

Turning Point: The Conversion of Cornelius

Acts 10:23b-48

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We continue this morning in the Book of Acts as we look now at the third consecutive conversion. We've been going through the Book of Acts; we've largely gone verse by verse up until this point. I just want to let you know that over these last two weeks the purpose has been to look at these particular, strategic conversions that the Lord has accomplished to achieve the fulfillment of the promises that he gave early on in the Book of Acts, that the gospel would go forth from Jerusalem to the outermost parts of the world. But as we walk through the Book of Acts, I want to let you know that the intention will not be to cover every verse until the end of the Book of Acts. Partly it's the way the narrative works, and we'll be able to cover most of the main topics, but it's partly also because of planning; if we were to preach through every single verse, we might be here for a few years, and so we have other things that we will accomplish.

With that said, we turn this morning to the Book of Acts, chapter 10. This is one of those examples where this is a retelling of the drama that has just unfolded in the chapter before, and so we're able to look at that drama, but also to see the fruit of it, that is, the conversion of Cornelius. But also, it serves as a turning point, a major turning point, in the life of the church, as the Lord is sending out his apostles and as the gospel is being preached from Jerusalem throughout the rest of the world. We saw the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch and the unlikelihood of a man who would've been barred from the temple, being brought to the Lord himself through learning of the Lord Jesus Christ. We saw last week the conversion of a murderous and violent man that was Saul of Tarsus, who would become the apostle Paul. And now, this week, we look at the life of a Gentile, a man of military place, who would be told of the gospel, and his being converted. There's a lot going on here, so let's look together at Acts 10: 23-48.

The next day he rose and went away with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa accompanied him. 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. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me." And Cornelius said, "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."

So Peter opened his mouth and said: "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. As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing

all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

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. Then Peter declared, “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me this morning?

Now come, Holy Spirit; fall fresh upon us, and open the eyes of our hearts that we would see the exulted Christ who is both judge and who is Lord. We ask you, Lord God, by your Son, that you would help us to see the turning point in these men’s lives and, subsequently, how the gospel calls all of us to this very same turning point. We pray you would do this for the glory of your name, for the exulting of Christ, by the power of your Holy Spirit. Help the teacher. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

For fear that this song may be replaying itself in your brain throughout the sermon, I give you the words of John Lennon’s song, “Imagine.” Try not to sing along.

Imagine there’s no heaven
It’s easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us only sky
Imagine all the people
Living for today

Imagine there’s no countries
It isn’t hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace

You may say I’m dreamer
But I’m not the only one
I hope some day you’ll join us
And the world will be as one

What he imagines is something perhaps many of us long for. We long for reconciliation. We long for peace. But by these standards, is peace and reconciliation really possible? I believe this passage gives us a hope—a hope, in fact, for the very same thing that I think John Lennon hoped for, but by a very different path. So what I want to do is show you in this passage, in this conversion of

Cornelius, that there is a turning point, but that turning point is for Cornelius and it's for Peter. Also, I want you to see that there is a making of a peace in definitive forgiveness. Turning point; making peace; definitive forgiveness. And after we're done, I want to come back to the lyrics of this song to test its merits against the merits of this Scripture. So let's go together then.

You'll see in verses 23 through 34 the turning point. You've heard it talked about in these verses, the retelling of what has just taken place just a few days before. We hear in the life of Cornelius, as the Book of Acts testifies, that Cornelius, it tells us, was a God-fearing man. He was a God-fearing Gentile. And what is known of Cornelius—he was well-known, but one of the things he was known for is that he was a generous man. He gave to the poor. Now, this is something which is very close to the heart of our heavenly Father. It was very close to the ministry of Jesus Christ, for Jesus said, "What you do to the least of these, by giving them water or bread, you give to me. When you visit someone who is in prison, you are as if you are visiting me. What you do to the poor is done unto me." What we see in Cornelius's life is twofold.

One: he's called a God-fearer. Now, scholars tend to disagree on whether or not that's an actual term known at the time, but whether it was or not is somewhat irrelevant. What is important is that Cornelius represented a not-too-small group of people who were Roman Gentiles, Greeks, who themselves found a great deal of merit in the lives of the Jews—the moral lives, the character that they saw. Cornelius was one of those. He was known as an upright man, a righteous man, and he did that which was pleasing to God. But what is very clear, and without a doubt, is that though Cornelius led an upright, righteous life and actually did things that are pleasing to God, it wasn't enough. While it may have pleased God, it did not merit for Him, it did not earn for Him, salvation. While what he did was gracious to others, it did not, in turn, give him grace. He comes to Cornelius who is clearly seeking the Lord, and he says to Cornelius, "You need,"—and I'm paraphrasing, the implication being—"what you need is the grace of my Son."

Now, a couple of things are at play there if we're willing to look underneath the drama. One: it is completely possible to live a righteous life. We've heard it before: were we to come into contact with many who lived during this time who were considered of the party of the Pharisees, as was Saul of Tarsus, who lived their lives according to the moral law of God, we would have thought of them very respectfully. High character, high moral standards—but it wasn't enough. It wasn't enough for the Pharisees, and it wasn't enough for Cornelius. But it's very possible to live an upright life, and how humiliating is it—perhaps you haven't felt this way; I know that I have—when I look around at others who have rejected the name of Christ but who devote their lives to caring for the poor, for the needy, and they do it day in and day out. To me, that is something to be thankful for, because I wonder if we look at the life that we have been given... If you are a Christian in Jesus Christ, imagine how much more grace we have to give. So, it is not required, to be a Christian, to do great and righteous things, self-sacrificial things, but the other side of that drama is: it does not merit the grace of the heavenly Father. It's God's common grace at work in Cornelius's life—that's clear. And I think as we look around the world, many people who do not know the Lord Jesus yet are doing good things—I look at that and I say, "That is worthy of praise, because I see that as God's common grace." But that's a very different thing than the specific, unique grace that comes through knowing Jesus Christ. This was a turning point for Cornelius, and so he saw the vision, he heard it, and he said, "Lord, come."

And then what happens, also, is a turning point in Peter's life. Because at almost the exact same time that this was happening to Cornelius, something was happening to Peter. Peter was obviously a converted Jew, now an apostle being sent of the Lord, but his ministry had been to those who were also Jewish. Now the Lord comes to Peter at a turning point, though he was a converted Christian trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ—and as we know Peter, what a life that has been!—but now, one of the things that he's having to deal with at the very center of his heart is this: the gospel

has saved me, has transformed me, but what about for *those* people? And so the Lord gives him a vision, and that vision is this meal made up of animals that would've been to Peter unclean, let down on a sheet, and the Lord says, "Get up, kill, and eat." And Peter says, "Wow! Wow." And God is saying, "Yes; wow. This is exactly what the gospel does. Nothing that I have made is either common or unclean." And Peter needed to see that more than once, became convinced of it, and he now sees that it's not just food; it's people. So what's happening in Peter's life—the turning point is: the gospel is not meant for just one tribe of people or one socioeconomic group or race or nation. "God shows no partiality," Peter says. That is a complete upside-down inside-out change for Peter.

Now, in both of these, they both serve as a great turning point even for Christians and for those who are here this morning. The gospel shows no partiality to Presbyterians or Methodists, to Southerners or to Yankees, to Americans or Iraqis, to black or white, rich or poor, male or female. The gospel knows no one unique tribe. The gospel is about making a kingdom of people who have been made in God's image. The beauty of the gospel is this: that if it were not for the gospel, how many of us would actually be in the same room together? Think about that for just a moment. There are some of you in here who fellowship together, you pray together, you study together, you hang out together—but left to your own, maybe you don't have the same politics, you don't have the same musical taste, you don't like the same art or the same movies—all that *stuff*—that were it not for the gospel, you'd be like, "Nope. Not my kinda person." If that's the case, that's precisely what the gospel should be doing. The church of Jesus Christ should be a group of people that, were it not for the gospel, would have no commonality, but the gospel brings us together. We recognize that it's not just meant for *me*, but for all of us. Who may God be calling you to and out of your tribe? Let me say this: what ghetto do you put the gospel in? In what echo-chamber do we think that Christianity works? There is no such place. The gospel ought to be working its way out. It ought to be making us different. It ought to be calling us out of our comfort zones as it did Peter. But so is the same with Cornelius. At any point that you and I think that our deeds merit anything, we will have missed the unique, powerful grace of Jesus Christ.

Here's one more interesting point about both—one who's becoming a Christian and one who already is—and it's this: both come to the Lord and they say, "Speak, Lord,"—they don't say this specifically; I'm paraphrasing—"Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." Isn't it interesting that after he explains why he's called Peter, Cornelius says this, he says to them in verse 33, "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." What's beautiful about that is this: he's expecting God to speak. When we come on Sunday morning, are you expecting the Lord to speak to you from his Word? Am I expecting, as a preacher, that when I prepare a sermon in my study and that when I'm praying, that in fact it's not me, I'm just an instrument in the Redeemer's hands through who he's going to speak?

It is a weighty thing, a scary thing, but the one thing I want you to know is I need the Lord to speak to my heart this morning. That's the reason I pray often at the end of my prayers before I preach, "Help the teacher." I know this—even in the act of preaching, do you know, as a preacher—and I know Pastor Tim would say this too—that even in the act of preaching, the Lord is still teaching me? And sometimes I don't want to be taught. I'm just being honest. Because when I'm sitting there before God's Word, it's convicting me even as I'm preaching. It's also a weighty thing because there are time when I go home and I curl up in a fetal position and I go, "That was the worst sermon I have ever preached!" And yet, sometimes—not all the time—sometimes somebody will come in those moments and say, "That's the best sermon I've heard you preach." This is what the Lord taught me, and what that shows me in that moment: I'm thankful to the Lord it's not about me. It begins by preparing you.

Here I want to say a unique word to Presbyterians: we believe that the Word is our authority. We believe that it is the living Word of God. We believe that it is one of the five solas, the five only's, of the reformation. But it is a book before which we don't just open up to study in its original languages, to look for all the doctrine to be taught; it is a Word before which we sit silently but expectantly. Lord, speak, for your servant is listening. My charismatic brothers and sisters in the Lord have taught me how much and how often I've come to worship expecting to study and not to hear. They've taught me to expect the Lord to speak. Are you? What could the Lord be saying to you? Are you a Cornelius? Are you a Peter? The Lord has a word for you, and I am his weak chosen vessel through which this word comes. May the Lord speak to us as we continue to see that both of these men had to yield before the Word and before the Lord.

But then, Peter preaches. He preaches about Jesus Christ, who makes peace—it's called the gospel of peace, he tells us here. What he says to them, he says specifically in verse 36, "As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed." And it says here that he put him to death by hanging on a tree. That is what God is doing. But let's understand, in verses 43 through 48 when he's talking about making this peace, what he's talking about is that God shows just how the gospel comes out and brings someone like Peter and someone like Cornelius to himself, and it is through this making of peace. It has two aspects to the making of peace. One is the vertical, the other is the horizontal.

Let's begin with the vertical. When it speaks of Jesus Christ coming as the good news of peace from God through Christ, the Lord of all, who was hanging on a tree—what he's talking about is that God was first making peace and reconciliation with human beings to himself. A vertical peace. That's the first thing that Jesus was accomplishing. To get a picture of precisely what God is doing in Jesus Christ in the making of this peace, we're getting ready to have a lived-out illustration in just a few weeks—many of us are going to celebrate Thanksgiving. We're going to have meals, and we're going to be with extended family, and there's Christmas, and all the food and everything—and if we can put in our mind's eye being in a really large house, and we're welcoming in our family, for a moment putting aside squabbles and everything else (I'll get to that in a minute), but you're inviting your family in—you've set the table, you've put the nice stuff out, the candles, the silverware, and all the stuff, and the doorbell rings. You open up the door, and you welcome in friends and family. You bring them in and what you're practicing is hospitality. Why? Because hospitality does mean—we get it from the word "hospital." You're creating a refuge; a place of healing; a sanctuary for those you invite into your home. But hospitality has another meaning—and that is communion. You're bringing them into relationship. So you go to the table and you have the place settings, you take the chairs, and everyone sits down, and you're able to enjoy good food that satisfies our stomachs, we're able to drink and laugh and tell jokes and share our lives together, and that is the picture of joy—okay, remember I did say this is about family, so I recognize for some of you it may not be that way but work with me on the illustration.

This is precisely what God does, except with one incredibly unique, specific twist: that on the cross, Jesus Christ, by his body and his blood, was making space. You see, the cross becomes the front door of God's house, and at that front door is a suffering Savior who welcomes in not friends and family, but God makes space for his enemies. Because God, in dying on the cross, in Jesus Christ, means that Jesus's blood was poured out for what? Our sins. What happens there at the cross is that Jesus takes on himself our sin that caused the brokenness between us and our heavenly Father, and we receive in return his righteousness. Jesus sets the table of God's kingdom for his enemies. For while we were yet his enemies, Christ died for the ungodly. Our sin was the cause of the brokenness of our relationship with the Father, and yet it is God who sends his Son to set a table. Isn't that an amazing way of making room? It's one thing to talk about hospitality to our friends and family; it's a

whole other thing to open up that front door and set a table for people who didn't want to be with you—who, in fact, rejected you at every corner. But that is precisely what Jesus does. In his body and on that tree, God made room so that we could commune, be reunited, with him. Reconciled with the Father through the cross.

But there is another piece: that the outworking of that peace with the Father also should issue forth in horizontal peace between human beings. We see it here in this passage. You see Peter knowing that he would never have gone to another people, another nation—surely not Gentiles—were it not for the gospel. And Cornelius would not have listened necessarily to Peter so eagerly were it not for the gospel. So the gospel is to bring out reconciliation between human beings.

With that said, it completely redefines how we go about making reconciliation. Here is the rub for us. So, oftentimes what we want is, we want to have peace so long as that peace doesn't mean necessarily that we have to be close to each other. Some of you know that—I don't know—that you're in relationship with people maybe you haven't spoken to in a while, or if you have, it was like a Cold War. It was there, not much shared, because there was a rupture in the relationship. What we've settled for oftentimes is not real peace; it's a false peace. We've become accustomed to simply existing in the same zip code or in the same room or in the same family or in the same network, and we call that peace. Let me say that the gospel of Jesus Christ means that if God can make a kingdom out of his enemies, those who've received that grace are then enabled to look at other human beings eye to eye and see that they need the grace just as much as you do. We oftentimes play at Christianity, ladies and gentlemen, if we are failing to see that at it's most practical point, the Christian ought to be the first one to want to make reconciliation.

Let me make clear, the Bible doesn't mean that our desire to make peace, to seek reconciliation, means that that is what's going to happen. The Bible says, as far as it depends upon you, seek to live at peace with others. Notice the key. It doesn't mean that peace is automatically gonna happen; a lot of the time it's very hard work, but it's not a guarantee. But as far as it depends on *you*. How can we say that Jesus Christ has paid for my sins when at the crevice of our heart is perhaps the fulcrum of a relationship where we've looked at another person and said, "I might be able to forgive, but I don't want to talk to you anymore"? Is that what the Lord does? Does God take a divine can of Febreze and kind of spray it over our sin at a distance? No. Jesus Christ came to die on a cross to remove the stain, and when you remove the stain out of fabric, what do you have to do? You have to get down in it. You have to rub it with the soap and the water. You have to work at it. Jesus came to die on a cross, that we might receive forgiveness—and not just forgiveness of sins, but the removal of stains that we might be called his children and welcomed in around the table, and not at a distance.

My friends, I cannot apply this for you. I pray that the Spirit would call us to be a people who seek to make peace with one another. Some of you are already working towards that, and you know how hard it is. Others of you hold in your hearts a special room or closet that has some hurt, and at times you sharpen it, and at times you dull it, and at times you try to keep it at a distance. I say to you in all humility, the Lord wants so much more for you. He wants to free you of that, and he wants you to experience not just a vertical reconciliation with him, but to begin to live out what Jesus prayed for us—a horizontal peace—that we would love one another, that the world may know that Jesus is the Lord.

So if that's the making of the peace, what's the bridge? The bridge is definitive forgiveness. In verses 43 through 48, when he says to them, "To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." So the question is, what is this forgiveness? You see, when you and I try to talk about forgiveness—which is at the heart of the

gospel—in every day language, we tend to not use the word “forgiveness”; we tend to use words like “apology” or “I’m sorry.” I’m not suggesting that those words have no place, but we need to be aware that they are too weak, too shallow to be able to unpack the Technicolor richness of Biblical forgiveness. You see, the word “apology” is the same way we get the word “apologetics”—making a defense. An apology sometimes is making a defense for our actions. We’re *sorry* for how someone else might feel. That’s a very different thing than confessing particular sins and asking for forgiveness. To get at this, and because of time, I want to unpack for you what this is referring to here, when he talks about the forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus. Three quick things.

First: it’s personal. The Lord does not simply say to us, “You know what? It’s all good. You stay over there; I’ll stay over here.” God doesn’t seek us out at a distance. He’s not saying, “You stay on that side of the room, I’ll stay on this side of the room, and we’ll just try to co-exist. We’ll send each other emails once in a while.” No, the whole point of the incarnation, the whole point of Jesus being raised, the whole point of Jesus having to walk in obedience and being without sin, the whole point of the cross and the resurrection, is that God is saying, “I did not stand far off from you. I became flesh and walked among you.” Because forgiveness isn’t just general; it’s personal. Christ died *personally* for you. He died personally for your sins, and for the sins of others, but for *your* sins.

Secondly: it’s intrusive. It’s intrusive, meaning this: it’s not passive. Meaning, “We don’t have to get into it, don’t worry about it, it’s all good.” No, it’s uncomfortable because it’s intrusive; it gets to the specific sins. See, as Pastor Tim was referring to last Sunday night, so oftentimes our pride wells up within us and we’re like, “I’m not as bad as *that*.” Or the other side of our identity, and that is, we feel shame because we can’t imagine looking at the sin. The work of Christ and the work of forgiveness means that the work of Christ is *intruding* on the areas that cause us the most pride, and the areas that cause us the most shame—to look at them in the bright light of the glory of God. It comes in intrusively. It’s uncomfortable. It hurts. But it heals, you see?

It’s personal. It’s intrusive. But it’s also expensive. Some would say that God’s forgiveness is unconditional, and I understand what someone may mean by “unconditional”—but so oftentimes in our culture when we use the word “unconditional”, what we mean is that something is free, not hard or costly. That doesn’t fully get at what Jesus accomplished for us on the cross, because it was extremely costly. It was the most expensive gift anyone could ever give us: God’s willingness to die on our behalf. It cost the Lord. And so, therefore, it comes to us free—but it costs God everything. It comes to us freely, just as we are, but it will never leave us as we are. Because remember, God’s forgiveness is personal, it’s intrusive, and it’s expensive, and because it’s all of those things, he means to make us new. That’s what we see happening in Cornelius. It’s what we see happening in Peter. It’s changing them. As we walk through the life of Peter, it will continue to need to change him. And if we were to know what the rest of Cornelius’s life was like, the same would be the case. And the same is the case for anyone who comes to the Lord. Because God’s forgiveness is personal, intrusive, and expensive, it will cost us everything, but we receive the most expensive and wonderful thing we could ever receive: the grace of forgiveness.

So in closing I say this: I don’t fault John Lennon for his imagination. I don’t fault him for desiring that nations be brought in as one. I don’t fault him for wanting to be rid of separation and hostility. The problem is: in a world that is soaked in hostility among people, in families, among nations, and the blood that has been poured out as a result of so much of that hostility—there is no one who can say, “Don’t worry about it.” Our hearts cry out for justice. Our hearts cry out for vengeance, do we not? But God, in Christ, who is both judge and Lord of all, came as both the Lord *on* sin and the sacrifice *for* sin. Jesus is coming again, and when he does he will make all things right—but until that day, he invites us into the only way that you and I can have peace, that when I sin against you and you sin against me, we have someone and something outside of our

pride, outside of our shame, that can bring us back together: that is the blood that paid for our sin. Forgive me; I am a man in need of mercy. The only way you and I can be back in relationship, and the only way you can be in relationship with each other, is because of the fact that instead of trying to take vengeance and the sword or the shield, we can hold up a cross and say, "Jesus died for you, and he died for me."

So the problem isn't that John Lennon had an imagination, but dare I say it, it's the fact that his imagination wasn't big enough. Can anyone ever imagine that God would send himself, clothed as a child, to live a perfect life and to die for the likes of you and me and to then be raised on the third day, victorious over sin and death, to make not a tribe, but to make a kingdom of people for his glory? That is what he is doing. As we come into contact with that grace, may God make us a reconciling, loving people, because the gospel has changed us for his glory and for our good. Let's pray.

Come, Lord Jesus. Give us a picture, an experience of the exalted Christ who died for us to make peace through the cross, to then make a kingdom of people united not by likes and dislikes and family backgrounds and nations, but rather, a people who have a common faith because they love Jesus, because Jesus first loved us. Lord, do this we pray, and may reconciliation and peace break out. Begin with us, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.