

September 15, 2013

A Gospel Centered Community

Salvation to the Gentiles

Acts 10:24 – 48

Last week we saw at least two things from the first section of chapter 10. **One was that no human being should be considered common or unclean.** None are to be spurned, or shunned or rejected or despised because of his color or race or ethnicity or culture or any other distinctive. Our hearts, like God's heart, should be big for sinners in need of a Savior. In fact our hearts ought to be broken over the lostness of people around us and stirred to action by their plight.

The second thing is that **in every nation, every ethnic group, every culture around the world, God has prepared some to seek Him out with the light that they have.** There are people prepared by God who are praying for a Peter to come and tell them the way of salvation. The only question is, will we respond and go? I don't mean we have to go somewhere overseas to the jungles of Africa – what I do mean is that we have to go right where we are. God has prepared some right in your sphere of living – your workplace, your neighborhood, your circle of friends and family – who are asking God for a Peter. Cornelius would not have been saved if Peter had not gone – and no one will be saved in our generation if we do not go. In every nation, among every tongue and tribe and people group, God has prepared the hearts of some to receive the good news of the gospel.

Scattered through the mountains in Myanmar, formerly called Burma, lived a tribe of people called the Wa. The Wa were headhunters, who once a year, in planting season, felt compelled to plant human heads in their fields along with their seeds, to ensure a bountiful harvest. Neighboring tribes always wanted to leave on vacation when the Wa were planting their crops, but unfortunately that was when they had to plant theirs. But strangely enough, from time to time, prophets of a god the Wa called the true God arose to condemn headhunting and spirit appeasement. One such prophet appeared during the 1880's, called Pu Chan. Pu Chan persuaded several thousand Wa tribesmen to abandon headhunting and spirit appeasement, because he said that the true God was about to send a long awaited white brother with a copy of the lost book that would tell them the way of salvation. If that white brother came and found them practicing evil things, he might think that they were unworthy of God's true book and turn away from them. If that happened, Pu Chan warned, they might not get another chance.

One morning, Pu Chan saddled a Wa pony and told some of his disciples to follow this pony. 'The true God told me last night that the white brother has finally come near. The true God will cause this pony to lead you to him. When you find this white brother, let him ride this pony back to us. We would be an ungrateful people if we made him walk the last part of his journey toward us.' That pony led the disciples of Pu Chan over 200 miles of mountainous trails and down into the city of Kengtung, where it turned into the gate of a mission compound and headed straight for a well. Pu Chan's disciples looked around in vain for either a white man or a book, until they heard a sound coming from the well. They looked in and saw a white face with clear blue eyes looking back up at them, and saying 'Hello strangers. May I help you?' His name was William Marcus Young, and he had been working with another group of Burmese called the Lahu. The disciples of Pu Chan asked him, 'Have you brought a book of God?' Marcus nodded and the men were overcome with emotion and fell at his feet. They gave him the message to come from Pu Chan and said, 'This pony is saddled and ready especially for you. Our people are all waiting. Fetch the book! We must be on our way!' As a result, Pu Chan and thousands of Wa became Christians.

This story of Cornelius was only one of the first of hundreds of thousands of stories like his for 2,000 years, and it not only tells us that no one should be spurned, or shunned or rejected or despised because of his color or race or ethnicity or culture or any other distinctive; and that there are people in every nation, every ethnic group, every culture around the world, prepared by God to embrace the gospel, but the rest of his story I think tells us three important things about real conversion. Three factors of genuine salvation.

First of all, salvation comes through God's initiative. Real conversion, real salvation always comes because God initiates things. Lets look at the text. *And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am a man." And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered. And he said to them, "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.* Acts 10:24-28 And then Peter says: *So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me."* Acts 10:29

So Cornelius responds by saying: *"Four days ago, about this hour, I was praying in my house at the ninth hour, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing and said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.' So I sent for you at once, and you have been kind enough to come. Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord."* Acts 10:30-33

So Cornelius' answer to Peter's question – Why did you send for me? – is 'I sent for you because God first sent for me'. Cornelius would never have sent for Peter on his own. He didn't even know Peter existed. It wasn't until God, through an angel said to Cornelius, 'Send for Peter' that he sent men to find Peter. The point of this story is not that every genuine conversion begins with a vision or dream. Sometimes it does. But it didn't happen with the 3,000 at Pentecost; it didn't happen with the Ethiopian finance minister; it doesn't happen later with Lydia in Philippi. Dreams and visions are not the point. The initiative of God in salvation is. Everyone who is genuinely converted, realizes sooner or later, that their search for God was a direct result of God's first searching for them.

Everyone who has come to Christ eventually looks back and says, 'I thought I was searching for God, but I now realize that I was only searching because He was searching for me'. C.S. Lewis talked about this in his spiritual autobiography: ***'Amiable agnostics will talk cheerfully about man's search for God. To me they might have just as well talked about the mouse's search for the cat'***. Vincent Donovan had been working among the various Maasai villages in northern Tanzania and Kenya for many months and had struggled in trying to convey to the Maasai what it meant to really believe. At one point Donovan spoke with a Maasai elder about the agony of belief and unbelief. In their conversation, the Maasai elder pointed out that the word Donovan had been using in Swahili to convey the word "faith" was not a very good word in their language. The word they were using for "faith" meant literally, "to agree to." The elder said that to believe like that was similar to a white hunter shooting an animal from a great distance. Only his eyes and his finger got into it.

The Masai elder then said that for one to really believe is more like a lion going after its prey. The lion's nose and ears sense the prey. He sniffs the air and locates it. Then he crouches, and slithers along the ground virtually invisible. The lion gets into position, and when everything is optimum, the lion pounces. All the power of his body is involved and as the animal goes down, the lion envelopes it in his arms, pulls it to himself, and makes it a part of himself. This, said the elder, is the way one believes, making faith a part of oneself! Donovan nodded in complete agreement, almost overcome with the elder's wisdom. But the elder was not done yet. The old Maasai became thoughtful. Then he said to Donovan: "We did not search you out, Padri. We did not even want you to come to us. You searched us out. You told us of the High God. You told us we must search for the High God. But we have not done this. Instead, the High God has searched us out and found us! All the time we think we are the lion. In the end, the lion is God!"

One stanza of an old Reformation hymn says it perfectly: ***'Tis not that I did choose Thee, For Lord, that could not be; This heart would still refuse Thee, Hadst Thou not chosen me. My heart owns none before Thee, For Thy rich grace I thirst; This knowing, if I love Thee, Thou must have loved me first.'*** Anyone who has experienced real salvation, knows one way or another that is true. We're not capable of longing for God unless He was already at work in us. Another way to put that is a sense of His absence is a sign of His presence. If God was not already after you, you wouldn't feel a need to search for Him. That's the first thing, salvation comes through God's initiative.

The second thing we learn is that salvation is always a challenge to moral goodness. A challenge to religion if you will. What do I mean by that? Let's look at the story. What did the angel tell Cornelius? He said that God had heard his prayers and remembered his generosity to the poor. Therefore, send to Joppa for Peter. This is stunning. Maybe it slipped past you almost unnoticed. Listen to what the angel is saying. 'Cornelius, you have been recognized in heaven as being a devout man. We've been looking at the human race and you are an outstanding representative. You pray, and give sacrificially, your integrity and reputation are without equal – you're a really good man. Therefore, if you just keep doing what you're doing there's no doubt you'll make it to heaven'. Is that what the angel said? No! What he said was 'Cornelius, your devotion to God and your exemplary living have been noticed in heaven – therefore you need salvation. You need to hear the gospel that can save you from your sins'.

That is absolutely not what the unconverted world thinks. Here's a good man, a moral man, recognized even in heaven, and what he needs is salvation. Nicodemus, in John chapter 3 is another example. Nicodemus comes to Jesus and says, 'Master, we know that you are a teacher sent from God'. Now Nicodemus is a lot like Cornelius. A moral man, a powerful figure in the community, a man of impeccable credentials, a humble man. And what does Jesus tell Nicodemus? Does he say, 'You're a good man Nicodemus – you're moral and spiritual, you know the Bible, you're very religious – you just need a few tweaks to make it perfect?' Is that what Jesus says? No! What He says is 'You must be born again! What you have won't make it into heaven – you need to start from scratch – you need to be born again'.

Typically when we think 'Born again' we think that's for people whose lives are a wreck, they're on skid row, they're falling apart – they need some kind of cathartic experience. But I'm pretty much pulled together. But look at Cornelius – look at Nicodemus – they're as pulled together as you can get – they're as good as you could ask for people to be. But what does the angel say? What does Jesus say? You must be born again! Until we understand this, we won't be converted. The average person hears the call to salvation, the call to be converted, born again, as a call to be moral and religious. A call to traditional moral values. But that can't be what it is. Cornelius's story – Nicodemus' story, not to mention Paul's story we saw in chapter nine, tells us that salvation is not a call to morality and religion, rather it is a challenge to morality and religion.

It is especially a challenge to people who consider themselves moral and religious. Why is that? The Bible says that the basic problem with every human being is that human beings put themselves in the place of God. And there are two ways to put yourself in the place of God. Two ways to make yourself your own savior and lord. One way is to break all the moral rules; and the other is to keep all the moral rules. One way is to say, 'I'm going to live the way I want to live' and trample on others and be dishonest and break all the rules. And the other way is to be absolutely moral and good and say 'because I'm so moral and good I've earned my salvation – God owes me to save me'. One way makes you a criminal; the other makes you either a selfish, prideful pharisee – or a person who is always anxious and worried that you've haven't kept all the rules quite right, and you never feel good enough. And both of these are sources of soul-distorting self-centeredness and pride. And while it is true that both need salvation – it is also true that the self-moral person has a tougher row to hoe simply because they can't see their desperate need of a Savior.

So salvation always comes through God's initiative; secondly, salvation is always a challenge to moral goodness; and finally, **salvation happens through the transformation of the Holy Spirit.** Look at verses 44 – 46. Jesus told Nicodemus that he had to be born again by the Holy Spirit; Paul tells us in Titus chapter 3 you have to be reborn by the Holy Spirit; and Luke tells us that salvation comes by the Holy Spirit. Conversion is not an act of your will, your turning over a new leaf, or application to some sort of reform program – salvation is the utter transformation of the old you by the power of the Holy Spirit. Verse 44 - 46: *While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God.* Acts 10:44-46

These are the two marks of genuine conversion, two marks of spiritual transformation – speaking in tongues and praising God. Now I'm sure your interest is peaked trying to anticipate what I'm going to say about speaking in tongues as a mark of spiritual transformation; but we cannot overlook the significance of this since the text makes it plain that these two things were clear indications to Peter and the other Jewish Christians that Cornelius and his household had truly been converted. They were amazed because the evidence of real conversion before their eyes – speaking in tongues and praising God – was undeniable.

Extolling God, or praising God, is a mark of the psychological transformation the Holy Spirit brings; and speaking in tongues is a mark of the sociological transformation the Holy Spirit brings. Let's do the easy one first – praising God. How do they know these people were saved? They heard them praising God. The word *megaluno* means to make great, to magnify, to declare great, to esteem highly, to extol, laud, to celebrate. Worship means that you ascribe ultimate value to something. You don't just like it – you put ultimate value on it – you cherish it, you adore it. And everybody on earth is doing that with something. Everyone on earth looks to someone or something as the ultimate source of meaning and worth and happiness.

And whatever it is that you value the most, whatever it is that you adore the most, that's your spiritual oxygen, your emotional food and drink – without it life is unbearable. So if it is the approval of others – if that's what you look for and live for to have happiness and joy – that controls you. What people think of you controls you. If your main thing is power, then you're controlled by status and money. If your thing is emotional fulfillment, then whatever gives the next emotional high controls you. Whatever it is, you do not control it – it controls you. You're controlled by what you worship. You're controlled by what your heart most values, what it most adores, what it most praises. And you cannot change unless you change what you worship. All change is superficial unless you change the object of your worship. Until God's love and grace is the praise of your life, you haven't really changed.

Secondly the Holy Spirit's transformation changes you sociologically. The evidence that salvation had come to Cornelius' household was that they were praising God *and* speaking in tongues. What does that mean? Well Peter saw it, and it dawned on him. In chapter eleven as he is recounting this event for the apostles in Jerusalem, he says the Holy Spirit came on Cornelius' household just as it came on them at the beginning. What's he thinking of? He's thinking of Pentecost. He's hearing them speaking in tongues just like at Pentecost. What does that mean here? Not what it means generally – but here, in this text.

There are several places in Acts where Luke describes conversions and this is the only place where speaking in tongues by those who are converted happens. Didn't happen with the Ethiopian; didn't happen with Paul, doesn't happen with Lydia – but it happens here. And there are a number of times when the Holy Spirit comes down, but there is no speaking in tongues that happens in those accounts. But it happens here – and Peter gets it. 'This is just like Pentecost' he says. 'I know what God is saying'. So what was God saying? You have to go back to Pentecost. What happened there? What happened there is that the Holy Spirit was poured out on the church and the gospel went out in every language to those who were listening. What that means is that in the most vivid, unmistakable way, God was saying, 'There is no language, and therefore no people or culture that is a more godly or appropriate vehicle for the gospel than any other'. Racial superiority has to end – cultural superiority has to end. The Holy Spirit's work is to come into every language and culture and recreate Christianity in that culture.

In the strongest possible terms in Acts chapter two, God was saying, 'This is the end of racial and cultural superiority. I want you to go to all the nations and bring them in'. But they didn't go. When Peter came to Cornelius he basically said, 'I've never done this before – you know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with any kind of Gentile – all of my life it's been drilled into me that I shouldn't walk into a Gentile's house because you're unclean. And I'm only here because the angel told me to come'. And he begins to speak – doesn't even really get to the conclusion, and the Holy Spirit falls down and God gives the Gentiles their own little Pentecost, reminding Peter of what Pentecost was all about and Peter says, '**get it**'.

In spite of the fact that Peter was one of the leaders in the church, he still wasn't living out Pentecost, he still wasn't living out the gospel, he wasn't living out the implications of salvation by grace and not by pedigree. The speaking in tongues at the Pentecost of the Jews and the Pentecost of the Gentiles, is God's way of saying have done with racial and social and cultural ideas of superiority and privilege. When the Holy Spirit captures your heart and soul through the gospel you immediately understand that there is no more distinctions between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, or free; but Christ is all, and in all, as Paul tells us in Colossians.

So what are the implications for us? First, the fact that salvation comes through God's initiative means that **the gospel we preach has power to save souls and will save souls**. The only thing God has asked of us is to go where He sends us and open our mouths. Do you see? The only role Peter has to play in this little drama is to obey the call and open his mouth. God gave Peter the vision; the men came from Cornelius; God told Peter to go with them; Peter went, opened his mouth and preached the gospel and the Holy Spirit fell and Cornelius and his whole household got saved. That means we can be as bold as lions to share the gospel wherever we find ourselves. William Carey, the man God gave the vision and burden to carry the gospel to India said: *'The work to which God has set His hands, will infallibly prosper. Christ has begun to besiege this ancient and strong fortress, and will assuredly carry it through'*.

Secondly, **the gospel is not a call to religious reformation**. It is not a call to moral reformation. The gospel is a call to sinners, good ones and bad ones, to repent of their goodness, repent of their badness, and be saved. Cornelius was a good man, a devout man, a praying man – but apart from the gospel, apart from Christ, a lost man. That is why, when Peter said: *To Him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.*" the Holy Spirit fell, salvation came to that household.

Finally, genuine conversion always means **a radical transformation of your soul and your culture**. Your center of worship will shift. The thing that you worshiped, the thing that was your lifeblood no longer controls you. Your center, the meaning of existence for you now is God Himself, and anything less just won't satisfy. What controls you now is what God thinks of you, not what others think. The gospel also radically transforms your culture. Sinful ideas of racial prejudice, and cultural superiority are utterly demolished in the light of God's love and grace. The transforming power of the Holy Spirit broke through the centuries old cultural animosity and racial hatred that existed between the Jews and Gentiles that day in Cornelius's house and created a new people wholly dedicated to the worship of God and the proclamation of the Good News of peace through Jesus Christ.

Our good and gracious Father and God,

We are eternally thankful and utterly humbled that you did not wait for us to seek You out but You came seeking the lost. Before You grabbed hold of us, we thought we were the lion. But in the end, O Lord, the lion is You!" We could not have begun to love You had You not first loved us. Let all thoughts of our own moral goodness or religious effort sufficient to earn our salvation be forever destroyed by Your all-sufficient grace to sin-sick hearts. By the power of Your Holy Spirit teach us that all the good things of this life are less than nothing when compared to Your love. All the treasures of a million worlds could not make us wealthier, more joyful, more contented because all Your unsearchable riches are ours. Holy Spirit, birth in us a white-hot passionate worship of God that demolishes racial and cultural barriers and brings the gospel of peace to every nation, tribe and tongue for Your great glory and Your Holy Name's sake we pray in the precious name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.