

## WHEN BEING GOOD IS NOT GOOD ENOUGH

### Acts 10

It is SO GOOD to be in front of you this morning. While some of you are watching this on YouTube, many others from the Burning Hearts congregation are, for the first time in two months, hearing a sermon LIVE and in PERSON! Wow! Does it feel good? I trust it feels GREAT!

We have been making our way through the book of Acts since last year. Acts has 28 chapters and, generally, it is thought to fall into two parts: the first part covering the first 12 chapters with the stories of Peter, John, Stephen and Philip and their **ministry to the Jewish people**, and the last 16 chapters dealing with Paul, Barnabas, Silas and company as the gospel makes its way out of Israel and **into the Roman world**. But in truth, chapter 10...the chapter we are about to read...is **the real dividing point** of the book. For with chapter 10 we find the gospel, **for the first time**, going beyond the bounds of Judaism and into the world of the Gentiles. And what is maybe most interesting is that the one who, in this chapter, took the gospel to the Gentiles was NOT Paul, the so-called "apostle to the Gentiles," but Peter, "the apostle to the Jews." In this case, the Gentile was a Roman centurion: a good and godly man, and someone who had even heard about Jesus.

But change was about to come to this Roman centurion and with that change would come an eternal change to the church of Jesus Christ. Let's read it...

#### Acts chapter 10, in its entirety

Ruth and I have a son who is a captain in the army. Because of that we have had to learn some military nomenclature. For example,

- a platoon consists of 16-44 soldiers and is led by a lieutenant,
- a company consists of 62-190 soldiers and is led by a captain while
- a battalion consists of 300-800 soldiers and is led by a lieutenant colonel.

Acts 10 is the story of Cornelius, a Roman centurion. The word "centurion" is from the same root as the word "century." So a centurion was and is, by definition, a military official who was over at least 100 soldiers. This would

have put Cornelius at about the same level of responsibility that our son David now has in the army.

- How old Cornelius was we do not know.
- Nor do we know anything about his family (though the text does mention his "household.")
- We also do not know from what town Cornelius came. In the text we find Cornelius in Caesarea, a seaside town on the Mediterranean coast that the Roman emperors had been making use of as a get away resort town for more than 100 years. So to have been stationed at Caesarea was, for Cornelius, a good deal (comparable to if our son, David, was sent to Hawaii for a year or two). But where Cornelius actually hailed from we have no idea.

But, here is what we DO KNOW about Cornelius...

### 1. **Cornelius was a good man.**

verse 2

So, Cornelius was

- a devout man
- who feared God
- who gave alms generously, and
- who prayed continually.

Sounds like a **VERY good man!** I would be happy to have had Cornelius for a neighbor, a son, or a son-in-law. And I'm sure you would feel the same as well.

So why didn't God just leave him alone? For instead of just leaving Cornelius alone (that he might continue on with his good and godly life) we find AN ENTIRE CHAPTER from the book of Acts being given over to this one man.

Why?

It is because – and this is where the good news of Jesus SHINES through so brightly for those who have eyes to see it and take it in – **being good is simply never good enough.**

Some of the people around us may be a bit like Cornelius. Truth is, they probably are **not QUITE AS GOOD** as Cornelius, but still they are pretty good. But as good as that son or daughter, that neighbor, brother or sister...as "good" as they may seem, it doesn't mean they have all that they need. Likely they know that, deep down.

## 2. **Cornelius was an obedient man.**

In this text we read of this vision that Cornelius had – a vision that HE TOOK to be a vision from God. And having been told in that vision what he should do, he obeyed...he did it.

He could have just written it off.  
He could have justified doing nothing.

It is like those promptings that many of us have had through the years...

- to call so and so
- to write a letter to so and so
- to stop by so and so's house,
- to buy that book for them
- to invite so and so over for dinner or dessert

Promptings. You know what I'm talking about. I'm not talking about God giving us extra-Biblical revelation. I'm talking about nudgings by the Holy Spirit. Maybe you have a dream, maybe someone makes a comment about something and that triggers a thought you have been having. Again, YOU KNOW about this.

And when these things come our way we have two options: to either **listen to them and heed them**, or to just **brush them aside**.

In our story before us there are, of course, 2 people that had this same choice: Cornelius AND Peter. Both could have done nothing about what they were being shown, but in this case they both obeyed.

### 3. Cornelius was a humble man.

Back in the first century, working among and living among the Jewish people was no picnic. The Jews were perceived by the Romans as ornery, difficult, holier than thou bigots who believed that everyone on earth was inferior to them. To the Romans that was more than a bit ironic. For if the Jews were so great and the Romans so inferior, why was it that the Romans were ruling the world while the Jews were living in comparative squalor?

It reminds me a bit of back when the 2016 presidential election was taking place. A fellow I know, who hadn't held a steady job in decades, was letting his political views be widely known over Facebook. I did my best to simply AVOID what he wrote. But when he posted that Donald Trump was, in his opinion, an "idiot" (and that was the term he used) that did it. I couldn't remain silent any longer. And so I raised the question how an idiot could have amassed literally BILLIONS of dollars while he – this fellow that I knew – was basically penniless? My point was: who is the real idiot? (It was this interchange and a few more like it that got me to get off of Facebook. I'm generally a very calm person, but that had the effect of raising my blood pressure for sure!)

In much the same way, the Romans perception of the Jews is that it was THE JEWS who were the real losers in life while the Romans ruled the world. Yet it was the Jews and not the Romans who were the ones who remained high browed, looking down on all others.

Peter as much as admits this kind of arrogant bigotry in verse 28...

#### verse 28

Still, knowing that the Jews were this way, and having proven himself a friend to the Jews over time..."being well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation" (v.22)...when Peter showed up at his house it says that Cornelius "fell down at his feet, and worshipped him" (v.25).

Peter was no military official

Peter wasn't even a governmental official

Peter was just a fisherman turned preacher and apostle of Jesus

Yet it was before Peter, the Jew, that Cornelius, the Roman, humbled himself.

Within a few decades Rome would come against the Jews in a ferocious way, killing over a million of them, while making thousands of them slaves.

When Ruth and I were in Rome this past year (and boy am I glad we visited Italy when we did!). Just a short distance from the famed Coliseum in Rome is an arch built by Titus, the Roman commander who conquered Jerusalem in 70A.D. The arch commemorates that victory. Now here is what is interesting: Titus used the booty that was taken at the time of Israel's defeat to fund the construction of the Coliseum. And who did he have build it? The Jewish slaves that he took captive. So the coliseum was constructed by and, in a very real sense paid for, by the Jews. But there is even more to the story.

Move ahead some 1400 or so years, and St. Peter's basilica was being built by the Roman Catholic Church just a couple miles from the Coliseum. As the goal was to make it the largest and grandest church building ever built, marble was needed – and plenty of it. So where did they get the marble? By stripping the coliseum of its marble seats and walls...the very ones that had been placed there by means of Jewish sweat and paid for by means of Jewish wealth.

And so, in a way, it was thanks to the Jews that St. Peter's basilica, at the heart of the Roman Catholic Church, could be built!

The point is that Rome was over the Jews, and Cornelius, as a centurion in the Roman army, was **way over** Peter the fisherman turned preacher and apostle. But it was before Peter that Cornelius fell to his knees and worshipped him.

Peter, as the text explains, was quick to correct Cornelius and see him back on his feet. But the humility of Cornelius is rather astounding.

#### **4. Cornelius knew of Jesus.**

verses 37-41

Exactly how much Cornelius knew about Jesus we do not know, but Peter here states quite clearly that Cornelius was not totally ignorant of Jesus, what he did or what happened to him.

### 5. **But Cornelius needed something more.**

Recently I met, just with a woman who, it seemed to me, was a lot like Cornelius. She was (and is):

good

obedient

humble

and she knows about Jesus, having attended church from the time she was a little girl

She was (and is), like Cornelius, a religious person. I have no question but that she had and has the capacity to be a wonderful wife and mother.

But, like Cornelius, to be good, obedient, humble and even to know about Jesus is **NOT ENOUGH**.

And so Peter preached Christ to Cornelius.

- He preached about Christ's death on a cross, and the empty tomb.
- He preached about how there was forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus. And though the text doesn't tell us just how it happened, one gets the impression that it was while Peter was in the midst of his preaching Jesus to Cornelius that **it all must have SUNK IN** and Cornelius accepted it, for suddenly the Holy Spirit of God fell upon Cornelius as well as upon those who were with him.

And with that Cornelius began to speak in tongues.

The effect of all this was **ASTOUNDING** to Peter and those with him.

This could mean only one thing: that the good news of Jesus Christ was not only for the Jews but also for the Gentiles, for here were Gentiles having the same experience with God that they had had.

Wonder of wonders!

Next Sunday, Lord willing, we will deal with this text again and at that time deal with the issue of unclean foods no longer being regarded that way and the issue of tongues coming to the Gentiles. That's next Sunday.

But for today I want us to close considering how it was that this good, obedient, humble, informed man named Cornelius, still needed something more. It is really rather remarkable that God turned the heart of Cornelius in this way for I think most people in his position might have concluded that they were **good enough, obedient enough, humble enough and even knew about Jesus enough.**

But Peter was clear: Cornelius, you need something more. You need to have your sins forgiven and you can only have that by trusting in Jesus Christ.

In less than four weeks, Ruth and I are planning on flying to Phoenix, Arizona. Our daughter, Esther, her fiancé, Marcus, as well as my younger sister and her family live out there. But that is not what prompted this visit to Arizona in June...when it will be about 110 degrees in the shade. No, what prompted it was the realization, back in January, that this year – 2020 – the year that we will all remember all too well, is the 50 year anniversary of the time that I, along with some friends, got right with God. So we are going out there to visit, yes. But also for me to remember as I interact with at least one of those friends who is still in the Phoenix area.

When all that change took place in my life, recognizing for the first time the LORDSHIP of Jesus Christ, I immediately witnessed to my best friend, Scott McEwen. Scott was a good fellow, obedient, humble and he too knew some things about Jesus. But I had come to be SAVED...really SAVED, and with that I so desperately wanted that for Scott as well. And so, oh well I can recall talking to him...after explaining how Jesus came into this world to truly be our Savior and Lord and to forgive us of all our sins, I said,

"Scott, I'm going to bug you, and bug you and bug you until you too come to faith in Jesus."

That day I prayed with Scott to accept Christ as his Savior and Lord. Later his younger sister would also come to

be saved, and then his other sister as well. That was 50 years ago. And today they all still name Jesus as their Savior and Lord.

How about you?  
Do you know him?

For if you are trusting that your being a "good person" will be enough, I'm here to tell you today, and Cornelius, if he were here would add a loud Amen, that being good is not good enough.