

Papa's Got a Brand New Bag

Devotional

Have you ever noticed that the guy driving slower than you is always a jerk, whereas the guy driving faster than you is always a maniac? By fallen nature, we're all prone to justify ourselves and to condemn those who are different than we are. We're prone to judge others according to outward characteristics, rather than to accept them as individual human beings on an equal par with us.

The ancient Greeks divided up the human race into two categories: Greeks and barbarians. The barbarian was literally a man who could not speak Greek, and so his words sounded to the Greek ear like "bar bar." One Greek historian asked rhetorically, "How can men who can only bark ever rule the world?" Prejudice is not eradicated with brilliance, since Aristotle believed that the world's climate maintained the difference between Greeks and barbarians. He explained that those who lived in the cold lands to the north had plenty of courage and spirit, but little skill and intelligence. Those who lived in the warm south had plenty of skill, intelligence, and culture, but little spirit and courage. Only the Greeks lived in a climate designed by nature to produce the perfectly blended character (Aristotle, Politics [7:7:2], cited by William Barclay, *Flesh and Spirit* [Baker], pp. 40–41).

We may chuckle at Aristotle's theory, but we're all prone toward prejudice in some form or another. But for God to use us effectively in His purpose, He must break us of our prejudices. To be prejudiced is to pre-judge someone without sufficient information. The story of the gospel spreading beyond Jewish boundaries toward the Gentiles teaches us from the life of Peter that...

We all have built-in prejudices that God must break down if we are going to be effective in His service.¹

Open it

1. What movie, TV show or book did you prejudge negatively only to be pleasantly surprised?

¹ Sermon by Steve Cole found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-25-breaking-down-our-prejudice-acts-101-33>

Read it

Acts 9:32-10:33

Explore it

2. Describe who Cornelius was and how he lived his life.
3. Who visited Cornelius and what was his message?
4. What vision did Peter have?
5. What type of greeting did Cornelius give Peter? How did Peter respond?
6. What did Cornelius want from Peter according to verse 33?
7. What conclusion does Peter come to in verse 34?

Apply it

TRANSITIONS—Acts 9:32–43

Having already witnessed God's working of miracles through Peter, we may wonder why these two miracles are included here. First, they reinforce the authenticity of Peter's apostleship. They remind us of who Peter is and that he is running in the footsteps of Jesus. Second, they demonstrate the power of Jesus. Peter's mission to the nations (and ours) is propelled by the resurrection power of Jesus. Third, these miracles provide signs of the coming kingdom of Jesus, who will heal the sick and raise the dead. Finally, these miracles aren't ends in themselves; in both stories people turn to the Lord for salvation as a result of them (9: 35, 42).²

The first miracle, involving Aeneas, highlights Christ's power over disease.... While in Lydda, some twenty-five miles northwest of Jerusalem and about twelve miles southeast of Joppa, Peter met Aeneas. The man had been paralyzed and bedridden for eight years. I can only imagine the longings of this guy's heart. Maybe he desperately wished to feel his wife's feet snuggled beside him under their blankets, to be able to feed himself, to experience the satisfaction of a hard day's work, to feel the Mediterranean splash against his ankles on a summer day. Whatever dreams he cherished, he was about to see them come true. When Peter sees Aeneas, he simply says, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and make your bed" (9:34). In doing this Peter points to the power, Jesus, who had a history of healing paralytics (cf. Luke 5:24–25). And Aeneas just got up and walked in response to Peter's words. Just imagine the joy in this man's heart!³

Next we see Christ's power over death displayed in the story of Dorcas. This saint fell ill and died, and Luke tells us what had made her so special: verse 36 says, "She was always doing good works and acts of charity." (What a great epitaph!) The widows for whom she had made clothes mourned for her deeply (v. 39). The disciples in Joppa promptly sent for Peter, hoping he might raise her up. They didn't even bury her; they placed the woman's body in a room, hoping for a miracle. And they weren't disappointed: God used Peter to display Christ's power over death.... In response Dorcas opens her eyes like the Shumammite woman's son did in 2 Kings 4:35 as he awakened. Dorcas then sits up, as did the widow's son at Nain (Luke 7:15). Then, as Elijah and Jesus gave sons back to the widowed mothers (1 Kings 17:23; Luke 7:15), so Peter gives the widow back to the saints. Both of these miracles set the stage for the next one. Having shown us Christ's power over disease and death, **Dr. Luke has prepared us to see Christ's power over discrimination.** Luke concludes the chapter by noting that Peter is in Joppa, staying with Simon, a tanner (9:43). This is significant. Clearly God was already overcoming some of Peter's cultural biases. A tanner was rendered perpetually unclean by the Jews because he dealt with dead animals in order to convert their skins into leather.⁴

8. Luke could have easily moved from the conversion of Saul to the story of Peter and Cornelius. Why does he write about these two miracles, and what do they teach us about the kingdom of God?

² Merida, Tony. *Exalting Jesus in Acts (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)* (Kindle Locations 3400-3402). Holman Reference. Kindle Edition.

³ *ibid*

⁴ *ibid*

9. Look at the map⁵ and find the three cities Luke speaks about in Acts 9:32, 36 and 10:1. What does Acts 1:8 tell us about God's plan and purpose in sending Peter this way? What barriers might need to be crossed for ministry to be done there?



10. Peter's travels covered a radius of about 50 miles. What different kinds of ministry can you encounter in a 50-mile radius from your home. How might ministry look different in each of those locales?
11. Are there different gospels for different people? How can we contextualize the ministry and message of the gospel to a variety of people in different situations without compromising it?

THE SEEKING SINNER AND...

Peter was staying at Joppa on the Mediterranean coast. It was the city where the prophet Jonah had fled to board a ship to Tarshish. He was trying to run from the Lord's command to go and preach at Nineveh, the capital city of Israel's arch-enemy, Assyria. About 30 miles north of Joppa and some 65 miles northwest of Jerusalem, was the Roman provincial capital, Caesarea, where the governor lived. Under his authority were some 3,000 troops, including the Italian cohort. Serving with this unit was Cornelius, a centurion who commanded 100 soldiers. The Jews despised the Roman occupation of Palestine; they hoped that Messiah would come and deliver them from the Roman oppression.

⁵ Map found @ <https://www.ccel.org/bible/phillips/CNM14-Philip.gif>

And so the stage is set: you have a Gentile Roman soldier, representing the despised occupation of Israel, residing in the main city of the Roman occupation. Thirty miles south you have a Jewish apostle, temporarily residing at the spot where Jonah had taken off in disobedience to his commission to preach to Israel's enemy. And behind the scenes, God is orchestrating the events to bring these two men together in a way that shocked both of them by breaking down the wall of prejudice between them. The result of the story is that today you and I who are Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the church with the Jews, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel (Ephesians 3:6).

12. How might the ministry successes in Acts 9:32–43 have encouraged and equipped Peter for his mission in Acts 10? What does this tell us about ourselves and God?

"It seems that we must understand Cornelius to have been a Gentile who, having realized the bankruptcy of paganism, sought to worship a monotheistic God, practice a form of prayer, and lead a moral life, apart from any necessary association with Judaism."⁶

13. Our text tells us that Cornelius and his family are described as being "devout" and "God-fearing" people. What does it mean to you for someone to be devout? What must this type of person be careful of?

It is almost startling to note the character of the men who are described in The Acts as needing the salvation that can be found in Christ alone. This section of the book narrates three notable conversions: that of the Ethiopian prince, of Saul, and of Cornelius, but all of these were godly men; they were not only of irreproachable morality but they were zealously religious. Are such men lost? Is it absolutely necessary today for men of this character to experience a "new birth"? These narratives seem so to affirm, and they remind us of the words spoken by our Lord to the great teacher of Israel: "Ye must be born anew."⁷

14. How does one determine whether he is simply devoted to religious morality or is in fact a true follower of Christ?

⁶ Richard N. Longnecker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1981), 9:385.

⁷ Charles R. Erdman, *The Acts: An Exposition* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966), 96.

Given the instruction to send a delegate to Joppa to find Peter, Cornelius did not hesitate. One cannot help but contrast his far humbler attitude with that of Naaman in 2 Kings 5, who initially refused to bathe in the Jordan River to be cured from his leprosy. Cornelius was humbler and wiser! **There is a lesson here: When God seeks you, don't hesitate! Cornelius immediately obeyed the angel and sent a delegation for Peter.** Cornelius sent "two of his household servants and a devout soldier" to find Peter. The servants acted as his official representatives, while the soldier was sent along, no doubt, for the protection of the servants.⁸

15. Here we see a military man submitting to some obscure commands given by God. What commands of God do you find easy to obey and which ones are harder to follow?

THE BIGOTED BELIEVER

It was midday at Simon the Tanner's odoriferous cottage by the sea—prayer time*, not mealtime. Jews ate two meals a day—a light meal in mid-morning and a more substantial meal in late afternoon. Peter was on the roof of the house, where he could catch the Mediterranean breezes. He was praying. He was hungry. His rooftop experience is called *ekstasis* (Acts 10:10). As Peter saw the huge tablecloth being lowered from the sky and spread before him containing animals, reptiles, and birds—all on the Jewish no-no list of "unclean" creatures to be avoided—he was shocked! A voice told Peter to get up, kill something to eat, and dig in.⁹

16. In comparison to Cornelius' humble obedience Peter recoils back three times and says "no" to God's commands. When have you found yourself arguing with God? What can we glean from Peter's response to the Lord?

All his life Peter had been taught to see Gentiles as impure. He would not enter a Gentile's house for fear of touching something "unclean." Contact with anything unclean required a process of ritual cleansing before one could participate in worship. Israel must be a "separated" people, consecrated to God. **But it was time for change.** The old rules of separation must be scrapped if the Jesus movement was to take the next step toward world conquest: witness "to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8 NKJV). If not, the Jesus revolution would end before it had scarcely begun because it would be forever trapped behind the growth-stifling walls of Judaism. For the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ to be offered to "whoever" (John 3:16; Acts 2:21), the barriers between Jews and Gentiles had to come down.¹⁰

⁸ Sermon by Doug Van Meter found @ <http://brackenhurstbaptist.co.za/race-grace-and-pace/#fn-3110-7>

⁹ Girard, Robert C.. The Book of Acts (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series) (Kindle Locations 2619-2622). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

¹⁰ *ibid*

17. What types of people do you find yourself unfairly judging or find yourself struggling to interact with? Where do these feelings come from?

Specifically the voice in the vision told Peter to eat what is unclean. That very day and in the days following he would find himself eating with “unclean” Gentiles (Acts 10:23; 11:2). But food wasn’t really the issue, although scrapping the outdated food laws was necessary if Jewish and non-Jewish believers were to eat together. Acceptance and fellowship were the issues. Eating together* is an act of fellowship and acceptance. It’s why Christians often “break bread” (share meals and celebrate the Lord’s Supper) together. But at issue in Peter’s mind-altering vision was God’s plan for the church to open its doors (and hearts) to believing Gentiles and accept them as part of Christ’s body* ... without reservations.¹¹

18. What actions show us that Peter’s thinking regarding Gentiles had changed?

19. Peter says in verses 34–35 that “God shows no partiality.” What does it mean to you that God does not show favoritism? In what ways do we as Christians knowingly or unknowingly show favoritism, and what is the cure for this malady?

Here’s a radical prayer request: Ask God to show you your prejudices. When He does, obey Him by putting your prejudices to death and by showing His love and offering His gospel to those whom you might not naturally be inclined to like. He will use it to exalt His name among the nations!¹²

20. In what ways can we be the answer to the above prayers? Who might God be calling you to engage with and serve no matter the cultural differences? What tangible steps can you take this week to allow Christ’s love to be seen by all types of people?

¹¹ ibid

¹² Sermon by Steve Cole found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-25-breaking-down-our-prejudice-acts-101-33>

Note: This study was compiled and questions written by Pastor Tim Badal, Village Bible Church. www.villagebible.org/smallgroups