

A Blanket Statement

(Acts 10:1-20)

1/29/20; Wed PM Pine Grove

Introduction

Prejudice is defined as a preconceived opinion of another person not based on actual experience.

It is existed ever since the fall of man in the garden of Eden.

It is often called racism, but that isn't an accurate term for a couple reasons.

#1 - Racism assumes that there are multiple races of people but the Bible is clear.

There is but one race of people, and that is the human race that descended from Adam and Eve.

#2 - Racism is only one kind of prejudice that comes from ethnicity or skin color.

But prejudice can be against people of your own ethnicity and skin color.

The Jews exhibited prejudice against the Samaritans even the Samaritans lived in the same nation and certainly looked the same as the Jews in Judea.

The same would be true for Muslims who view other Muslims as enemies like the Sunnis and the Shias.

The same would be true in our own country where Northerners and Southerners view each other with contempt.

So racism is not an accurate term but prejudice certainly is, and it has been a problem since the fall in the garden.

Now, the tower of Babel contributed to the growth of prejudice as God dispersed the world's population by language and sent people in all directions.

From that event came multiple cultures and ethnicities and skin colors.

And that only heightened prejudice as people began to look more and more different and began to sound more and more different.

Then the Lord came to Abraham and began to form a nation from his descendants.

And the purpose was not to make Israel a superior people but to use that nation to deliver a Messiah to the world.

But in the process of setting that nation apart to represent Him, the prejudice of Israel grew.

Though they were not more special than any other nation, they began to look down on other nations with prejudice in their hearts.

Though God gave them his law and his word, they turned that privilege into prejudice and began to denigrate anyone not like them.

Folks who weren't Jewish were seen as Gentile dogs rather than people who were made in God's image.

Folks who didn't live in Israel became an enemy and not a mission field.

Israel began to love their nation more than they loved God.

Now the sad reality is that the world has often followed the sinful practices of Israel.

We see it today in our nation as prejudice divides our own nation in terms of skin color or nationality or region of the country.

And prejudice is sin against the image of God in man.

Prejudice says that we know who has more value to God based on skin color or country of origin without meeting or speaking to the person.

And prejudice seeks to divide the church, but this is not from God at all.

It is satanic in origin, and it needs to be repented of any time we see the temptation to give into preconceived ideas about a person or group of people.

The bottom line is this.

We are all made in God's image.

We are all broken because of Adam's sin.

We are all in need of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection in order to be saved.

And that is true regardless of skin color, level of education, country of origin, native language, religious background, and a whole host of other things that make us different from each other.

Tonight is a great opportunity to rid ourselves of this prejudice as we look at the apostle Peter in the book of Acts.

Now the reason that Peter becomes a model for overcoming prejudice is because Peter was a man filled with prejudice.

Peter was a Jew from birth, and he had quickly learned how to dislike people not like himself.

Yet Peter's life began to change when he met Jesus on the shores of the sea of Galilee.

From that point on, all that Peter had ever been taught was challenged by the teaching of Christ.

Yet, Peter seemed to miss Jesus' greatest teaching and that was the fact that he had come to save both Jews and Gentiles.

That is, Peter never understood it until we arrive at Acts 10 and meet a Gentile named Cornelius.

In this scene which includes all of chapter 10 and part of chapter 11, Peter's prejudice is confronted in a most remarkable way.

And Peter will be changed by the grace of God.

Now to bring us up to speed, I want to remind you that God has already been at work in Peter's heart in terms of his prejudice.

WE saw a few weeks back that Peter travelled to Samaria which no self-respecting Jew would ever do since the Samaritans were as mix of Jew and Gentile.

But not only Peter travel there, he preached the gospel there.

And then last week, we finished up chapter 9 with this short but important verse..

43 And Peter stayed many days in Joppa with a tanner named Simon.

And we noted that staying was also a big step for Peter since tanners were seen as unclean due to the fact that they worked with the skin of dead animals.

But Peter stayed with Simon for a number of days in Joppa.

Now here is our map of Israel and you can see Joppa on the coast of Israel.

And that bring us to chapter 10, and let's just let this scene unfold verse by verse since it is the longest scene in the entire book of Acts.

What I want us to consider are 3 simple truths to help us deal with prejudice in our hearts.

And just as Peter was graciously changed by the Lord into a man without prejudice, may we all be changed as well..

The first truth we need to embrace is found in verses 1-8..

I. God Can Work in the Heart of Anyone (1-8)

Verses 1 and 2..

1 Now there was a man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort, 2 a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many [b]alms to the Jewish people and prayed to God continually.

Let's begin by setting some background.

Let's look at our map and find Caesarea.

First of all, Caesarea was a coastal town about 30 miles north of Joppa, where we last saw Peter.

It was in Israel but it was largely Gentile since the Roman government had their Judean headquarters there.

It was a relatively new city in Peter's day, having been built by Herod the Great to honor Caesar.

The city streets of Caesarea all went toward a magnificent harbor and some say the population may have been as high as 200,000 people in 40 AD.

It is also a key city in the book of Acts.

You may remember that Paul was taken to Caesarea and shipped off to his hometown of Tarsus a few weeks back to prevent trouble in Jerusalem.

Paul will also use the city as a hub for some of his missionary journeys later in the book of Acts.

He will also be put in prison in Caesarea for 2 years in Acts 24

Paul will also preach to King Agrippa in Caesarea in Acts 25 and 26.

And Caesarea will also become the center of Christianity in Israel after Jerusalem is destroyed in 70 AD.

Needless to say, Caesarea is an important city in the book of Acts.

Here are some modern day pictures of Caesarea today.

And it has become a tourist destination for many, but in Acts 10, it was a Roman outpost, and we know that because Cornelius is called a centurion.

And a Roman centurion is a man in charge of 100 Roman soldiers.

Most centurions were well respected men, and we can see from Cornelius' character that he was well respected.

Verse 2 says that he was a devout man and one who feared God and his money to support Jews and was also a man of prayer.

So first of all, Cornelius was a respected man among his peers.

He was so respected that he worked his way to a place of leadership in the Italian cohort.

A cohort was a larger group of 600 soldiers, so Cornelius was a respected leader in the Roman army.

And part of the reason for that is due to his respect of the Lord.

Now to be clear, Cornelius is not saved.

In fact, Acts 11:14 says that Cornelius is saved by the preaching of Peter.

But at this point in verse 2, Cornelius is unsaved despite all the good qualities listed about him.

At this point, Cornelius is in danger of hell despite his giving, his praying, and his devotion to God.

And this is a great reminder that good people go to hell unless they hear and believe upon the name of Christ.

Though God is clearly at work in Cornelius heart, he needs the full gospel.

He needs to hear the name of Christ.

But God is about to put His plan in motion to get the name of Christ to Him.

Verse 3..

3 About the [c]ninth hour of the day he clearly saw in a vision an angel of God who had just come in and said to him, "Cornelius!" 4 And fixing his gaze on him and being much alarmed, he said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and [d]alms have ascended as a memorial before God.

The ninth hour of the day would be 3 pm by Jewish reckoning.

And that was the time for Jews to pray so Cornelius joined in.

Now understand Cornelius is not Jewish.

In fact, Jews had 3 categories for Gentiles.

The first category was simply a Gentile who showed no interest in the things of the Lord.

Then there were Gentiles that converted to Judaism, been circumcised and joined the practices of the Jews.

And then there a group of Gentiles that were somewhere in between those two.

The Jews simply called them God-fearers.

They had not converted to Judaism but they showed an interest in the things of the Lord.

They may even come to some synagogue.

Do you remember the Ethiopian eunuch?

The Bible says that he had come to Jerusalem to worship.

The same may be true for Cornelius.

He was learning about God from the Jews, but he was not a convert.

But he is praying according to Jewish custom at 3 in the afternoon when a miraculous thing happens.

He has a vision of an angel calling his name, and though Cornelius was probably a brave soldier, he was frightened by what he saw.

However, he answered the angel..

“What is it, Lord?”

And the angel simply told Cornelius that his prayers and alms had risen to God.

They were a memorial, which simply means that they reminded God of the life that Cornelius was living.

They testified of his desire to be pleasing to the Lord.

They testified of his desire to seek the Lord.

So the angel told him what to do next..

Verse 5..

5 Now dispatch some men to Joppa and send for a man named Simon, who is also called Peter; 6 he is staying with a tanner named Simon, whose house is by the sea.”

In God’s sovereignty, Peter is just 30 miles south of the Caesarea in Joppa.

And the instruction of the angel is for Cornelius to send for Peter.

Now why not just send Cornelius to Peter?

Well, the Lord is working in Peter's heart too, and the call to come to a Gentile soldier and into his house would be the ultimate test of Peter's changing heart.

He has gone from a man who only loves Jews to a man who went to Samaria to a man who is styling with a ceremonially unclean tanner to now being called to come visit a Gentile in his home.

Cornelius could go to Peter to get the truth but God wants Peter to come to him.

Ultimately, it is best to obey an angel, so Cornelius simply follows orders.

Verse 7.

7 When the angel who was speaking to him had left, he summoned two of his [e]servants and a devout soldier of those who were his personal attendants, 8 and after he had explained everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.

All I want to say is this.

God can work in any human heart.

Cornelius is a Gentile.

He is a man that the Bible describes as someone far away from the Lord.

He was not a part of the covenant that God made with Israel.

But the gospel is going to bring those far off into a close relationship with the God of the Jews.

The gospel is going to cross all national boundaries and cultural boundaries and financial boundaries and educational boundaries.

The gospel is going to go to the Jew and Gentile, the rich and the poor, the slave and free, the male and the female.

And Cornelius is going to be proof of that.

And we need to be reminded that God can work in the heart of anyone.

People in our country, people outside our borders.

People who look like us and people who don't look like us.

The gospel does not discriminate, it permeates the entire world.

And God sends the truth of the gospel to whomever He desires.

In this case, Cornelius is going to God's chosen man to hear the greatest truth ever known.

But as God works in the heart of the recipient, he is also at work in the heart of the messenger.

This brings us to verse 9-15, which we will call..

II. God Can Change the Heart of Anyone (9-16)

Let's now catch up with Peter..

Verse 9..

9 On the next day, as they were on their way and approaching the city, Peter went up on the house-top about the [f]sixth hour to pray.

It just so happens that Peter heads to pray as Cornelius' men approach Joppa.

The sixth hour would be noon, which explains verse 10..

10 But he became hungry and was desiring to eat; but while they were making preparations, he fell into a trance;

The word trance just suggests that Peter was put in state to see a vision from the Lord.

Now remember, this is not the normal Christian experience.

You should not expect this at all today.

In Acts 10, the church is still young.

Not a single book of the NT has been inspired yet, so God still needs to communicate through visions, as he did often in the OT.

So Peter finds himself in a trance prepared to hear and see from the Lord.

Verse 11..

*11 and he *saw the [g]sky opened up, and an [h]object like a great sheet coming down, lowered by four corners to the ground, 12 and there were in it all kinds of four-footed animals and [i]crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the [j]air. 13 A voice came to him, "Get up, Peter, [k]kill and eat!" 14 But Peter said, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything [l]unholy and unclean." 15 Again a voice came to him a second time, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider [m]unholy." 16 This happened three times, and immediately the [n]object was taken up into the [o]sky.*

No what in the world is this vision?

First of all, it is a vision that addresses the diet of the Christian.

Jews had followed a strict God-given diet as a nation in the OT.

Some of their food restrictions served a practical purpose, and that purpose was to keep Israel healthy.

In the days before refrigeration, illness from consuming some foods could wipe out an entire population of people.

So God offered some dietary laws to simply protect Israel from extinction due to illness.

But along with that, dietary restrictions were designed to set Israel apart from other nations.

You see, Israel was meant to be a light to the Gentile nations.

They existed to draw the world to them.

But in God's design, he wanted Israel to remain fully committed to him.

So he set dietary restrictions to prevent too much fellowship with other people.

You see, a meal has always been a social event.

It is where people can fellowship and grow in relationship.

And though did not prohibit Israel from being a light to the world, he wanted that light to remain uncontaminated by the sins of the world.

So Israel's dietary restrictions didn't allow to eat with just anyone.

Instead, they forced Israel to mainly fellowship with one another.

And Israel took these restrictions very seriously.

Notice what Peter says in verse 14..

Lord, for I have never eaten anything [l]unholy and unclean."

And that was true for Peter and his fellow Jews.

But now in the church age, all food will be clean and permissible to eat.

Look at verse 15..

"What God has cleansed, no longer consider [m]unholy."

And the point is simple, dietary restrictions on God's people are done.

In fact, Jesus had tried to this to Peter and the rest of the disciples in Mark 7..

14 After He called the crowd to Him again, He began saying to them, “Listen to Me, all of you, and understand: 15 there is nothing outside the man which can defile him if it goes into him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man.

The point was clear.

What a person ate didn't make them unclean.

What a person did is what made them unclean.

And Peter is hearing this same principle again in this vision.

God has declared all food clean, so food choices will no longer defile him or any other Jew.

Now that is big news, but the larger picture is this.

This no allows the Jews to fellowship with the Gentile around the table.

Jews can no enjoy a meal with a Gentile without any fear of defilement over the menu.

God is no longer pulling people to Himself through the diet of His people.

He is changing the diet of His people and sending them into the world.

The church will no be a group of people with dietary laws that restrict fellowship.

The church will be a group of people who can enjoy a meal of anything with anyone.

Now this vision is about to become reality for Peter because he is about to be called to the home of Gentile.

And he can enjoy bacon for breakfast with Cornelius if he so desires.

So what is the point?

Simple.

God is working in Peter's life to remove the things that contribute to his prejudice toward Gentiles.

God is changing the heart of the preacher so that he can preach the gospel to all.

Look, if you see prejudice in your life, don't allow it stay and grow.

Ask God to take it away and work with Him to see that change accomplished.

Crucify prejudice whenever you see it, and be willing to take the gospel to anyone..

That leads to verses 17-20, which we will call..

III. God Directs the Plans of Everyone (17-20)

17 Now while Peter was greatly perplexed in [p]mind as to what the vision which he had seen might be, behold, the men who had been sent by Cornelius, having asked directions for Simon's house, appeared at the gate; 18 and calling out, they were asking whether Simon, who was also called Peter, was staying there. 19 While Peter was reflecting on the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, [q]three men are looking for you. 20 But get up, go downstairs and accompany them [r]without misgivings, for I have sent them Myself."

As you seek to fight sin in your life, do not be surprised for God to bring opportunities where you can demonstrate obedience.

Even before Peter is quite sure what this vision was about, 3 men show up knocking on his door.

And the Lord clearly tells Peter how to respond.

go downstairs and accompany them [r]without misgivings, for I have sent them Myself."

Look, there are times when we simply trust the Lord even though we aren't sure what he is doing.

Now again, we aren't to expect a voice from heaven like Peter, but should expect the Lord to direct us through the events of life.

Peter is growing in his acceptance and love of others.

Going to Samaria has grown him.

Staying with a tanner has grown him.

And going with Gentile men is another step in the progress.

We don't need a voice from heaven to grow, we simply need to trust the sovereignty of God in the ordinary events of life.

Peter is about to have his life changed.

The church is about to open her doors to the Gentiles.

But this will not happen with a loud blast of a trumpet.

It will happen in the ordinary events of life as Peter goes with 3 men to visit the home of Gentile named Cornelius.

This is what it means to trust the providence of God.

We simply obey and God works in our lives through that obedience and trust.

Peter is not going to have a road to Damascus experience.

God is simply going to gradually change his life through a series of ordinary events.

Next week, we get to see Peter and Cornelius finally meet.

So what do we take with us tonight?

Conclusion

#1 - Rejoice in the fact that God can work in any human heart.

Let's face it.

Prejudice has no place in the life of a believer.

But it certainly has no place in the life of a Gentile believer.

And the reason is simple.

We were once on the outside of the gospel looking in ourselves.

So how dare we now put others on the outside looking into us.

#2 - Recognize and repent of the sin of prejudice.

Jokes about people of different ethnicities and skin color and culture have no place in the life of a Christian.

Favoritism toward people like yourself has no place in the life of a believer.

Exclusion of people unlike you has no place in the life of a believer.

Live every day seeing not the culture or the color of the skin but the image of God in every man.

And depart from people of prejudice.

#3 - Remember the gospel is personal and not national.

The American church does not own the gospel.

We are not the center of God's attention.

People in this nation are simply instruments in his hand to get the gospel to the widest audience.

So don't gloat over the freedom we have, use it to set others free from sin.

Let us pray.