

# Gospel Transgressions: Going Through the Door

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 05 May 2024

Preacher: Kirk van der Swaagh

[ 0 : 00 ] I'm going to begin by doing a little bit of review of something that we talked about in the morning, just to kind of set what we'll be considering tonight, because this is the second of a four-part sermon series that I have been undertaking in the absence of Colin, who's away with Kathmar on holiday.

So, this morning is the first, this is the second, next Sunday will be the third, and the following Sunday evening will be the fourth. So, what I want to do is introduce again, now some of you, a lot of you were here already in the morning, but others might not have been, so just in order to put this concept out before us, we're going to go through the beginning of what we went through this morning.

So, you know, the first review, the first rule of teaching is review. So, you get a chance to go through this all again, you know, because we forget about 60% of everything we learn immediately after we've learned it.

I think it's even higher than that. So, review is good. So, what we're going to do is we're going to consider a term that's used in the political sphere in the United States called gerrymandering. Gerrymander. Gerrymander. Gerrymander. Gerrymander means to manipulate the boundaries of an electoral district so as to favor one party or class.

[ 1 : 26 ] So, the boundaries of the voting people, wherever they happen to live, they create districts, voting districts, and they get reshaped by the people who are in power so that they can remain in power.

One person says that it describes, he describes gerrymandering as politicians picking their voters instead of voters picking their politicians.

And it originated in 1812. 1812 in the United States because there was a governor of the Massachusetts, the state of Massachusetts, called Eldbridge Gerry. So, his name is combined with the word salamander.

Eldbridge Gerry and salamander. And you take gerry and you take mander, and what do you get? Gerrymander. Now, the idea of the salamander is for this reason.

Let's have that next image there. There he is. Look at that. What a cute guy. The idea of the salamander is that it kind of represented or reminded people of the shape of the salamander.

[ 2 : 29 ] That is, the voting district that had been created. So, it kind of wove around and came up to the top in order that it might again, you know, serve Eldbridge Gerry.

And a map was printed, a picture was printed in a Boston newspaper that showed just what this looked like. So, there it is.

You can see that kind of dragon-looking thing wrapping up and around. That was the district that had been created in order to keep Gerry in power. Now, you can see they've added wings and fangs and claw feet, probably representing the amount of political and social violence that's been created by creating this kind of voting district.

So, gerrymandering, again, is a process whereby those in power stay in power. It's legal, but it is not very ethical. Most of the time, it is not.

What I asserted this morning, and I'm going to assert again, Christians cannot gerrymander. What I mean is that whatever role gerrymandering plays in politics, we cannot, as Christians, engage in the practice of, in our relationship with the world around us as politicians do in order to create a district that favors them.

[ 3 : 48 ] If we're going to be agents of reconciliation in the world, and that's what we've been called to be, we must have the ability to see how sin creates self-promoting, self-protecting boundaries and be willing to transgress them.

You know, that's the lead-in of this series, gospel transgression. Gospel transgression. The gospel is essentially a transgressive force in our fallen world.

And how is the gospel transgressive? Well, what does it mean to be transgressive? It involves violating moral or social boundaries. We might think of, for instance, when a novel like *Catcher in the Rye* or *Lady Chatterley's Lover* or some painter does something grotesque, and it's all there to kind of break the boundaries, to be cutting edge, to throw off the norms.

Well, the gospel, in that respect, is also transgressive. Transgressive. And yet, when we think about transgression as being that which, in that context, as being something which violates moral or social boundaries, you might wonder, well, how is the gospel transgressive?

We don't think the gospel violates moral boundaries. It's transgressive because it transgresses, again, the sinful boundaries that have been set up that keep people trapped in behavioral, societal, religious categories that appear to be uncrossable.

[ 5 : 16 ] These categories, these boundaries can be put by religious people, by non-religious people. They can be based on politics, class, morals, gender, immorality.

See, when gerrymandering shows up in the church, it expresses itself as an unwillingness or a discomfort in engaging with people that are different than us, that we think our religious scruples should keep us from hanging out with, that allows us to create a walk of faith that keeps us in control.

Relationships that favor us. But as we noted this morning, we're expected by our master to love God and to love neighbor, to love God with all of our being and our neighbor as ourselves.

And I think we'll find that because that is the expectation, gerrymandering in our Christian walk is out of the question. Somehow loving God, being faithful to God, and loving our neighbor are not opposing interests.

In fact, Jesus says that they're like one another. This quote from a fellow named Christopher Watkin says this, My neighbor is an anarchic category, an anarchist.

[ 6 : 32 ] An anarchist is someone who doesn't like rules, right? He throws off the rules. He doesn't play by the norms. My neighbor is an anarchic category, a happenstance intrusion into my carefully curated networks of family, friends, and co-workers.

An anomaly, not on my list of friends, a subversive shuffling of the relational cards. We have to love our neighbor because he is there. A much more alarming reason for a much more serious operation.

Because this is the expectation of our master, of our Lord Jesus Christ, we can expect, we will expect that we will have to commit gospel transgressions.

Jesus did it. So did the early church. This morning, we considered how it was that Jesus' gospel transgression involves his going to sit and eat with tax collectors and sinners, much to the horror of the Pharisees.

But that's the kind of movement that the gospel brings. It brings us out of our gerrymandered spaces to cross over boundaries that have been set up for various reasons, but yet keep us constrained in order, moves us in order that we might actually meet the needs and be those agents of reconciliation.

[ 7 : 55 ] You know, there's a tragic story of church gerrymandering that I came across that involves the Mahatma Gandhi, you know, the Indian independence activist, the politician.

In his autobiography, you might have known this already, but in his autobiography, he relates that during his years, while studying in England, he had been reading the gospels.

And apparently, he was impressed by what he read and was quite seriously considering becoming Christian. And what particularly intrigued him was how the implications of the gospel provided the means for undoing the caste system that dominated the Indian society.

Let me quote directly from the source that I came across. One Sunday, he attended church services and decided to ask the minister for enlightenment on salvation and other doctrines.

But when Gandhi entered the sanctuary, the ushers refused to give him a seat and suggested that he go elsewhere to worship with his own people. He left and never came back.

[ 9 : 04 ] He quote, If Christians have caste differences also, he said to himself, I might as well remain a Hindu. I say that's a tragic story because that kind of gerrymandering, barring someone from Christ because of their race or ethnicity, was something the church struggled with in its inception.

And one would think that it had been resolved. You know, if we're honest, I suspect that over the last 2,000 years, since those early conflicts in the church, the Gandhis of the world have experienced and could still experience such exclusion.

Well, in this evening's passage, which is the passage from Acts chapter 10, we read of a groundbreaking, earth-shattering moment in the life of the church.

It's a story that has the power to challenge all of our own gerrymandering due to the prejudices, preconceived notions and biases that we might have. The situation was going to prove incredibly challenging.

So as we read, God orchestrated his new era in redemptive history by the use of visions and angels and powerful manifestations of the Holy Spirit. And that it involved the apostle Peter should come as no surprise.

[10:23] Do you remember what Jesus said to Peter when he asked, who do people say that I am? And what does Peter end up confessing? That you're the Christ, the son of God of the God. And what does Jesus say? I'll tell you, you are Peter.

And on this rock, I will build my church. And the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you, it's in the singular, he's talking to Peter. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.

And whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven. And whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. See, in the incident we're going to consider tonight, Peter is gaining understanding of just what role he is to play in Christ's building of his church.

And though he doesn't quite realize the implications of it, he holds the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Let's remind ourselves of something that we're familiar with.

The outworking of God's redemptive works. Christianity has its roots in God's dealings with humanity from the moment he took dust from the ground, formed it into a man, and breathed breath into him.

[11:29] In that initial relationship, there was a promise made. Heed what I tell you to do, and you'll live. But within a few short paragraphs, within the biblical narrative, a few short paragraphs, the situation has radically changed.

The man and his wife do not heed what God had told them to do, and the lifelong struggle against sin and death ensued. However, at the very onset of the consequences of that law breaking, God offers another promise.

One would come from the seed of the woman who would overcome those consequences, the consequences of sin and death that had been introduced into the world by their rebellion. It was a gracious promise, and one that God sustained throughout his dealings with now fallen humanity. Now, a crucial moment in those dealings was when God revealed that this promised one was going to come through the line of one particular man, Abraham.

It was going to be through his descendants that all the families of the earth were to be blessed. And as the story moves on, we discover that one particular son of Abraham was to be the line through which the promise would come, and then one particular son of that son, and one particular son of that son.

[12:45] And what took place by all of this was that the path of the promised redeemer had been narrowed down to a particular group of Abraham's descendants. They were marked out by circumcision of the males, the food that they ate, the clothes that they wore, and the way they worshipped, and how they were to treat one another.

They were a particular people, and they were people of the promise. And one night in Bethlehem, one night in Bethlehem, that one who had been promised, that one who would overcome sin and death that had been unleashed on creation by those first humans, that one was born.

He was given the name Jesus because he would save his people from their sins. It's an amazing story. It's an amazing story. Of God's relentless love, his abounding grace, his unparalleled kindness, and perhaps most of all, his patience.

The redeemer of the world had come at last in the fullness of time. That's such a great phrase of the Apostle Paul. In the fullness of time. As Jesus entered into his ministry, he calls a number of men, 12 of them, who were to walk with him.

And as they walked with him, they saw with their own eyes Jesus going after the consequences of that initial law breaking. He healed the sick. He overcame demonic forces.

[14:10] He renewed people's minds. And as he taught them, he drew people from the margins of society back into the stream of life. He even raised the dead. And after three years of ministering, it

came to a God-ordained, sin-concocted end.

He was judged to be a criminal by the Romans and a dangerous upstart by the Jews. The result? He was crucified. But if you know the story, you know that was not the end.

Three days after his death, he was raised back to life, having won the victory over sin and death. A victory to be shared by all who by faith are united to him. See, when Jesus says to Peter, upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

I'll give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. This is the story that he is to tell.

This was the good news that was to go out to the ends of the earth and whoever heard and believed would be loosed and whoever heard and did not believe would be bound. Peter held the keys of the kingdom of heaven.

[15:24] And while holding those keys, he has a vision. He was confronted by a vision. A vision that would push him to gospel transgression.

A vision that would expose his gerrymandering heart. Peter, on the housetop, sixth hour, he went up to pray.

He was hungry. They were preparing something to eat and right in the middle of that experience the heavens opened up and something like a great sheet descended being let down by its four corners on the earth and in it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds and there came a voice, Rise, Peter.

Kill and eat. But Peter says, By no means, Lord. For I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean. And the voice came to him again and said, What God has made clean do not call common.

It happened three times and it was taken up into heaven. It seems God deals with Peter in threes. He has three denials of Jesus, three questions by Jesus to restore him and then three presentations of a sheet.

[16:28] We might even consider them all connected. Three denials force Peter to recognize the cost of holding the keys. Three questions restored him to his fundamental role in holding the keys.

And by three presentations he is being led to use the keys in a way that he could never have anticipated. The sheet. What does the sheet represent in this vision?

Well, by the end of the account, we understand that the mixture of clean and unclean animals represents a mixture of Jews and Gentiles as both fit for inclusion on the sheet.

And the four corners likely represent the four corners of the earth from which God will call people from every tongue, tribe, and nation to be on the sheet. But at this point, Peter is inwardly perplexed.

Little does he know that God has directed Cornelius, a Roman centurion, a Gentile, to send for him. And as Peter ponders the meaning of the vision, those sent by the centurion, they're standing at the gate.

[17:31] The Holy Spirit directs Peter to go with them for they were sent by the centurion. Yep, we actually learn they were sent by the Holy Spirit. He finds out why they're there and he learns Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man who is well-spoken of by the Jewish nation was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and hear what he has to say.

So he goes with them. But between the time that Peter leaves Joppa to the time that he arrives in Caesarea where Cornelius lives, Peter has been thinking and he's made a link between the vision and the invitation.

And here's where we begin to learn of Peter's spirit-directed gospel transgression. As he talks with Cornelius, he goes in and he finds many people gathered.

And he said to them, you yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or visit anyone of another nation. I live in a gerrymandered district.

I'm not supposed to have anything to do with you. 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.

[18:46] I asked them, why did you send for me? And so Cornelius relates how he visited, how he was visited by the angel and directed to send for Peter. And so he says, so I sent for you at once and you have been kind enough to come.

Now therefore, we're all here. He's invited his family, his close friends. We're all here to hear what you have to tell us, what you have been commanded by the Lord. And so Peter opened his mouth. He says, totally, 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. See, as Peter tells the story, he goes on to tell us what it is that God can do. When he goes on and tells the story, the keys of heaven looses Cornelius and all those whom he had invited. They're all converted. The Holy Spirit falls on them, manifesting his presence in a way recognizable to the other Jewish believers that Peter had brought with him. They are amazed because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. And Peter declared, can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people who have been received the Holy Spirit just as we are? [ 20 : 00 ] And he commands them all to be baptized. See, this is a God-driven gospel transgression. I want us to listen again. We're going to look a little bit at Peter's objection in this vision.

Right? He's told by God to rise and eat. And he says, by no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean. And now when he's in Cornelius' house, what does he say? God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. See, in the vision, there were animals that Peter would have nothing to do with. Indeed, had never had anything to do with. But as he ponders a vision, as he follows God's leading, as he learns about God's dealing with Cornelius, he makes the connection. God has made him realize that his religious scruples, his pious abstaining, had fostered in him a heart that was willing to equate fellow human beings with unclean animals and to treat them with as much disdain. See, it isn't until Cornelius says, I sent for you at once, you've been kind enough to come, now therefore we're all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord.

[ 21 : 16 ] It isn't until then that Peter understands and says, truly, I understand God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him and he goes on to share the good news.

And when the inclusion of the Gentiles is confirmed by the Holy Spirit, Peter seems absolutely charged with energy. Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we?

The rhetorical nature of the question carries its force. It's a question that will brook no debate. He's persuaded and so he commands them to be baptized in the name of Jesus. He's been brought by God across that boundary, that gerrymandering boundary that kept him as a Jew out of the household of Gentiles.

But now he sees, now he understands, now he knows. He holds the keys of the kingdom of heaven. So what are we to take from this incident?

Well, certainly the inclusion of Gentiles among the covenant people of God. This was a huge deal. This was very big. Paul calls it a mystery revealed that had existed before but now has been revealed.

[ 22 : 31 ] He argues that in Ephesians. He says it was there all along and we saw that when we read about God's promise of a redeemer and the purpose of calling Abraham so that all the families of the earth would be blessed.

But that aspect of the covenant had been clouded. It had been clouded over by religious posturing, man-made regulations that only served to harden hearts towards all the families of the earth. But it was so important. It was so important that Luke, as he recounts the early beginnings of the church in his book, Acts, we have the telling that we've read.

That story is told again when Peter has to give an account for himself to Jerusalem. And then later when Paul's mission is coming under question, Peter recounts this life-changing moment as evidence that God had surely included the Gentiles solely by faith in Jesus.

That's three times. Three times that this incident is recounted in just this one book. So you could argue that the major impetus behind Paul's letter also to the Ephesians, it's to make plain the fact that Gentiles are full-fledged members of the people of God and all the implications of that new reality.

[ 23 : 43 ] This was a huge paradigm shift for Jewish Christians. You might be familiar with the unfortunate incident that happens later with Peter.

And despite what he had learned in the household of Cornelius, he was drawn back to thinking of his Gentile brothers and sisters as being unfit to eat with. Paul had to rebuke him and rebuke them sharply for heeding another gospel which he says is in fact no gospel.

So inclusion of the Gentiles is something that we Gentiles we could celebrate as those who were formerly strangers to the covenant of promise without hope in the world. But the middle wall of partition has been broken down and we are being built together into a dwelling place of God by the Spirit.

So that's one thing to take away from this. The inclusion of the Gentiles the inclusion of you and me. But Peter's revelation opens up other avenues for thought.

What did he say? God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. I think if we're honest we have people who we consider to be on the sheet of the common and unclean.

[ 24 : 58 ] People that we look on with disdain not worthy of our attention or concern. People that we say to God when he says rise and eat we say by no means Lord.

You might be familiar with the story from Corrie Ten Boom's life. I'll read her account of it an abbreviated account. I was in a church in Munich you know Corrie Ten Boom was a Dutch woman who with her sister and her family hid Jews and they were finally arrested.

I was in Munich a church in Munich that I saw him a balding heavyset man in a grey overcoat a brown felt hat clutched between his hands people were filing out of the basement room where I had just spoken it was 1947 I had come from Holland to defeat Germany with the message that God forgives and that's when I saw him working his way forward against the others one moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat the next a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones it came back with a rush the huge room with its harsh overhead lights the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor the shame of walking naked past this man I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin oh Betsy how thin you were Betsy and I had been arrested for concealing Jews in our home during the Nazi occupation of Holland this man had been a guard at Ravensbrück concentration camp where we were sent you mentioned

Ravensbrück in your talk he was saying I was a guard there no he didn't remember me but since that time he went on I have become a Christian I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there but I would like to hear from your lips as well for then his hand came out will you forgive me and I stood there I whose sins had every day to be forgiven and could not Betsy had died in that place could he erase her slow terrible death simply by the asking it could not have been many seconds that he stood there hand held out but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do for I had to do it I knew that the message that God forgives has a prior condition that we forgive those who have injured us if you do not forgive men their trespasses Jesus says neither will your father in heaven forgive your trespasses and I stood

I stood there still with the coldness clutching my heart but forgiveness is not an emotion I knew that too forgiveness is an act of the will and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart Jesus help me I prayed silently I can lift my hand I can do that much you supply the feeling and so woodenly mechanically I thrust my hand into the one outstretched to me and as I did an incredible thing took place the current started in my shoulder raced down my arms sprang into our joined hands and then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being bringing tears to my eyes I forgive you brother I cried with all my heart for a long moment we grasped each other's hands sorry the former guard and the former prisoner I had never known God's love so intensely as I did that see Corrie ten Boom was struggling

[ 28 : 38 ] God said rise and eat and she was saying by no means Lord but the gospel pushed her to transgress those boundaries the boundaries of unforgiveness sorrow heartbreaking memories anger and a host of other feelings that we would likely say she was justified in forgiving this man Lord by no means but she knew the gospel and she knew herself to be in her obedience she knew herself she knew the gospel and she knew herself and in her obedience she followed God's leading and her response sounds as jubilant as did Peter when the Holy Spirit fell on Cornelius his family and friends Alexander White Scottish Divine also like ourselves for how we bundle up whole nations of men to throw them into that same unclean sheet whole churches that we know nothing about but their bad names that we have given them are in their sheet of excommunication also all of the denominations of Christians in our land are common and unclean to us every party outside our own party is the political state also in the political state also we have no language contemptuous enough

wherewith to describe their wicked ways and their self-serving schemes they are four-footed beasts and creeping things indeed there are very few men alive and especially those who live near us who are not sometimes in the sheet of our scorn unless it is one here and there of our own family or school or party and they also come under our scorn and our contempt the moment they have a mind of their own and interests of their own and affections and ambitions of their own you know in thinking about this

I went and asked some of the folks gathered in this room what might likely end up on there as among the common and unclean and you know there are some Protestants who look upon Catholics that way there are some Catholics that look upon Protestants that way I guess ragers and selfless fans as well there's the Romani they might end up on that sheet some of those we considered this morning in our message addicts alcoholics the people who live in schemes I don't know how much it still lasts but at one point Scottish and the English you know looking upon them and just thinking you know when I look and God says rise and eat say no by no means Lord back in the US it's blacks looking upon whites whites looking upon blacks blacks looking upon the Chinese Democrats some looking upon Republicans Republicans looking on Democrats Trumpers and never Trumpers and seemingly everywhere these days the Jews are the uncommon dirty ones on this sheet

I think all of us will have to say that there are people who have hurt us who have let us down who have who we have said will never have anything more to do with them it's all a form of ungodly gerrymandering it's a fundamental denial of the gospel the gospel the gospel calls us to transgress those self-serving self-justifying self-promoting dehumanizing boundaries let me give you an exercise again from Alexander White it would change your whole heart and life this very night if you would take Peter and Cornelius home with you and lay them both to heart if you would take a four-cornered napkin when you go home and a pen and ink and write the names of the nations and the churches and the denominations and the congregations and the ministers and the public men the private citizens the neighbors the fellow worshipers all the people you dislike despise and do not and cannot and will not love heap all their names into your unclean napkin and then look up and say not so Lord

I neither can speak well nor think well nor hope well of these people I cannot do it and I will not try if you acted out and spake out all of the evil things that you are that are in your heart in some such way as that you would get a sight of yourselves that you would never forget I'm saying you but it also applies to me I guess what I'm trying to argue it's clear that Peter was a thoughtful man and he's responsive to the work of the spirit in his life and I wonder upon reflecting of the events of the few days that we've just been considering if he ever had to consider his response when told rise and eat by no means Lord see when he connected the vision to the gracious ingathering of the Gentiles I suspect he might have asked forgiveness for refusing to do as the Lord commanded because after all he held the keys of the kingdom of heaven