

## Dealing with Prejudice

Acts 10:1-33

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We made a quick road trip to Virginia last weekend to see two of our daughters and sons-in-law...and three of our grandchildren. Here's a picture of us decorating pumpkins with them. And here's a picture of our grandson Dean with his pumpkin. Dean lives in Davenport (we join Biff and Robin Rollins as doting grandparents).

We left Thursday afternoon and came home early Monday morning. While the visit was short, it was worth it. When we were about 30 minutes from arriving at Lydia's house, a yellow light blinked briefly on the dash and I heard what sounded like a chime. Because it didn't stay on long, I just ignored it. On Sunday morning, while driving to church, yellow lights were lit up all over the display alerting us to a low tire.

After church, I immediately found a tire repair shop. They discovered a screw embedded in the shoulder area of the tire (when they told me it was in the shoulder area, I started rubbing my recently repaired rotator cuff). I smiled at God's sense of timing because I arrived right before four other customers came in. Because of the location of the puncture, they couldn't patch it, so I had to buy a new tire.

Beth and I have had many experiences where something went wrong with our car and we were able to fix it right before heading out on a long trip. It made us stop again and praise God for His sweet sovereignty and tremendous timing.

In our passage today we're going to see how God got the attention of some people before they took a long road trip. We'll see how He accomplished His will and His ways for His glory and the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles. Please turn to Acts 10 where we will see His sovereign sense of timing on full display.

While using the Edgewood Bible Reading Plan this week, I read the words of Jesus in John 5:17: "***My Father is always at His work to this very day, and I too am working.***" After reading this verse, I wrote down a sentence, which actually serves as a good summary for our sermon today: *God is always at work...and sometimes we get to see it. When we don't see it...remember God is always at work.*

Last week Pastor Tim did a great job preaching the last part of Acts 9 where he established this theme: *“God uses obedient people and troublesome circumstances to expand His influence.”*

We’ll take our passage in sections so we can allow the narrative to unfold. The main characters are Cornelius, a Roman officer, and Peter, a Jew, and one of the twelve disciples. This is a groundbreaking chapter in the history of the church and a crucial turning point for the advancement of the gospel. It’s so important that 66 verses are devoted to this encounter (we’ll cover the second half next week). Two main points will emerge from the text which we can apply to our context.

- Adjust our attitudes (Acts 10:1-20)
- Align our actions (Acts 10:21-33)

We’re going to see how God orchestrates events to bring these two men together by breaking down the wall of prejudice between them.

**1. Adjust our attitudes.** We’re introduced to the first character in verse 1: *“At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort.”* Caesarea was a beautiful seaport city and home of the governor, along with many members of the Roman military. The city was named after Caesar Augustus and was a place Jews denounced for its immorality and idol worship. Cornelius was a high-ranking military officer, in charge of 100 men. Incidentally, centurions are always depicted in a positive light in Scripture.

Listen to verse 2: *“A devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God.”* We learn four character traits about Cornelius.

- **He was devout.** This means he was a reverent man.
- **He feared God.** This was not just a description of his character, but the title “God-fearer” was given to those who worshipped with the Jews in their synagogues but had not been circumcised. Basically, he was a Gentile who worshiped the Jewish God. He was a moral man but not yet saved. God-fearers were not full converts but had left their idolatrous ways.
- **He was generous.** Alms were gifts of mercy, given generously by Cornelius. This reminds me of what Acts 9:36 says about Tabitha, *“She was full of good works and acts of charity.”*

- **He prayed continually.** He not only gave gifts to others, but also gazed toward heaven as he offered his prayers to God throughout the day.

In verses 3-4, when Cornelius gathered for prayer at 3:00 pm, an angel appeared in a vision and called him by name: **“And he stared at him in terror...”** The idea behind staring is to *“strain or stretch forward.”* He was filled with fear but responded with a faith-filled question, **“What is it, Lord?”** His eager response is similar to how the young boy Samuel replied to the Lord in 1 Samuel 3:4: **“Then the LORD called Samuel, and he said, ‘Here I am!’”** Have you ever said, *“Here I am, what is it, Lord?”*

Next, the angel tells Cornelius his **“prayers and...alms have ascended as a memorial before God.”** Like a fragrant offering, his praying and his giving were like sweet incense to God.

In verse 5, he’s told to **“send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea.”** Joppa, 30 miles away, is modern day Tel-Aviv and is where Peter raised Dorcas from the dead. Also it’s where Jonah jumped on a ship to avoid God’s assignment. Peter is staying in the house of Simon by the sea. Don’t you love how specific God is? A tanner’s house needed to be by the sea because he would need saltwater to do his work. These men would have no trouble finding it because it would have been quite smelly.

After hearing this specific message, Cornelius calls two of his servants and a devout soldier and **“related everything to them.”** The phrase **“related everything”** is the word *“exegesis”* and means, *“to explain everything by bringing out the meaning, without reserve.”* That’s the type of preaching we’re committed to here – no matter who preaches, our aim is to bring out the meaning of the Word so we can apply it to our world.

Before moving on, let’s reflect on the fact God could have sent the evangelist Philip to Cornelius because he was living in Caesarea at the time (see Acts 8:40). But in His sovereignty, the Lord wanted Peter because he was a key leader of the church, who held some keys. This goes back to Matthew 16:19 when Jesus said to Peter: **“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.”** God used Peter to unlock three doors for gospel proclamation among three key groups of people:

- Jews (Acts 2)
- Samaritans (Acts 8)

- Gentiles (Acts 10)

Having prepared Cornelius to hear the gospel, God now has to prepare Peter to go and explain the gospel to a hated Gentile. But for that to happen God had to deal with a huge attitude issue Peter had. It would be difficult for Peter to turn this key to unlock this last door.

In verse 9, ***“Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray.”*** Back then, houses had flat roofs which people used for recreation, rest and reflection because it was often cool and quiet. It was a place for recreation, rest and reflection. Peter is praying at noon, following the admonition of Psalm 55:17: ***“Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, and He hears my voice.”***

Because it was noon, verse 10 tells us Peter became “hangry” and wanted something to eat. As he smelled the aroma of fresh falafel and hot buttered bagels, he fell into a trance. Verses 11-12 tell us what happened next: ***“And saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air.”***

I’m so glad we have a God who has opened the heavens and came down! Isaiah 64:1: ***“Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down.”*** Revelation 4:1: ***“Behold, a door standing open in heaven!”*** As he continued to look, he saw something like a linen sheet descending slowly. In the sheet was a mixture of all kinds of beasts, birds and bugs. This means there were “clean” and “unclean” animals all jumbled together.

Peter was raised only to eat what was considered ceremonially clean and Kosher. He would have been repulsed by all the unclean animals touching the clean ones. Abstaining from unclean animals was part of his Jewish heritage and identity and to do otherwise was anathema to him.

I’m sure he wasn’t expecting to hear the voice say in verse 13: ***“Rise, Peter; kill and eat.”*** In verse 14, Peter pushes back in a big way: ***“By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.”*** Peter is horrified and is saying something like, “No way!” or more literally, “I shall not do it!” And yet, He calls God “Lord.” You can’t say “no” and “Lord” at the same time. If you say “no,” then He’s not your Lord. And if He’s your Lord, you’ll want to say “yes.”

Peter had kept the Old Testament dietary laws his entire life, so this really ruffled his feathers. Most of you know our grandson Pip has a genetic disorder that doesn't allow him to eat anything with protein in it. Jamie and Lydia work hard to weigh his carefully selected food, being careful not to give him anything that could be toxic to his brain and neurological system. At four, Pip reads labels to check protein levels and is fully aware he must avoid certain foods.

Peter didn't have a genetic disorder, but he believed he could do serious damage to his spiritual life if he ate any "unclean" food. It was one way for God's people to remain separate and holy among pagan people. After giving His people a list of foods to avoid, God says in Leviticus 20:26: ***"You shall be holy to me, for I the Lord am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine."***

It's helpful to unpack the tension which existed between Jew and Gentile. If a Jew went into a Gentile country, they would "shake the dust" off their feet before returning to Israel because Gentile dirt was considered defiled. If milk was drawn from a cow by Gentile hands, a Jew could not drink. No Jew would ever eat with a Gentile.

I love how gracious God is with Peter as the voice comes a second time in verse 15: ***"What God has made clean, do not call common."*** Verse 16 tells us this voice came three times, ***"and the thing was taken up at once to heaven."***

It's difficult for us to grasp how big a deal this was for Peter. He had always followed Leviticus 11:2-3: ***"These are the living things that you may eat among all the animals that are on the earth. Whatever parts the hoof and is cloven-footed and chews the cud, among the animals, you may eat."*** They were forbidden from eating camels, rock badgers, and pigs. And now God tells Peter he can eat camel chops and bacon because He has declared all foods clean!

I wonder if Peter remembered what Jesus said in Mark 7:18-19: ***"Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him? Thus He declared all foods clean."*** 1 Timothy 4:4 adds, ***"For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving."***

Verse 17 tells us ***"Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision that he had seen might mean..."*** The word ***"perplexed"*** means he was ***"in turmoil and hesitating greatly."*** Literally it means, ***"to stand in midair."*** Or, in our jargon, his mind was blown.

This was a crossroads moment for Peter. Here we see God's sovereign timing once again. At the exact time Peter is perplexed, "**Behold, the men who were sent by Cornelius**" stood at the gate and asked if this was the place where Peter was staying.

Peter needed some help processing all this so verses 19-20 tells us the Spirit said to him, "**Behold, three men are looking for you. Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them.**" That phrase, "**without hesitation**" has the idea of making no distinctions. In other words, these Gentiles who Peter would have considered "unclean," are not to be put in a separate category any longer.

This process was used by God to adjust Peter's prejudicial attitudes. What we see next is God sovereignly aligning Peter's prescribed actions. God is preparing Cornelius for salvation while preparing Peter to get rid of his prejudice and bigotry towards Gentiles.

*God is always at work...and sometimes we get to see it. When we don't see it...remember God is always at work.*

**2. Align our actions.** God's timing is always perfect. As Peter is pondering, he hears men pounding on the door. He exhibits immediate obedience in verse 21: "**And Peter went down to the men and said, 'I am the one you are looking for. What is the reason for your coming?'**" The men answer in verse 22: "**And they said, 'Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say.'**"

I'm sure Peter linked his vision with what the angel had revealed to Cornelius. He didn't understand everything, but he obeyed anyway. Some of us wait until everything makes sense or we have all our questions answered before we obey God. Here's a principle to ponder – understanding often comes *after* obedience. That's what Jesus said in John 7:17: "**If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God...**"

In verse 23, we see Peter is beginning to let his prejudices go: "**So he invited them in to be his guests.**" Normally Jews would not invite Gentiles into their homes and would certainly not have a meal with them, but Peter gives them a bed and some breakfast.

The next day he headed to Caesarea with six brothers from Joppa (see Acts 11:12) who would serve as witnesses and for accountability. The following day they arrived in Caesarea: ***“Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends.”*** He was eager for his family and friends to hear the good news from Peter.

Jews believed they would become unclean if they ever entered a Gentile’s house so the beginning of verse 25 is stunning: ***“When Peter entered...”*** Cornelius is so thrilled that ***“he fell down at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter lifted him up, saying, ‘Stand up; I too am a man.’”*** To ***“worship”*** literally means, ***“to throw kisses toward while lying prostrate.”*** In Revelation 19:10, John fell down at the feet of an angel to worship him and was told, ***“You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you...”***

Two thoughts came to mind when I read how Peter refused to be worshiped.

- Idols we worship will not satisfy us and will ultimately fail us. Not to take anything away from Eddie Van Halen, who died this week, but I found the headlines announcing his death to be ironic: ***“Eddie Van Halen, rock guitar god, dead of throat cancer at 65.”*** The gods we worship will all die.
- It’s also fascinating to me as a former Catholic, that Peter who Catholics consider to be the first pope, refused any worship or adoration or claim of infallibility. He referred to himself this way: ***“I too am a man.”***

Peter was a servant, not a celebrity.

Verse 27 tells us again that Peter ***“went in”*** and found many Gentiles gathered. Now Peter is in a crowded room with them. There was no social distancing going on either. BTW, just a reminder to physically distance before and after the services. This will be harder to do when the weather gets cold. Also, we highly recommend the use of facemasks, especially when entering and exiting the facility.

Then Peter gives a brief statement about how the Almighty had adjusted his attitude and aligned his actions in verses 28-29: ***“You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me.”***

While it wasn't technically unlawful for a Jew to associate with a Gentile, Peter had followed the legalistic rabbinical laws which went beyond what the Scriptures teach. In his mind, a Gentile was the equivalent of a stray dog wandering in the streets.

We know Peter's prejudice was pulverized and his attitude was adjusted because he was able to declare, "***God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean.***" Interestingly, the vision Peter had was of unclean food, but he had made the application to no longer categorize people according to spurious standards.

Then, Cornelius answers Peter's question by explaining his encounter with the angel and how he was told to send for Peter. In verse 33 he expresses his eagerness to hear what Peter has to say about the glories of the gospel: "***Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord.***" That's one of the things I love about Edgewood. Whether you're here in person or engaging remotely, you love to hear all that God has said.

We'll pick up the story here next weekend. Interestingly, this is a fulfillment of what Jesus said when He called Peter in Matthew 4:19: "***Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.***"

*God is always at work...and sometimes we get to see it. When we don't see it...remember God is always at work.*

## Principles

**1. Deal with any prejudice or racism in your heart.** The word "prejudice" means, "*to prejudge.*" It's wrong to divide people according to race. I like how Ken Ham says it, "*There's only one race...the human race.*"

What step can you take this week? Peter went through a process to root out prejudice. He started by staying with an unclean tanner. His next step was to invite Gentiles into his home. Then he went into a home filled with people who were different from him.

The church is like the linen sheet – we're filled with all races, ethnicities and political parties and one day will be raptured up to heaven. This theme is picked up in Ephesians 3:6: "***This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members***

*of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” Galatians 3:28-29 adds, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.”*

**2. God moves when His people practice spiritual disciplines.** In verse 2 Cornelius was praying and in verse 9 Peter was praying. Also, Cornelius was a giver. When we put God first and put ourselves in a position to hear from Him, He will speak to us through His Word.

**3. Practice immediate obedience.** It’s much better to say, “*What is it, Lord?*” then it is to say, “*By no means, Lord.*” Don’t wait to understand everything. Obey and then God will help you understand. Is there an area of disobedience or delayed obedience in your life? Someone has said, “*Delayed obedience is disobedience.*”

**4. God is gracious when we delay to obey.** God is always at work adjusting our attitudes and aligning our actions. Are you aware Peter refused to obey two other times? In Matthew 16:23 he rebuked Jesus for saying He was going to die and in John 13:8 he told Jesus he didn’t want his feet washed. Remember Peter denied Jesus three times and later was asked three times by Jesus if he loved Jesus. The point is he wasn’t DQ’d for his disobedience and neither are you. We learned today how God told him three times not to categorize people. Aren’t you glad God is patient with our prejudices as He works gradually, graciously and gently to change us?

**5. Minister to your family and friends.** Cornelius was eager to have people hear the gospel message, so he invited everyone over. That’s hard to do during Covid but you could tell people about our services on Cozi-TV or encourage them to engage through our new Livestream. God is preparing you to go with the message of the gospel and He’s preparing others to hear that message.

**6. Trust God’s timing and surrender to His sovereignty.** Whatever you’re going through right now, will you trust Him? Cornelius is not the main actor in the chapter, and neither is Peter. It’s the Holy Spirit. He is orchestrating events to adjust our attitudes and align our actions. Will you surrender your will to His will?

On October 8, 1871, D. L. Moody preached to the largest congregation he had yet addressed in Chicago. His text was, “*What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ?*” from Matthew 27:22. At the conclusion of his sermon he said, “I

*wish you would take this text home with you and turn it over in your minds during the week, and next week we will come to Calvary and the Cross, and we will decide what to do with Jesus of Nazareth.”*

That night hundreds died, and thousands of people became homeless because of the Great Chicago Fire. To his dying day, Mr. Moody deeply regretted telling the congregation to come back next week and decide what to do with Jesus: *“I have never since dared,”* he said, *“to give an audience a week to think of their salvation...I have never seen that congregation since...But I want to tell you of one lesson that I learned that night which I have never forgotten, and that is, when I preach, to press Christ upon the people then and there and try to bring them to a decision on the spot. I would rather have [my] right hand cut off than to give an audience a week now to decide what to do with Jesus.”*

I was happy to buy a new tire last Sunday, especially after I asked the technician what could have happened if we had we set out on our 900-mile return trip. He became quite serious and said: *“You would have lost more air and possibly had a blow out or even shredded your tire up in the mountains.”*

Are there any warning lights going off on your dash today? Do you have a slow spiritual leak going on? If so, you’re driving on borrowed time. Is God trying to get your attention in order to adjust your attitude and align your actions? Will you let Him pulverize your prejudices before you have a blowout? If you don’t know Jesus through the new birth, don’t delay. Repent and receive Christ today.

*God is always at work...and sometimes we get to see it. When we don’t see it...remember God is always at work.*

Cornelius was religious but he wasn’t redeemed. He was sincere, but he was not saved. We’ll see how God saves him next weekend, but I want to give you the opportunity to get saved right now.

If you have not yet repented and received Christ as the Son of God and the Savior of the world, you could do so right now by praying this prayer: *“Lord Jesus, for too long I’ve kept You out of my life. I admit I am a sinner and I cannot save myself. I repent of my sins by changing my mind about the way I’ve been living. By faith I appropriate Your gift of salvation. Thank You, Lord Jesus, for coming to earth. With all my heart I believe You are the Son of God who died on the cross for my sins and rose from the dead on the third day. Thank You for bearing my sins and giving me the gift of eternal life. I believe Your words are*

*true. I repent and receive You into my heart. Be my Savior and Lord, my Forgiver and Leader. I surrender to Your leadership in my life by saying, 'Here I am, Lord. What is it you want me to do?' Make me into the person You want me to be. In Jesus' name. Amen."*