

The Unifying Power of the Gospel

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[0 : 00] The psalm that we just sung together in some ways picks up the theme of this section, the idea that God had always promised that he would bring together as his people those from a variety of nations.

And so what we're thinking about today is the unifying power of the gospel. There's something about the good news of Jesus that breaks down barriers.

But connected to that, there's something about the gospel that at the same time then confronts our cultural or social prejudices, perhaps those blind spots we have towards the way that we treat other people.

And so at a recent conference in the States, Together for the Gospel Conference, two leading pastors both found themselves confessing a blind spot in their lives.

They were blind to the reality of the racism around them, whether that be in the context of the theological training colleges or whether it's a failure to strive for ethnic diversity and leadership in a very diverse church.

[1 : 22] Both of them confessed that they never saw the problem of racism around them. Now for ourselves, psychologists will tell us that our brains are wired to make snap judgments on the people around us.

Within a very short period of time, we will look at someone and we will have all kinds of categories and labels that we will place on them, perhaps based on race or gender or class or appearance. We instinctively do that. Now that was certainly true for a first century Jew. They were brought up to know that there were certain people who they would regard as clean and others who would be unclean.

Those who they would choose to associate with and those who they would tend to avoid. And Gentiles, non-Jewish people, would certainly be unclean.

Mixing with them was one of the great taboos of the day. And that leads us into the second part of this story of Peter and Cornelius and God bringing them together.

[2 : 39] And just as we saw last week, God was at work in these visions. So we see God is at work in the power of the gospel, tearing down barriers and creating unity.

And so a quick recap, because this is one of those really big, important stories in the book of Acts. It takes up a lot of space. Last week, we discovered God sending through his angel a vision to Cornelius to go and send for a man called Peter.

And then at the same time, or slightly after that, we had Peter having a vision where from heaven, there was a sheep came down with clean and unclean animals and he was told to kill and eat. And he said, no, that's against the law. And the voice from heaven saying, don't call anything unclean that God has made clean. And so then messengers arrive from Cornelius.

The spirit comes to Peter and says, go with these men. And so Peter now arrives at Cornelius's house, directed by the spirit of God. And he begins with a question, why have you sent for me?

[3 : 45] So here is what happens next. And I want us to continue to see that God is at work. First of all, in the fact that Cornelius is ready to hear the gospel.

So we said this last week that Cornelius was in an elite regiment. He is in the equivalent of the special forces of his day. So again, he is a surprising convert to the Christian faith.

But we see that when Peter arrives at his house, he is ready. He's even desperate, we could say, to hear good news from Peter.

Why can we say that? Well, look at verse 24. The following day, it says, Peter arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting Peter and his friends and the messengers and had called together his relatives and close friends.

So he's thinking of everybody that matters to him, everybody who is important in his life. He wants them all to hear this message of God that's going to come through Peter.

[4 : 50] And then we see his attitude. As Peter entered the house, this is verse 25. Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence.

Now, we see this sometimes when people met with Jesus. Roman soldiers, sometimes when they met with Jesus, would take that position of humility, would bow at the feet of Jesus.

It seems surprising, given his prominent status, that he will adopt that low position. But he does. He reveres Peter. Indeed, that posture is like the way many people welcomed a visitor from heaven.

An angel would come with a message from God and people would fall at their feet. So he is ready and he reveres and is humble before Peter, the servant of God.

Of course, Peter, it discourages him in verse 26, tells him to get up. He's only a man. What's important is his message. Peter is not the important one.

[5 : 53] And then one other thing that we notice in verse 33. So in verse 29, Peter asks Cornelius, may I ask why you sent me?

And he begins and he explains about the vision that he saw, telling him to go and send for Peter.

Verse 33. So I sent for you immediately and it was good of you to come.

Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.

This is a preacher or a Bible teacher's dream audience. Here is Cornelius saying, I understand that I stand with you in the presence of God.

He understands that Peter, as an apostle, is going to speak the word of God to all the people gathered in his household. And he and they are both ready and eager to listen and learn.

[6 : 59] God has been preparing him. And so he's got this sense of humility and sense of privilege. It's really obvious as we read it.

I really love getting the Bible Society newsletter because almost in every issue you get these wonderful stories of, it doesn't matter which community it is around the world, but you'll get these stories of people coming with Bibles to hand out to people who can't afford them.

And you'll hear stories of people trekking for miles, spending days coming to receive the word of God. Stories where the Bible is clearly so precious to them, where Jesus matters so much that they will do anything to have the chance to hear.

It's a wonderful thing when people suddenly find themselves, maybe you've had this, a friend or a family member, suddenly they want to read the Bible. They are asking you questions about Jesus. It's a wonderful thing. And it's a sign that Cornelius is ready to hear the gospel. And again, that's not from himself. This is a God thing.

[8 : 09] God is doing something in his heart and in his life to make him realize his need of God and give him this desire to hear the good news of Jesus. And that's a great thing.

And praise God if we've seen that in our own experience in the lives of others. And let's keep praying that we would see that among the people around us. So Cornelius is ready to hear the gospel and that shows us God is at work.

But we also see that God is at work as Peter preaches the gospel. We see that God uses his words to great effect. From verse 34 all the way to verse 43, Peter presents the good news of Jesus to Cornelius for the very first time.

It's really interesting how full his gospel message is. It's very similar to the same themes that we find in Acts chapter 2. He presents a lot of information and all centers on the person and work of Jesus. But as he begins in verse 34, there is something that Peter has come to understand. So verse 34, I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism.

[9 : 29] So he'd been brought up in a system where you were to think of some people as clean if they were Jewish and other people to be unclean and outsiders if they were not Jewish. And now that's being broken down.

Something about the coming of Jesus has brought a change. So he can say to Cornelius, I now understand. God doesn't show favoritism. There is no partiality based on what race a person belongs to or what they look like or what class they're in or what gender they belong to.

Why not? Because the gospel, the good news of Jesus is all about grace. It comes to us as a gift that we do not deserve.

Therefore, it is impossible for any type of person to say, this belongs to me. It's loving kindness to the undeserving.

That means that the good news of Jesus is open to all. It's wonderfully inclusive, draws people in.

[10:33] And Peter will go on to say that God accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. So we sang in Psalm 87, this list of foreign nations who would make up the register of God's people.

And now Peter in the New Testament is saying that God accepts people from every nation, fulfilling this promise that God gave to Abraham way back in Genesis 12.

That God was calling Abraham as one man to be a blessing to the nations of the world. That through one of Abraham's descendants, through Jesus, the good news of God would spread through the whole world.

And that good news and that acceptance from God is for everybody who responds to God in the right way. Here it's described as those who fear him, those who worship and honor him, those who do what is right, those who respond with faith and obedience as children to a father in the family of God.

God will accept people regardless of their background. And then after that introduction, Peter moves on to the content of the gospel message.

[11:54] What is the good news that he's been sent to bring? And we see he goes through the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus. That's the center of our good news.

That's the distinctive of Christianity. We're not about morality. We're about being saved through what Jesus has come to do for us. So he begins with the life of Jesus.

In verse 37, So he begins with the ministry of John.

And we know that Jesus was baptized by John. And as Jesus was being baptized, the spirit came on him in power in the form of a dove.

And there was a voice from heaven saying, This is my son who I love. So from the beginning of his public life, Jesus was marked out as the son of God and this perfectly spirit filled man.

[13:11] And what Peter says about Jesus is that he went around doing good. And as we read the gospels, isn't that what we discover? Here is a man who cared for the poor.

Here is somebody who had time for the outsiders, who gave dignity to whoever he came across. Peter focuses attention on the healing ministry of Jesus.

An emphasis on the power of God over against the power of the devil. That Jesus' miracles are a sign of God's kingdom breaking in, of the power of God being greater than the power of the devil. And so as blind people were able to see, and as people with leprosy were able to be made clean, as those who were dead were given life, it was a sign.

Here is God's kingdom. Here is God's king. And so the message of the church includes the wonderful and the perfect life of Jesus.

[14:16] Sometimes we hurry on to the cross, and we understand the cross is so vital, but the life of Jesus is so important because we see there his perfection.

We see what it means to be truly human, to be truly obedient to God. There is something wonderfully compelling about his love and his power and his words.

I was speaking with a non-Christian this week, and they were saying to me exactly that. One of the reasons why they began to be interested in faith, having been brought up in it, and then leaving it behind for a number of years, was the life of Jesus, the quality of his life.

And so we celebrate, and we want to represent that to the people around us. And having spoken about his life, Peter makes clear that he is an eyewitness of everything.

Verse 39, we are witnesses of everything Jesus did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. And this is a thing that we see in the book of Acts, that they're very clear that they are presenting eyewitness evidence of historical facts.

[15:30] Our faith rests on the facts of history and on the historical Jesus. And we'll see that again as he continues to speak. So he speaks of his life, and then at the end of verse 39, he turns his attention to the death of Jesus.

Last sentence of verse 39, they killed him by hanging him on a tree. Now the choice of language there is significant, not a cross, but the tree.

In the Old Testament, if a person was hung on a tree, it was a symbol, a sign that they were under the curse of God. And so here is Peter making a deliberate theological point as he speaks about

Jesus hanging on a cross to say that Jesus dies under the curse of God.

Jesus dies facing the curse that you and I as lawbreakers should face so that the curse can be lifted from us. That Jesus on the cross is regarded as the worst sinner who ever lived so that we might be forgiven.

He takes all of our sin and he bears it on the cross and so goes under the curse of God so that we might be welcomed and accepted by God.

[16 : 55] There's this wonderful truth in the gospel that God sees us at our worst. That Jesus takes the worst of our lives.

The stuff that we try and keep secret and if other people knew about we'd be so deeply ashamed of. Jesus goes to the cross willingly to be punished on our behalf for those sins so that we might go free.

And then having spoken of his death he then moves on to his resurrection. So the gospel speaks of the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus.

Look at verse 40. They killed him by hanging him on a tree but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen.

He was not seen by all the people but by witnesses whom God had already chosen by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.

[17 : 58] Here is a reminder with that but God that behind the human actions to kill Jesus lay the eternal plan of God's salvation. Just as he said to the crowds in Acts chapter 2 he said to a crowd of Jews you with the help of wicked men put Jesus to death but it was all part of the plan of God the eternal plan to save people and the sign of that is the resurrection that God accepted the son's sacrifice that he is raised in victory.

And it's a sign for us that by faith we too can enjoy new life from God through faith in him. And again notice how Peter deliberately highlights historical reliability.

There's dating. When did this happen? Happened on the third day. There's eyewitness. He says that the disciples were chosen by Jesus to be eyewitnesses and notice that his eyewitness is to a physical Jesus.

He talks about Jesus eating and drinking. Jesus was resurrected to a perfect physical body. A reminder that our future as Christians will be to have perfect physical resurrection bodies.

And having stated the facts Peter then begins to draw towards the significance of the facts of Jesus.

[19 : 42] Verse 42 He commanded us Jesus commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.

This risen Lord Jesus who Peter is speaking about is the one who sits in heaven as king the one who will return from glory to be the judge of all.

So he draws Cornelius' attention to the second coming to the fact that there is a life beyond this one that Jesus will come back as judge to make everything new and all of the people who are trusting in him will go to be with him to live in this perfect world forever.

And because that's true because Jesus is the judge we need to respond in time. Just as Cornelius we will see responds in time to the message so we too need to respond in time so that the judgment that we receive might be well done good and faithful servant.

Come and enjoy the master's happiness. And then in verse 43 we read Peter saying all the prophets testify about him.

[21 : 11] So you can read the Old Testament and it speaks of this that everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

Jesus has authority to forgive sins and everyone who believes is forgiven.

Again a reminder that this is inclusive this is open to all just as the prophets had always said. So that's Peter's remarkable message that he brings to Cornelius and it's all about Jesus.

And what we see is that the message that he brought to the Jews is now the same message that he brings to this non-Jewish person to this Gentile that the only way to know God the only way to be reconciled to him is through God's grace in sending his son Jesus.

I was reading some snippets from a book called Overcoming Katrina. It was a collection of writings by a variety of African Americans writing about New Orleans around the time of the hurricane in was it 2005 or 2006.

[22 : 29] Well one story in particular was written by a lady and she was writing about the retirement complex that she found herself in at the time that the storm came.

And what she was reflecting on was that as the hurricane broke on the city so all barriers of class and race began to break down.

In her own words she said we were united in a crisis. And although in normal life perhaps those distinctions between black and white and rich and poor might have been really obvious in a storm they were all united together.

And then she said that we were rescued by a National Guard helicopter together. And in the gospel we discover this same thing to be true.

that on the one hand we are all united together in a great crisis. The Bible will say that we are trapped by sin.

[23 : 33] That we are slaves to sin leading to death. And there is one way of rescue for all. Not a rescue helicopter.

Our hope of rescue is through the Lord Jesus. So God is at work as Peter brings the good news of Jesus and we see that because God is working creating unity through the gospel.

What happens next causes amazement for the people who are there. So verse 44. While Peter was still speaking these words the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.

The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles for they heard them speaking in tongues speaking in other languages and praising God.

There is amazement among the Jews with Peter because this group of Gentiles have received the same Holy Spirit that God's people had received back at Pentecost.

[24 : 46] They've got the same ability to speak other languages that God gave to the disciples back at Pentecost. And there's this wonderfully rich symbolism.

You know, why did the apostles in Acts chapter 2 when they received the Holy Spirit why were they able to speak other languages? So that people would get to hear the good news of Jesus. And so here is a sign for us that as God is saving Cornelius and his household so he will use them to share the good news of Jesus in their community with the people around them.

They get these languages so that more and more people can hear the good news of Jesus. Peter clearly recognizes God is at work. Verse 47, can anyone keep these people from being baptized?

They've received the Holy Spirit just as we have. So they get baptism. Baptism is evidence of Jesus having washed them from sin. This sign of publicly being identified with Jesus and his church.

Just as happened with the Jews at Pentecost. And then verse 48, he ordered that they be baptized. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

[26 : 04] So here's another expression of this unity that the gospel creates. Remember, Peter was brought up with the idea that Jews and Gentiles were to keep separate because the Gentiles were unclean.

Well, back in chapter 10, Peter had welcomed the Gentiles to share hospitality with them. And now, this time, he receives hospitality from the Gentiles.

Again, a sign that barriers are being torn down by the grace of God. And that's really what chapter 11, verses 1 to 18, is about.

People hear what's been happening and they're asking questions of Peter. What's going on? Why are you going into the house of uncircumcised people and eating with them?

Why are you breaking down that barrier that's existed for such a long time? And Peter acknowledges God's work in breaking down cultural and religious prejudices in order to create a united church.

[27 : 05] So as Neil read for us, Peter recounts for the people, there was the vision that was sent from God, teaching him not to consider other people unclean. There was the command from the Holy Spirit to go with the people to Cornelius' house.

There was the clear preparation of Cornelius to hear the gospel because he had received a vision from God. And then God's action of sending the Spirit was a clear indicator to Peter that God's desire was that Jews and Gentiles together be part of one church.

In verse 36, Peter says, in chapter 10, you know the message God sent to the people of Israel telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ.

The good news of Jesus is a message of peace, a message of reconciliation, a message that brings down barriers. First barriers between us and God, but then barriers between other people.

And so this story stands right at the center of the book of Acts to teach the first church and to teach ourselves about the grace of God to remind us that we must be careful to identify and get rid of prejudices or blind spots in our own lives that would put up barriers.

[28 : 32] the people that we would say they are beyond God's help. We don't want to make the gospel seem less powerful or less beautiful than it is.

The early church celebrated the fact that God had done this remarkable thing in bringing together former enemies into one church.

God's grace does that. And so let's be praying together that we would have in our own day and in our city lots more of these Peter and Cornelius stories.

Lots more examples of God's people being led by God to break down those barriers of seeing all kinds of people being gathered together in the worship of God and His Son Jesus.
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