

"The Heart of the Gospel"
Sermon Series on *The Way of the Spirit*
Dr. Peter B. Barnes
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(Acts 10:24-48)

Was there ever a time in your life when you felt the sting of prejudice or that you didn't fit in? Someone looked down on you and made you feel unacceptable. Maybe it was at 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 Carolina/Duke 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 several years ago, 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 listen to 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 Jesus Christ breaks down the barriers of prejudice and discrimination, and 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.

I. Peter's Visit With Cornelius.

Last week we learned how 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'll recall Peter was hesitant and even resistant to go, because it went against everything that he had 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.

The text tells us that the day after Cornelius' men visited Peter to tell him of the centurion's vision, the apostle set out for Caesarea with the three men sent from Cornelius, along with six believers from Joppa. (Their number is related to us in 11:12.) This party of 10 people traveled on foot the 32 miles and arrived at Caesarea the following day.

When Peter and his companions arrived, they discovered that Cornelius was expecting them, and he had assembled not only his immediate household, but also relatives and close friends. He was so eager that others might discover what God had in store for them too. As Peter entered the house, Cornelius fell at his feet in reverence. But the apostle made him get up and said, "I am only a man myself."

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. This is something that was strictly forbidden by Jewish custom. But 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. That's what the gospel did back then. It's what the gospel still does today.

Billy Graham grew up in Charlotte in the 1920s and 30s at a time when segregation was taken for granted in the South. Billy says that even after his conversion he felt no guilt in thinking of his dark-skinned brothers and sisters in the usual patronizing and paternalistic way. Billy's sister Jean recalled that when she and her mother went to a church in Charlotte to hear Billy preach, they had to sit in the balcony because the family's black maid had gone with them. All that began to change in the early 1950s. As the great evangelist studied Scripture and wrestled with the problem of segregation, he came to see that all people black and white stand shoulder to shoulder at the foot of the cross on equal footing.

At a meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention in San Francisco in 1951, Dr. Graham urged his denomination to open its colleges to qualified African Americans. Then the year 1953 marked a watershed. In

March, Graham started a four-week crusade in Chattanooga, Tennessee. State laws prohibited miscegenation, with severe penalties for violators, and segregation was mandated in schools, transportation, and public accommodations. Graham told the organizing committee that he would not preach if a rope separated the races at the crusade. Exactly what happened when he arrived is not clear, but either at the onset or sometime during the crusade he personally tore down the ropes. And a little more of heaven entered the world.

The gospel of Jesus Christ breaks down barriers, and it opens a way for everyone.

II. Peter's Sermon to Cornelius.

Peter began his message to Cornelius and those who had gathered with a personal statement of what he had learned through his experiences of the previous few days, and he said that he now realized God doesn't show favoritism and partiality. God's attitude toward people isn't determined by external criteria, such as their race, nationality or class. Instead, God accepts everyone who seeks to honor the Lord and do what is right.

In the text 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. Peter concluded his message by saying that 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 that was presented by the early followers of Jesus. Biblical scholars and theologians use a little Greek word to describe this core message. It's the word *kerygma*. The word literally means "preaching," and it represents the essential witness or the core message concerning the gospel of Jesus Christ in the New Testament.

It's easy for us to get distracted with extraneous matters that really aren't the heart of the gospel, and we tend to get sidetracked with secondary issues which aren't central to the message of grace. We add things to the list of what a person needs to do in order to receive salvation. That's what happened in the early church. Many of the early followers of Christ thought that you had to strictly observe the Old Testament law in the Torah in addition to believing in Jesus in order to be saved, that you had to go through Moses to get to Jesus. But that isn't the heart of the gospel.

The heart of the gospel is that Jesus died for sinners, and no amount of good works will ever save you. It's only as we put our trust in Christ alone for our salvation that we can find eternal life in the world to come and abundant life here on earth. And whenever we add additional requirements a person must do to come to faith, we are erecting a barrier and we destroy the heart of the gospel. The free gift of grace is available to all, and God doesn't clean His fish before He catches them!

How have you and I allowed secondary matters to creep into the message of the gospel we proclaim and let them 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, what behavior is acceptable and what's not? Each of us should make a careful examination of our own hearts before we're so quick to condemn others.

III. Peter's Response to God's Blessing.

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 again as had happened 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. They didn't have to go through Moses in order to get to Jesus.

This would be revolutionary for the early church, and history would never be the same again. Later on, when others heard about this experience and they saw that the conversion of these Gentiles was accomplished entirely by God, no one could revert to old prejudices and relegate these new converts to a role of being second-

class Christians. And the result was a multi-ethnic, multicultural church which brought together both Jews and Gentiles. The gospel of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit broke down barriers in the early church.

That is what is still needed today to break down the things that separate us from other people, but we can't do that on our own. We need the help of Christ. Last week Amy Carlan shared a blog with me by a man named Sean Watkins who is an African American that works with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in Texas. Sean writes: "Oil and water do not go together. You can stir them, blend them, or boil them together. It doesn't matter. They will not stay together very long. In order to get the two together, you need an emulsifier. Oil and water with an egg as an emulsifier gives you mayonnaise. Many ethnic groups cannot seem to get along. Whether its conflicts in Asia, Africa, or within the U.S., peace seems to always avoid us. We need each other, but we also need an emulsifier.

"The Gospel of Jesus is just that. It crosses ethnic lines and socio-economic statuses. The gospel in the hands a Black man can help heal Asian wounds across countries and generations. A Latino mom may give a ride to a black kid walking home in the rain because she sees 'a son' not 'a suspect.' An Asian-American woman can affirm and speak to white identity in ways I may not be able to. A South Asian man can work with a group of black college students, depositing seeds of reconciliation that will produce fruit for years to come. Christian Native Americans can humble us all, and remind us there is far more to lose than we imagine. The Latino voice may be what brings the different ethnic groups to the table to finally have an adult conversation on race and ethnicity in the United States. The list goes on and on and on. Either way, we need each other. We need to listen to each other, for the sake of our immortal souls."¹

It takes the emulsifier of Jesus to make that happen. And when it does, God breaks down huge barriers by the power of the gospel of His grace. Last week you'll recall I 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 this picture of her with the four U.S. Marshals which appeared in *Look* magazine back then.

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, including 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, don't they? Like they were on their way to church. One little girl is holding a cross. Christians were at the center of this demonstration. And there 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's 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.

The picture in the book of Acts, 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 regardless of someone's race.

Conclusion.

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 today.

Five years ago, I saw a picture of what heaven is going to be like. Lorie and I were invited to be delegates to Cape Town 2010, the third Lausanne Congress on world evangelization. Of the 4,000 delegates, only 400 were from the US and North America. The rest came from the majority world, and there were people from every continent and color who participated in this amazing congress. We were divided into tables of six, and for much of the conference, after a message was given in a plenary session, we would spend significant time in small group discussion interacting with each other about what we had just heard.

At my table there was a woman from Papua New Guinea, a man from the Cameroon, a woman from South Africa, a woman from Ghana, and a guy from Canada. The man from Canada was the only other white person at my table. Studying Scripture with these people and talking about the mission of God in the world blew my

mind, and it forced me to think beyond the provincial perspective of my North American white context. I saw lived out in that conference what can happen when the Holy Spirit is poured out on people and God tears down the walls that separate us. I'll never be the same again.

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's a child who has wandered away, and they have caused you a great deal of pain. Perhaps your Cornelius is a spouse who can't get free from their addictions, and you're 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's a miracle waiting for us.

May God pour out His Spirit on all of us here at First Pres and in Winston-Salem as we seek to live in the center of His will and join Christ on His mission of love to a lost and broken world which tears down the barriers that separate people. Amen.

¹ Sean Watkins, <http://smwatkins.com/2015/03/09/we-need-each-other-thoughts-from-mesc-15/>

