

Feeling Superior? God of Equality – Acts 10:28

Scripture Reading: Acts 10:17-29

Introduction

The late comedian, George **Carlin**, once described what he did as simply noticing and commenting on what the rest of us see all around us but rarely think to acknowledge and, therefore, fail to laugh at

In one of his routines Mr. Carlin talked about driving and how, when we're out on the road, everyone who drives slower than we do is an idiot while everyone who drives faster than we do is a maniac

We laugh because we know it's true and even if we don't say them out loud if we're perfectly honest most of us are guilty of using those labels to describe the drivers around us at one time or another

The reality is, we tend to believe that we are right and everyone who does differently than we do is wrong

And it's not just drivers who we label; we tend to categorize people in all sorts of ways

It may only be due to our fallen nature but our brains are hardwired to see similarities and differences and use them to group things together – that's just a part of who we are as human beings

And categorization is a very useful way to help us understand and make sense of our complex world

But it can also be a cause for concern when it is used to determine the value of a person or group of people

Applying labels can lead us to pre-judge others, prevent us from seeing things as they really are, and limit or even eliminate our interactions with those we label as "other"

Looking back through history, we see that the ancient Greeks viewed the world as consisting of two kinds of people: Greeks and barbarians

As a matter of fact, according to History.com, the word "barbarian" originated in ancient Greece and originally meant "babbler" because the Greeks couldn't understand foreign languages and the words of foreigners just sounded like "bar bar bar" to them

So the label was originally nothing more than a way to describe those who spoke other languages and it said at least as much about the Greeks as it did the "barbarians" since they were the ones who couldn't understand while the "barbarians" were doing just fine

But over time things changed significantly and those who spoke languages other than Greek came to be viewed as inferior people and the term "barbarian" came to mean an uncultured person of violent behavior and savage cruelty

And that serves to illustrate the danger with labels

This morning we are going to see how God had to deal with built-in prejudices in the first century in order to facilitate the spread of the gospel so that it could reach beyond the boundaries of the Jewish people

What makes this message so relevant today is that we find ourselves in the midst of one of the most divided times in this country since the Civil War

People who have never met fight each other online and different groups line up against each other in the streets, sometimes violently, and it's not uncommon to hear tales of friendships and families torn asunder along political lines

Positions are becoming ever more firmly entrenched and both sides of the divide are guilty of completely shunning those who see things differently

No one denies that the issues before and surrounding us are quite serious but we make the problem even greater when we write off entire groups of people as irredeemable, engage in name-calling, and stop communicating with them

And even when we don't go that far this passage is instructive for us because we are all susceptible to partiality and prejudice – that's our Roman numeral one by the way – We are all susceptible to partiality and prejudice

I. We are all susceptible to partiality and prejudice

When you consider the history of the people involved and the reality of their situation, it's something of a miracle that the meeting between Peter and Cornelius happened as it did

The Old Testament makes clear that God's intention was for the Jews to be a nation set apart from all other people

Look with me at **Exodus 33:16** where we see Moses saying to the Lord:

For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?

And the instructions they were given by God through Moses as found in Deuteronomy 7:1-5 could hardly be more clear concerning how God wanted the Jews to deal with the other nations

They were to devote them to utter destruction and intermarriage between Jews and Gentiles was forbidden

Because, as we read in **Deuteronomy 7:6** –

...you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.

God's desire was for the Jews to remain pure because he knew that they would be led astray otherwise and the line of Abraham had to remain pure because it was the line of the coming Messiah

Intermingling with Gentiles was a serious sin and we read in Nehemiah 13 how, when Nehemiah discovered that some of the Jews had intermarried with the Gentiles, he contended with them and cursed them and he beat some of them going so far as to tear out their hair as he made them swear to stop sinning in this way

When we come to our account, somewhere around 450 years had passed since Nehemiah and the division between Jews and Gentiles was so firmly entrenched that a serious Jew was diligent to have no meaningful contact with Gentiles

Consider the account of Jesus and the woman at the well that we have recorded for us in the Gospel of John

Jesus actually dared to ask this woman, who was only half Gentile, for a drink of water – it was shocking to her and the disciples and we see her surprise at Jesus' indiscretion and the explanation for it in **John 4:9** –

"How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)

Now we come to Peter in Joppa and he's up on the rooftop of Simon the Tanner praying

As he was praying he got a bit peckish and started thinking about lunch when he had a vision concerning food that really served to shake him up

Unbeknownst to Peter at that time, a Roman centurion named Cornelius had also been given a vision also and he had sent an entourage to ask Peter to come visit him at Caesarea about 30 miles to the north

Think of what is going on here – I mean when God wants to make a point he has a way of making a point

Not only was Cornelius a Gentile; he was a Roman centurion which made him an officer in the army that was occupying Israel and keeping the Jews under subjugation – the Jews and Romans didn't exactly share a friendly relationship

Consider for a moment how remarkable it is that Cornelius would call on a subject and then demonstrate the level of deference to Peter that he did

But as we see in verse 2 [**Acts 10:2**] Cornelius was also

...a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God

And so Cornelius was willing to obey the angel who came to him in his vision with God's command to send for Peter

Then, when Cornelius' servants showed up to fetch him, Peter had to quickly come to grips with the realization that centuries of prejudice were about to be overturned

Just as a humorous aside, make note that Peter was staying in Joppa which is where Jonah boarded the boat to head to Tarshish rather than obey the Lord and go to Nineveh

I'm not implying that Peter thought about getting on a boat and taking off but I find the coincidence rather amusing

Actually, our text seems to indicate that Peter didn't hesitate at all and likely only invited Cornelius' servants to be his guests for the night because it was too late to start the journey to Caesarea – which was at least a 10-hour walk

As our account progresses we see that Peter readily understood that the message God had sent him through the rooftop vision had as much to do with how he regarded people as it did with clean and unclean foods

And he likely thought back to the day Jesus ascended into heaven and the commission he and the others had received which is still binding upon all Christ-followers

II. We are commanded to make disciples of all people

Look with me quickly at **Matthew 28:18-20** which contains what we know as the Great Commission –

*“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of **all nations**, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

“All nations” here means all people groups which has to include Gentiles

Otherwise Jesus would have commissioned his followers to make disciples of the nation of Israel

Making disciples requires making contact and spending time together – a great deal of time

Because disciple-making is less about a course of study and boxes to be checked than it is about sharing life together in life-on-life activities that expose the disciple to various situations so they can learn how to follow Christ successfully by virtue of example and instruction from more mature Christ-follower

One cannot disciple another from a distance – discipleship requires personal contact

And disciple-making necessarily begins with the sharing of the good news of Jesus Christ

In our passage we see that God was busy behind the scenes setting up the situation that would result in Peter sharing the gospel message with Cornelius and those with him

Clearly, the Holy Spirit had stirred Cornelius' heart to cause him to desire and seek after God

Verse 22 [**Acts 10:22**] tells us that Cornelius was an “*upright and God-fearing man*” who was held in high esteem by the Jewish community around him

And verse 2 [**Acts 10:2**] tells us he “*gave alms generously*” and “*prayed continually*” to the one true God

So when we consider **John 6:44** – that no one comes to Jesus without the Father having drawn them – when we come across someone like Cornelius we know God has been at work preparing the soil of their heart

I have to admit that God's timing in matters like this is mysterious

We aren't told how long Cornelius had been faithful in his devotion to God but when the time was right, God sent him the vision that set everything in motion so that he would hear the gospel message

And Peter was willing to come as he says in verse 29 [**Acts 10:29**] “*without objection*”

The fact that Peter didn't dispute with the servants of Cornelius and willingly returned to Caesarea with them doesn't mean that doing so was a simple matter for Peter

We see this in Peter's reaction during his vision when he saw the unclean animals and was commanded to “Rise, kill and eat” he protested strongly and referred to remaining true to his Jewish heritage three times

What God was revealing to Peter was shocking to him because it went against everything he thought he knew

Peter was confused but he learned the valuable lesson that obedience to God must override our tendencies

III. Obedience to God must override our tendencies

Peter struggled with what he was being shown and he protested repeatedly out of a desire to remain pure

But when God made clear that the ceremonial laws regarding unclean food were done away with; Peter submitted

And, as far as we know, except for one lapse that Paul mentions in Galatians 2 when Peter behaved hypocritically in Antioch to impress some visiting fellow Jews, Peter from that point on ate all things with a clear conscience

Perhaps Peter was able to adjust his thinking regarding ceremonially unclean food as quickly as he did because he had heard Jesus teach previously that nothing that enters a person from the outside makes them unclean as he did in Mark 7

In fact, Mark even goes so far as to parenthetically include in the last part of **Mark 7:19** that Jesus had declared that all foods are now clean – but it's unlikely the disciples understood all of that then based on Peter's objections

Mark probably connected those dots while looking back at what Jesus had said after some time had passed

Still, Peter came to the truly remarkable understanding that if the food of the Gentiles wouldn't defile him then neither would associating with Gentiles when the servants of Cornelius arrived on the heels of his vision

Based on what we read about Peter in the Bible, no one could ever accuse him of being wishy-washy

He may have been a bit of a hothead and he may have acted hastily from time to time but he was committed and he is always pictured as trying to do the right thing as he understood it

And adjusting our understanding – especially when new information challenges our long-held beliefs – can be quite difficult

But God has a way of softening up and preparing even the most stubborn among us often without us even being aware of him doing so – and I believe God knew the vision was going to be a big reveal so he did just that with Peter

We could easily read right past the fact that Peter was staying at the home of a tanner – that is to say one who turned animal hides into leather

It seems apparent that Simon was a fellow Christ-follower but he was also perpetually ceremonially unclean because he handled dead animals on a daily basis

They were also quite literally “unclean” as their profession caused them to have a certain “air” about them – that is to say, they smelled bad

I worked as a farmhand on a hog farm one summer and discovered that the aromatic environment of a hog farm gets into your pores

I quickly acclimated to the smell and didn't realize it was still on me after I showered until other people started shying away from me and one acquaintance was bold enough to let me know that I stunk while at a gathering

Tanners were outcasts who were shunned by polite society –

They were typically forced to live outside the city limits and downwind according to the prevailing winds and rabbinical law stated that a young woman could break off her engagement if she discovered her fiancé was a tanner

So Peter was actively demonstrating his kinship with Jesus by being willing to reach out to someone so marginalized – even to the point of lodging and dining with them

We aren't privy to whether Peter had to work through his decision to stay with Simon and whether it was a difficult one for him but I believe his staying there was preparatory to his going to Caesarea

Actually, he didn't wait to put what God had shown him into practice but invited the entourage from Caesarea – who were likely Gentiles – to be his guests for the night which logically would have included sharing a meal with them

Still, when Peter arrived and found a house full of people waiting to meet him and to hear from him, he felt it was necessary to explain why he had come and why he was willing to break the long-held customs of his people

I believe he did this as much for the Jewish believers from Joppa who had come along with him and still Acts 11 tells us some of the believers in Jerusalem took exception to the fact Peter dared to eat with the Gentiles [**Acts 11:3**]

But Peter had heard the Lord's message and he was willing to act contrary to convention therefore he gained the great privilege of preaching the first gospel message to a group of Gentiles

And the result was one that every preacher of the Word would be righteously envious of – if righteous envy is even a thing; but I think you'll know what I mean in just a moment

Cornelius had invited all his friends and neighbors to be there and God had prepared them to hear the message and we see in verse 44 [**Acts 10:44**] that Peter hadn't even finished his sermon before every one of them was saved

Still, none of this would have happened as it did if Cornelius hadn't set aside his rightful claim to superiority due to his being a Roman soldier in command and if Peter hadn't set aside his rightful claim to superiority due to his being a Jew

The divide between Peter and Cornelius was wide and deep but not so wide and deep that the gospel couldn't bridge it as long as each man was willing to override his deeply held prejudices and come together to talk and listen

Conclusion

But what about us?

As we began this morning I commented that we are living during a time of great division

And the things that divide us, while not being as clear-cut perhaps as the divide between Jew and Gentile, are no less polarizing as people choose sides and neither side of most issues wants to have anything to do with the other side

It's rather chilling that a recent survey showed the top concern listed by 92% of one side of the political divide is the people who are on the other side showing that the divide has become personal - at least for those folks

And when someone expresses personal animosity it's difficult to resist responding in kind because it's so easy to rationalize and justify our partialities and prejudices

We label the other side as "stupid" and then say that staying away from stupid people doing stupid things in stupid places is only wise because it protects us

It seems only rational not to put oneself in danger by associating with those who can harm you and who have openly expressed a desire to do so – after all, why would anyone give ammunition to the enemy, right?

We repeat the old saying: "Birds of a feather flock together" to justify our sticking with those who think like we do even though we aren't birds because it's safer and more pleasant

We can even use Scripture to justify our behavior

After all, **1Corinthians 15:33** tells us that "*bad company ruins good morals*" and **2Corinthians 6:14** tells believers not to be "*unequally yoked*" with unbelievers

And the King David wrote proudly in **Psalms 26:4-5**

I do not sit with men of falsehood, nor do I consort with hypocrites. I hate the assembly of evildoers, and I will not sit with the wicked.

Peter likewise could have continued citing the passages from the Old Testament where God warned Israel about mixing and associating with the pagans around them

But to do so would be to ignore the passages that reveal that God also desired Israel to be a blessing to the world

Look with me at **Genesis 12:1-3** where God called Abraham –

*Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, **and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.**"*

God chose to bless Abraham and to make his descendants into a nation blessed above all other nations so that they could be a testimony to his grace and a channel of his blessing to the rest of the world

Many times in the Old Testament, Israel was told how to deal fairly with those who came in amongst them and demonstrated a desire to live according to God's Law – in the Old Testament the principle was "come and be blessed"

But in the New Testament the followers of Jesus Christ are told to "go and be a blessing"

We are called the light of the world and, as lights; we cannot hide ourselves away and we should shine ever brighter as the world around us gets progressively darker

But to do that we must associate with those who are in the dark – disciple-making can't happen from a distance

Please understand what I'm saying is not that we have to tolerate or accept practices that God's Word says are sin

We can be open without affirming and God does not ever expect us to accept or applaud sin

But to be effective witnesses to those who are so different from us we have to be willing to acknowledge and then ask God to break down the barriers and bridge the divides that hinder or prevent us from even going near them

After all, those people are our "Samaria" as we read about in **Acts 1:8**

Honestly consider whether there is a people group you would shy away from interacting with

Someone of a different race, culture, political orientation, sexual orientation, or someone from a different faith maybe

It's only natural to have reservations but we are called to overcome our old nature

We must come to the realization that God doesn't play favorites [**Acts 10:34**] and then make it clear to those around us that we don't see ourselves as being superior to them

After all, we know that we don't have any righteousness of our own to commend us to God but only rely on the righteousness of Christ that God applied to our account when we began to trust in his death on our behalf

We need to let others know that we are only beggars whose job is to show other beggars where to find God's free bread

Pastor, theologian, and author, John **Stott** has commented that

"The principle subject of this chapter is not so much about the conversion of Cornelius as the conversion of Peter."

And I think Mr. Stott is right

Peter could have very easily been wrong about Cornelius – after all, Cornelius was nothing but an oppressive pagan with the force of the military behind him, right?

Peter could have stood on centuries of tradition, teaching and even the Law in saying that associating with a Gentile, and especially a Gentile oppressor was the absolute wrong thing for him to do

Until we come to verse 28 [**Acts 10:28**] and the "But God..."

Peter starts out by pointing out the plain language of the Law and then he says, "...but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean"

We must ask God to change our perspective and to help us see people through his eyes as bearers of his image who are of equal worth to him as we are ourselves – souls whose destruction would grieve God deeply

And we need to ask God to open doors for us to present the good news of Jesus even with those we are tempted to shut out of our lives and trust in his protection and provision as we go

Let's pray