

UNMASKING PREJUDICE Acts 10

INTRO.: Justice and its opposite, injustice, have been much in the news lately. Prejudice and injustice are related. Someone who is prejudicial begins by drawing a line of demarcation. That enables him or her to see issues in terms of Us versus Them. Once you do that, you then feel that anyone who belongs to 'Them' does not deserve justice or does not deserve the same type of justice that anyone who belongs to your group deserves. You feel that no justice, or at best a lesser dose of justice, is good enough for 'Them.'

Acts 10 tells us of someone who had prejudice. His name was Peter— yes, Simon Peter, who was oftentimes the spokesman of the apostles of our Lord! But Peter did not know that he had any prejudicial bone in his body. God knew that Peter did not know of his problem, so He wanted to unmask the prejudice in him, and God knew that He would just about have to use a 2 by 4 in hitting Peter to get his attention so that he could realize his problem.

There was someone else with another problem that God wanted to solve. The true story in Acts 10 begins with our being introduced to Cornelius. Cornelius was a centurion (meaning that he was the commander of 100 soldiers) in the Roman Army. He was stationed in the city of Caesarea. Luke, the author of Acts of the Apostles, tells us,

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian cohort, a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God (Acts 10:1-2).

So Cornelius was a very good, religious officer. If it were today, had he not been a soldier, he could have been the president of the Rotary Club. But he had a problem, and his problem was that of reliance on human righteousness. He

believed that what he was doing was all he needed to do to have a right relationship with God. He had not given his life to Jesus Christ, so he did not know the Lord.

One day Cornelius was praying at about 3 p.m. when an angel of the Lord appeared to him, and the angel acknowledged the good things that Cornelius was doing but then gave him some clear instructions:

Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. And now 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 (Acts 10:4-6).

The angel was telling Cornelius that as good as what he was doing was, it was not good enough. This is a clear demonstration of the fact that good works cannot save anyone. You have to have faith in Jesus. Ephesians 2:8-9 states: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

Isaiah 64:6 states: “We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.”

There was a slogan that was popular in some Christian quarters in the 1970s and 1980s. It said, “Christianity is not a religion, it is a relationship.” I did not like that slogan from the start. You see, it sounded good until you examined it. Those who loved that slogan were making the mistake that the makers of Volkswagen were making in their commercial at about the same time, saying, “Volkswagen: it’s not a car, it’s a Volkswagen.” If Volkswagen wasn’t a car, what was it? Was it a boat or a plane? Their saying that didn’t make Volkswagen anything less or more than a car. What they were meaning to say was, “Volkswagen: it’s not just a car, it’s a Volkswagen.” Missing that little four-letter word, “just,” was important. In the same way, what those Christians who loved that slogan were trying to say was, “Christianity is not just a religion; it is a relationship.” Webster’s Dictionary defines religion as “the service and worship of God or the supernatural.” So, of course, Christianity is a religion. But it is not just a religion.

So the angel was saying to Cornelius, “Cornelius, you’re religious. However, you’re simply religious, and that’s not enough. Simon Peter will tell you what you need to hear and know.”

Also, notice how specific the angel’s instructions were. The angel told Cornelius that Simon Peter was lodging with another Simon who was a tanner (i.e. worked with animals), and that Simon the tanner’s house was by the seashore there at Joppa. Where Simon the tanner’s house was in Joppa probably had no street name, or the angel might have specified that too. When the risen Lord sent Ananias, the disciple at Damascus, to go to see Saul, He did say to Ananias, “Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying...” (Acts 9:11). The risen Lord actually gave the name of the street.

Incidentally, Peter was not living in Joppa. He had made it to Joppa on his missionary journey. The believers in Joppa had sent for Peter when Dorcas (or Tabitha) had died, and they heard that Peter was ministering in the nearby town of Lydda. At Joppa Peter had raised Dorcas from the dead and was evidently staying in that city to minister for a while.

After the angel who appeared to Cornelius vanished into thin air, Cornelius wasted no time in sending men to Joppa. He would send two of his servants and a devout soldier to Joppa. It would be the following day before they would get to Joppa.

Now, there was a potential problem in this whole thing, and God needed to eliminate the problem. Peter was a Jew living in the home of a Jew. Ordinarily, Peter would not have invited Cornelius’ messengers, being Gentiles, into where he was staying. This was because the Jews, including our Lord’s apostles, considered all Gentiles (non-Jews) unclean, and they would have no interaction with Gentiles or they would render themselves unclean. So God needed to work on that piece of the puzzle.

Cornelius' messengers were approaching Joppa. At Joppa, it was about noon and, as lunch was being prepared, Peter decided to go to the rooftop to pray. Most of the homes in Palestine in those days had flat rooftops, and one of my Palestinian students told me that that is the case even today. It should not be surprising, therefore, that we read in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament of people going to the rooftop to do different things.

While Peter was praying on the rooftop, he was hungry, and he saw a vision. He saw the heavens opened and a rectangular vessel descending from the heavens. The vessel was filled with all kinds of animals, reptiles, and birds. As the vessel got down to Peter's level, Peter heard a voice saying to him, "Rise, Peter, kill and eat" (Acts 10:13). Peter responded, "Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean" (Acts 10:14). Those three words should never go together. If you say, "Not so," you should not say, "Lord." If you say, "Lord," you should not say, "Not so." That is because the Lord never makes a mistake. The voice responded, "What God has cleansed you must not call common" (Acts 10:15). Peter saw the vessel go back into the heavens, only for the vessel come back down a second time and then a third time, each time with the same dialogue. After the vessel went up the third time, it did not descend again.

Peter was wondering, "What in the world is God trying to tell me?" He knew that God was not asking him to start eating all the disgusting animals, reptiles, and birds that he had never been eating in his life.

By this time the messengers from Cornelius had made their way to Simon the tanner's house and they were inquiring about Peter. I can only imagine how awkward the conversation at the door must have been. The person talking to the messengers may very well have said, "Let's see, you are Gentiles at the door of the home of a Jew, and you are asking for Peter, who is a Jew? What has Peter got to do with you men?"

While Peter was still wondering on the rooftop what the vision might mean, the Holy Spirit said to Peter: "Behold three men are looking for you. Rise and go

down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them” (Acts 10:19-20).

With no human being having gone to the rooftop to call Peter, he went down to the messengers and said to them: “I am the one you are looking for. What is the reason for your coming?” (Acts 10:21).

The three men narrated how they had been sent by Cornelius who was instructed by an angel to send for Peter, and Peter would have his first “aha” moment. “Aha, this was what my vision was about,” he would tell himself. Peter invited the Gentile messengers into the home, something he would never have done before that day. He asked them to spend the night there, adding that they would leave for Caesarea the following day. The Gentiles spent the night in the home of Simon the tanner, a Jew, and they must have eaten lunch and supper that day and breakfast the following day there!

Cornelius’ messengers and Peter, accompanied by some Jewish brethren, would leave Joppa for Caesarea the following day. They would arrive in Caesarea, going a distance of about 35 miles, in the afternoon on the following day (Day 4), meeting Cornelius and his friends and relatives.

Cornelius fell to the ground to worship Peter, but Peter lifted him up, saying, “Stand up, I myself am also a man” (Acts 10:26). That ought to say something to all these men who want to be worshiped! As Peter walked into the house and saw all the people that Cornelius had invited, he would say;

You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or 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” (Acts 10:28-29).

When did God show Peter that he should not call any person common or unclean? In that vision, of course! Peter was a fast learner!

Peter had asked why Cornelius sent for him, so Cornelius narrated how he was instructed by an angel to send for Peter. Peter would have a full “aha” moment, as he would say:

“Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him” (Acts 10: 34-35).

But Peter ought to have known that! He was with our Lord throughout our Lord’s earthly ministry! Why didn’t he? Peter was prejudiced, but he didn’t know that he was prejudiced.

Many people who are prejudiced do not realize that they are. Why not? Prejudice is often wrapped in tradition, so when people look at it, all they see is tradition. Saying it differently, people often look at prejudice with eyes that are blindfolded with tradition. Until the blindfold is removed, they cannot see the prejudice in their own lives. That was what Peter was dealing with. The prejudice had to be unmasked.

Peter proceeded to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, a revival broke out, the Gentiles spoke in tongues, and Peter would ask, “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” (Acts 10: 47). Before that day, the Jews would not have wanted to baptize these Gentiles. It had to take God’s clear demonstration to bring that about.

The Jewish believers baptized Cornelius and all the other new believers, and Cornelius and his relatives asked Peter and his Jewish friends to stay with them for a few days, and they agreed to do so! Obviously, they ate and fellowshiped with them. This was huge! Jewish protocols were being broken left and right!

At Jerusalem, the Jewish believers would chide Peter and interrogate him for doing what he had done. Peter would respond, in essence, “I too wouldn’t have done what I did, had God not practically used a 2 by 4 in hitting me to get my attention and to unmask my prejudice.”

We have come a long way in America, but we still have a long way to go. For a long time, if a black man stepped into a white church, he was physically escorted out of the church. Some churches were in the news even in the 1970s for doing just that. Thank God those days are over!

For a long time, the NFL (National Football League) did not have black quarterbacks. If a black young man was an excellent quarterback in college, an NFL coach would say to him, "Oh, you can be a wide receiver for us." What was their reason for doing that? They argued that no black quarterback had won the Super Bowl. But how could they have had black quarterbacks who had won the Super Bowl when they did not have black quarterbacks? Yet that argument made sense to them! It took Doug Williams leading the Washington Redskins to win the Super Bowl in 1988 to begin to open that door.

Today we see protesters of all races marching together demanding justice for all. We are getting somewhere. But we need to keep moving. We need to do all that we possibly can peacefully to hasten the day when we shall have justice for all in America. All of us, irrespective of our different political persuasions, ought to be able to do that.

God solved two problems all at once, killing two birds with one stone. He used Peter to help solve Cornelius' problem with reliance on human righteousness, and then used Cornelius to help solve Peter's problem with prejudice. Is one of them your problem? If so, you can do something about it. If prejudice is your problem, note that God is not prejudiced, and He does not want His people to be prejudiced either. Be willing for the Lord to unmask your prejudice. If reliance on human righteousness is your problem, ask Christ to come into your heart to take control of the throne of your life, so that you could become a new man or woman in Christ.

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