

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL THROUGH THE GOSPEL TO ALL CATEGORIES OF PEOPLE

Acts 10:24-48

INTRODUCTION

This past February I heard Matt Chandler, the pastor of a church in Texas speak at the Bethlehem Conference for Pastors. He told a story from when he was a young man and a young Christian. He and a group of Christian friends befriended a single mom. They were helping her both physically and also by sharing the gospel with her. She had children by different men and, at the time was having an affair with a married man. A friend of theirs, who was a Christian and a musician, was giving a concert at an area church one evening and so they invited this immoral woman to come with them to hear him and hoping also that she would have another opportunity to hear the gospel. It turned out that their friend was part of a youth rally where a preacher was making a presentation about why sexual immorality was wrong and urging the young people to be pure.

At the beginning of the talk this preacher took a rose and told the audience he wanted them to pass it around and to admire its beauty and smell its fragrance. Matt shared that the talk was one of the worst descriptions of God's purpose for sex and why God is opposed to sex outside of marriage that he has ever heard. Throughout the talk he was embarrassed that he had brought their friend, the single mom, to hear such an erroneous message. At the end of the talk the preacher asked for the rose back. From being handled by all those people the rose was now broken and missing many petals. As he held up the now bedraggled and wilted flower he went on to describe that this is what happens to people who are sexually promiscuous. He ended his talk with this question: "Who would want a rose like this? Who will ever want you if you are sexually impure?" Matt said he had to exercise the greatest level of self-control he's ever had to muster in order to keep himself from jumping from his chair and yelling, "Jesus wants that rose! Jesus died so that rose can be made new again!"

Here is a danger that faces every Christian and every Christian church. There is a tendency among those who have been saved from their sins and now agree with God's word and his standards of righteousness to begin to treat those who are living immoral lifestyles or belong to certain social or religious groups as if they are somehow beyond the scope of God's saving work. The longer you are a Christian the easier it becomes to look down your nose at those who are yet outside of Christ and of his church, to think and act as if somehow, you are better than those terrible sinners outside the church. We may confess that Jesus came to save sinners but in our avoidance and criticism of those outside the church we act as though Jesus only came to save certain kinds of sinners, that is, sinners like us. We easily speak only words of condemnation for homosexuals or pedophiles or terrorists or Hindus or alcoholics or Democrats. Most of us would never think of intentionally befriending anyone from any of these categories. It is easy for us to feel about certain kinds of sinners the same way that Peter and his fellow Jewish Christians felt about Gentiles.

Up until Acts 10 it was the firmly held belief of every Christian that Jesus had come to save sinners who were either Jewish by race or by conversion. There was not a single one of them who would have thought to intentionally go to Gentile people in order to tell them of Jesus. As Peter says in v. 28, it was unlawful for any Jew, be they a Christian or not to associate with Gentiles. If God had not so clearly commanded Peter to go preach the gospel to Cornelius and so clearly called Cornelius to himself through the gospel the church of Jesus today would either be a small sect within Judaism or non-existent. It is because of the events in this chapter that today the church is a multi-lingual, multi-cultural entity spanning the entire globe. This chapter sets before each of us individually and before us as a church a challenge. Are our sentiments and actions in keeping with the purposes of God? The second half of the story of God's bringing the gospel to the despised Gentiles shows God's purposes to save people from every category of human existence and so challenges us to examine our own prejudices and procedures in relation to the people who inhabit our world. As we observe God saving Cornelius and his gathered relatives and friends who were all Gentile, that is, non-Jewish, through the proclamation of the gospel by Peter we see that...

MAIN POINT

The Triune God is saving people from every category of human beings because...

I. God does not show favoritism based upon any human characteristic (vv. 24-35)

The OT repeatedly says that God does not show favoritism. Deuteronomy 10:17, “For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes.” There are numerous ways that the impartiality of God is set forth in this story. First, as soon as Peter enters the courtyard of Cornelius’ house he is greeted by Cornelius falling on his knees at his feet and offering him worship. Peter immediately tells him to stand up and tells Cornelius that he, Peter, like Cornelius is merely a man. Peter who is Jewish and an apostle does not see himself as superior to or above Cornelius. Religious leaders or teachers who insist on being treated with undue respect are not to be trusted. The impulse that many have to treat religious leaders and teachers with inordinate deference is to be resisted. All Christians, including pastors and other religious leaders are all only human beings, made by God, fallen into sin, just like everyone else. Second, Peter’s opening statement explains that the reason that he, a Jew, has without reservation entered into a Gentile home and is now consorting with this large group of Gentile people, which is unlawful for an observant Jew to do, is because God has shown him that he must not call any man impure or unclean. We know from the first half of this chapter that God showed him this through a vision while he was praying on the roof of Simon the tanner’s home three days earlier. In the OT law God told Israel that they would become impure and unclean before him in a whole host of ways; by eating the wrong food, touching dead animals or people, not butchering animals in the right way, having certain kinds of skin infections, etc. Since Gentile people did all these things they were always unclean in God’s eyes. The vision God gave Peter declared that the whole OT system had been done away with in Christ and thus, for example, as no foods were now unclean so no human could be made unclean by eating them. Therefore if the standards of “uncleanness” have now been done away with by the coming of Christ, then there can be no “unclean” people, that is, people who are beyond God’s grace because of who they are or what they do.

The third way this passage shows that God is indifferent to every human distinction is in Cornelius’ recounting the vision God sent to him to send for Peter. The obvious point is that God himself has arranged this meeting of Peter the Jew with these Gentiles in a Gentile home. Fourth, the last sentence in v. 33 is an amazing sentence. Cornelius says that this room full of Gentiles is now gathered before God to hear what the Lord has commanded Peter to tell them. This is identical to the language employed at Mt. Sinai where Israel is gathered before the Lord to hear what God has commanded Moses to tell them. This language is repeatedly used in the OT for the many occasions when the people of God are gathered before the Lord to hear what God’s prophet or appointed messenger has been commanded to tell them. Thus, this Gentile gathering in a Gentile home, not a synagogue or temple, is viewed as a congregation of God’s people gathered to hear the word of God. (Note: This is an excellent way for each of us to view what we are doing together each Sunday morning.) Finally, Peter, as he begins his speech reasserts the conclusion he has come to based upon these events: God does not show favoritism but accepts people from every nation who fear him and do works of righteousness.

There are two critical questions which Peter’s assertion of divine impartiality raises. First, the biblical record is full of statements that God does show favoritism. He chose Abram and his descendants to be his people. He did not choose his brother Haran or the Egyptians or the Assyrians. He favored Isaac and Jacob to be the recipient of his promises and not Ishmael or Esau. He established Israel as a nation and destroyed all the Canaanite nations. He chose David to be king and rejected Saul. In this very passage Peter says he accepts people who fear God and do what is right, which, by implication means he does not accept those who do not fear God and do not do what is right. In fact, there are several places in the NT where God calls unbelieving people impure and unclean. For example, Ephesians 5:5, “For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person-- such a man is an idolater-- has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.” So God does not let impure people into heaven, he rejects and does not accept impure people.

What the Scripture teaches is that God does distinguish between people but not based upon human distinctions. He does not limit salvation to a particular class or kind of human being. He is as likely to save a poor person as a rich person, a physically disabled person as a fully functional human, a man as a woman, the old as the young, those with tattoos as those without, black people as white, a homosexual as a heterosexual, a criminal as a law-abiding citizen, an alcoholic as a teetotaler. The distinctions God makes among humans are based entirely upon his free grace. He chooses whom he will save, as Paul says in Ephesians 1, "...according to his own purpose and will." Thus, the gospel is to go to all people, without distinction because God does not show favoritism based upon human characteristics. However, please note, he does not save people in their sins, he saves people from their sins. While he will not refuse to save a person who is an alcoholic or a homosexual because they are unfit for salvation by these sins, yet salvation means that they will not continue in these sins, they will fear God and do what is right as a result of being saved.

A second, and more difficult question, is raised by v. 35. What does Peter mean by saying that God "accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right"? There is, within the broader church, a very popular idea that God will save people who have never heard of Jesus. In other words, God will save "good" pagans or Hindus or Moslems or animists. If people fear God and do what is right but do not believe in Christ because they have never heard of him God will still save them. Cornelius and v. 35 is often used as biblical justification for this belief. This matter can be settled by asking, "Was Cornelius saved prior to his hearing the gospel and believing in Jesus?" The answer is a clear and emphatic, "No!" There are a number of reasons we know this but I will give you just two. First, the whole point of this story is that Cornelius needed to hear the message of the gospel in order to be saved. The coming of the HS upon Cornelius and his Gentile friends at the end of the story shows that salvation has come to these people by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit and their faith in the Jesus that Peter proclaimed to them. Second, this exact point is made by Peter in the next chapter when he explains to the church in Jerusalem what happened in Caesarea. In Acts 11:13-14 Peter says, "He (Cornelius) told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.'" If he was already saved then why would the angel tell him that it was through the message they would be saved? So when Peter says he accepts men of every nation who fear him and do right he does not mean that people can be saved without an explicit faith in Jesus.

So what does v. 35 mean? John Piper in his book, "Let the Nations be Glad" says that Peter is recognizing that there are individuals among the nations, who, by God's grace, are earnestly and extraordinarily seeking to know the true God, like Cornelius and that God responds to these individuals by getting them the gospel so that they can be saved. They do not earn the right to hear the gospel by their works but they are, by the inner working of the HS, seeking the God who is seeking them. Piper then recounts the story of an African man named Warrasa Wanga described in Don Richardsons' book, "Eternity in their Hearts", as a modern example (pp. 138-139). Warassa prayed to the god of his tribe, the Gedeo people in Ethiopia, that this god would reveal himself to his people. He had a vision of two white skinned strangers coming to his town and a voice telling him that "These men will bring you a message from the God you seek. Wait for them." Eight years later two Canadian missionaries, Albert Brant and Glen Cain came to Ethiopia to begin work among the Gedeo people and into the town where Warassa lived. Thirty years later there were more than 200 hundred churches among the Gedeo people, each averaging more than 200 people.

There are two ways the fact of God's impartiality ought to affect us. First, there is no one sitting in this room who should think it is unlikely that God will save you. You should right now begin crying out, like Cornelius, to the God who made you and who sent his Son to die on the cross to come and save you. Second, every Christian in here should repent of our prejudices and bigotry and ask God to give us compassion for all sorts of people so that we will willingly befriend and share the gospel with every kind of person with whom God brings us in contact. We as a church should pray and plan for ways that we can share the gospel with the diverse peoples who live in Rock County. We are praying for God to raise up a member of our congregation who has a vision for taking the gospel outside the walls of our church into the community to volunteer to be the Service and Outreach Coordinator. In the next year we need a group of people to do the research and begin laying the

groundwork for us to plant another church here in Rock County so that we can share the gospel with a wider and more diverse audience through another congregation.

II. Jesus lived and died and rose again to give God's peace to all who believe (vv. 36-43)

This summary of Peter's sermon that Luke records for us is full of the beauty of Jesus and his saving work. Let me show you a few of the highlights and encourage you to meditate upon it to see more. First, verse 36 is the thesis statement of his speech. It does not begin with the verb "you know" as the NIV has it. It simply says, "God sent this message to the sons of Israel, proclaiming the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all." Note first that God himself sent this message and it is a message of peace. "Peace" is an incredibly large OT concept. In the Hebrew language it is "shalom." God aims to make peace with men through Jesus. The implication is that God and humans are at war outside of Christ but through Christ we are made friends. God's intention is to bring the kingdom of peace to this world through Jesus. You should fill this word up with all those OT promises of peace and abundance and perfect fellowship between God and man and man with man and man with nature that populate the OT. This word sums up the experience of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. It is through Jesus that God is going to restore that Garden for all who believe. Also note this Jesus is Lord of all, which is one of the most common descriptions of God in the OT. The point being that because he is Lord of all that all humans without distinction have the opportunity to enter into the peace that he brings.

Second, why is this peace to come only through Jesus Christ? Why is it that there is no other person who can give this peace? The answer Peter gives to that question is this: God's peace only comes through Jesus because nobody else ever did what Jesus did. He is the only one whom John the Baptist described as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He is the only one who was identified as the Son of God by God himself who affirmed that this was his beloved son when John baptized him. He is the only one whom God anointed with the HS and who manifested that anointing by his acts of mercy and power over the forces of evil in the world. No one ever did what Jesus did, healing people and driving out demons and raising the dead. God was with him in ways he has never been with anyone else. No one ever died the death that Jesus died. Though he was the Messiah of God and lived a perfectly obedient life and always did good and did not deserve to die, yet he was killed by being hanged upon the cross. He was, according to the OT law, cursed by God as evidenced by his being hung upon that cross. While Luke does not record Peter posing the question, yet it is the question that immediately arises when the cross is mentioned, "why did he have to die? Why would God do this to his Messiah?" The answer that Peter and the rest of the NT would give is that he did not die for his own sins, for he had none; but he died for the sins of all who will believe in him. Finally, no one but Jesus has ever been permanently raised from the dead. He showed that he was gloriously resurrected, with a physical body, by eating and drinking with his disciples.

What sets the Christian gospel apart from every other human religion is that it is not about an idea but about a person. The truthfulness of this message is rooted in historical events that were witnessed. Peter and the other apostles and up to 500 other disciples personally witnessed all of these events. The message they proclaim is an accounting of these historical facts about this historical person. The Christian gospel isn't first and foremost about following the ideas and teachings of some spiritual guru but about trusting in who Jesus is, the Lord of all who became man and fully obeyed God, manifesting the power of God and dying a willing death and experiencing a glorious resurrection. He is now the Judge that every human being will one day stand in front of and give an account of what we have done with the life and gifts that God has given to us. He not only is the judge but he is also the one who secures forgiveness, pardon from his judgment for all who will believe. It is this Jesus about whom all the OT is written. So it is not only the apostles and original disciples who have seen and now bear witness to this Jesus but all of the OT prophets have joined their voices to that of the apostles bearing witness that all who trust in this Jesus are forgiven for their sins. So the message of the gospel is meant for all who believe, not all who are Jewish or all who are heterosexual or all who are Caucasian or all who are men. It is meant for all who will believe.

So here are the only questions that matters: Do you want to be at peace with God? Do you want to live in that kingdom of peace that will one day come to this world? Do you want to pass safely through the courtroom of this perfect Judge, the resurrected Jesus? Do you want your sins forgiven so that you can be reconciled to God? Do you want to be God's friend and not his enemy? If this is what you want, then stop trusting in all other saviors and all other salvations and trust in, depend upon, rest in this baptized, miracle working, crucified and resurrected Lord of all, Jesus the Messiah.

III. The Holy Spirit unites all believers into one body (vv. 44-48)

It is at this point that God interrupts Peter while he speaks. God decides the sermon is over. As Peter announces that forgiveness of sins is available to all who will believe in this Jesus the Holy Spirit is poured out upon Cornelius and all of his Gentile guests. The Jewish Christians who are with Peter are shocked and amazed that the Holy Spirit has been given to these unclean Gentiles. They know the HS has come because each and every one of these Gentiles begins to speak in other languages, declaring the greatness of God. The obvious reason for speaking in tongues in this text is to show these Jewish Christians that the HS has indeed come upon these "unclean" Gentiles. The remarkable thing to note here is that these Gentiles did absolutely nothing visible but were visibly affected by the HS. Here is the fulfillment of what Jesus tells Nicodemus in John 3:8, "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." No one sees the wind and no one controls the wind. The wind blows where it wants and you know it is present by the effects it creates. The uncontrollable, sovereign wind of the HS has given life to these dead Gentiles and has shown he is present by enabling these people to speak in other tongues declaring the glory of God. Peter, states what is obvious, the Holy Spirit has come upon these Gentiles just as he came upon the 120 Jewish disciples of Jesus in that upper room in Jerusalem. As numerous commentators say, this is the Gentile Pentecost. For the first time the HS is poured out upon non-Jewish believers in Jesus. These Gentiles are fully loved and accepted children of God, at peace with God through Jesus without becoming Jewish or fulfilling any part of the OT law. They have been justified not by observing the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. Do not miss the main point, these people are given eternal life not because of anything they do but because they believe in the Jesus who did everything for them.

Peter commands that these who have so clearly become full members of the body of Christ, receive the physical and outward symbol of their inclusion in Christ by being baptized in water. These Gentiles are marked by everything that marked the Jewish church in Jerusalem and the church in Samaria. They have heard the gospel. They have believed that gospel. They have been filled with the Holy Spirit. They have been baptized. And they receive further apostolic instruction as Peter remains with them for some period of time. We are witnessing here what is declared throughout the rest of the NT like in Galatians 3:26-29, "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." The people of God are made up of people from all walks of life, of every personality type, sinners of every stripe and variety, of every race and language and nation. We are all made the people of God in the same way, through the HS showing us the glory of God in the face of Jesus as he is held forth to us in the gospel so that we repent of our sins and trust in Jesus as our savior and Lord and treasure.