

He should have been doubly hated by the Jews as most Roman soldiers were

But according to the account given by Cornelius' delegation sent to fetch Peter he was "well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation"

He was a good guy who was on his way to hell

We need to be careful that we don't wrongly pre-judge those good guys that we know and assume that because they walk like us and talk like us that all is well with them

We need to ask the right questions and get to know the heart of those good people and make sure that they are actually saved people

We need to be especially careful when that good guy is the guy in the mirror

I know people, and I'm sure you do as well, whose biggest problem may be that they are upstanding, moral, decent people who by virtue of their outward goodness don't sense their need of a Savior

We need to be careful that we don't overlook their need for a Savior and tell them of that need

Think of what might have happened if Peter had allowed his prejudice to overrule God's command to go to Cornelius – the door to salvation for Gentiles might have remained closed

Or the door might have been opened a different way but a permanent split could have been baked in to the church as it was getting started and we could have a Jewish Christianity and a Gentile Christianity

And it's difficult to calculate what the impact might have been if Cornelius had been stubborn in accepting his need of a Savior and decided that he was good enough just as he was

Certainly he and his entire household would have been adversely affected and it's impossible to know how far the ripples would have spread

But with Peter's ministry to Cornelius God has now opened the gospel to all people groups

First to the Jews at Pentecost, then to the half-Jews in Samaria, and now finally to the Gentiles

We need to ask God to help us to see people as he sees them and then we need to get busy for Jesus' sake as we endeavor to share the gospel with everyone we can

Let's pray