

3-14-21 God Can Change A Heart

Acts 10:1-33.

Prejudice: preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience.

Preconceived Notion: opinion, persuasion, sentiment thought, view a personal belief or judgment that is not founded on proof or certainty.

Today we are going to look at how God deals with this in the life of the apostle Peter. Peter had his prejudices, preconceived notions, many that had been passed down through tradition, and heritage.

Ponder for a second, 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.

Matthew 16:18-19, "And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. 19 And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in 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)**

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.

1. **Adjust our Attitudes (Acts 10:1-20)**

- **(Verse 1)** 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.
- **Read verse 2.** What does it say about Cornelius?
- Devout, meaning reverent.
- He feared God. 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.
- 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.

- **Read verses 3-4.** I think the **ESV** captures **verse 4** the best, **“And he stared at him in terror and said, “What is it, Lord?”** 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?”**
- Continuing in **verse 4** **“Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial to God.”** Like a fragrant offering, his praying and his giving were like sweet incense to God.
- **Verse 5-6** God is so specific. Send men to Joppa, and get Peter, he is in the house of Simon a tanner, oh and he lives by the sea. Peter will tell you all about what is next!
- **Verse 8,** Cornelius **“explained all these things to them.”**
- Having prepared Cornelius to hear the gospel, God now must 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.
- **Read verses 9-10.** 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.** 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.
- We know for certain Peter wasn’t expecting to hear **verse 13.** Remember, when a needle on a record player would scratch across the record? That’s probably what Peter heard.
- **Verse 14, “Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything 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.

Leviticus 20:25-26, “You shall therefore distinguish between clean animals and unclean, between unclean birds and clean, and you shall not make yourselves abominable by beast or by bird, or by any kind of living thing that creeps on the ground, which I have separated from you as unclean. 26 And 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 were drawn from a cow by Gentile hands, a Jew could not drink. No Jew would ever eat with a Gentile.
- **Read verses 15-16.**
- 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.” ESV

- 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, And he said to them, “Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, 19 since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) ESV

1 Timothy 4:4, “For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving.”

- **Read verse 17, “Now while Peter wondered within himself what this vision which he had seen meant...”** The word wondered means perplexed, “in turmoil, hesitation” 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, **verse 18**.
- **Verses 19-20**, Peter needed help to process what God was revealing. The Spirit speaks up, **“Arise, go down, and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them.”** That phrase, **“doubting nothing”** 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.
- 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. (Acts 10:21-33)

- God’s timing is always perfect. As Peter is pondering, he hears men pounding on the door. He exhibits immediate obedience in **verse 21**:
- **Verse 22**, the men give their answer.
- 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.
- In **verse 23**, we see Peter is beginning to let his prejudices go: 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.

- **Verses 24-25**, Peter, a Jew enters the house of a Gentile, groundbreaking! Cornelius falls to his knees and worships Peter. To “worship” literally means, “to throw kisses toward while lying prostrate.”
- Food for thought: 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 myself am also 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 or masks going on either.
- **Verses 28-29** Peter gives a brief statement about how the Almighty had adjusted his attitude and aligned his actions. In 24 hours, Peter’s heart was able to be pliable to God’s direction. What a deference a 30-mile trip can make!
- Interestingly, the vision Peter had was of unclean food, but he had made the application to no longer categorize people.
- **Read verses 30-33.** 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.”**

Application

1. Deal with any prejudices or preconceived notions you hold.

- 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, come from all different backgrounds, social standings 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.

- When we put God first and put ourselves in a position to hear from Him, He will speak to us through His Word.
- Cornelius was doing the best he could as an unsaved man searching for God. Peter was hungry but seeking after God’s will.
- Often, we don’t see God moving because we aren’t seeking after Him or His ways.

3. Practice immediate obedience.

- It's much better to say, "What is it, Lord?" than it is to say, "Not so, 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?
- Don't hesitate!

4. God is gracious when we delay obeying.

- God is always at work adjusting our attitudes and aligning our actions. Peter refused to obey many 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. Also, 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 us 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 online. 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 His sovereignty.

- Whatever you're going through right now, will you trust Him?
- At the time of **Acts 10**, Peter had no idea what God was doing. But he was obedient and faithful to God, even when it didn't make sense, or when he disagreed with God. In **Acts 15:6-9**, because of his obedience, Peter came to understand what God was doing. But it started with him being obedient during a time he didn't understand or agree. Understanding often comes after obedience.
- 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?

Conclusion

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.

God was working in Peter's heart; in what ways is God working in yours?

Do you need an attitude adjustment? Can God realign your actions?