

No Unclean People

DAVE BAST

The bitter history of the 20th Century brought a hateful new term into the world's vocabulary: Ethnic cleansing. Is this how we should view people who are different from us? As if they were an infection that needs to be wiped out? Are individuals who come from other ethnic backgrounds or religions some sort of pollution to be gotten rid of so that our communities can be pure and clean? What an appalling idea! The God of the Bible does not care more about some groups than others. He does not play favorites with a preferred nation, race, or social class. He is not interested in building a homogenous church consisting of all the same kind of people. Today, as we continue our study of the book of Acts, we will look at the story that makes this point emphatically.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and today, once again, Scott, we are turning to Acts; this time to Acts Chapter 10. In our last program we looked at, really, a pivotal chapter in the story: Acts 9, the conversion of Saul of Tarsus into Paul the Apostle, and Paul is the Apostle to the Gentiles, and now God is going to teach that same lesson in Acts 10 to the other great Apostle of the early Church, Peter.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, all of this is the same Holy Spirit pushing the early Church in the same direction through a variety of different actions and maneuvers.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly. If you are familiar with the Bible at all you know that the story of the Old Testament – what we call the Old Testament or the Hebrew Scriptures – is basically the story of God's special, chosen people, the Jews; but in and through that story God makes it clear that his choice of them was for strategic reasons, not for prejudicial ones; not because he played favorites. It took a while for him to get that lesson across, even to the first Christians.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; already in Genesis 12 when God calls Abram out of the nations, he does it for the sake of the nations. So, if you are going to save the world, you have to start somewhere, even if you are God; and so, his beachhead, his first move, will be Israel, what would become Israel, Abram's descendents eventually; but already in Genesis 12 God said: I am going to call you out of the nations so that one day through you all nations will be saved. So, he started with a particular group, but the goal all along was to get everybody.

DAVE BAST

Right, and today we come to the story of the first clearly gentile convert in the early Church. It is true, as we saw in our program on Acts 8, there were some hints of this as the Gospel reached into Samaria; they were half Jewish and this Ethiopian eunuch, he may have been a convert to Judaism, but today we have the story of an out-and-out Gentile and how he came to hear the Gospel, and it is told in Acts 10. Let me begin by

reading the first few verses of that chapter.

¹At Caesarea, there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. ²He and all his family were devout and God fearing. He gave generously to those in need, and prayed to God regularly. ³One day at about 3:00 in the afternoon, he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, “Cornelius.” ⁴Cornelius stared at him in fear. “What is it, Lord?” he said, and the angel answered, “Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. ⁵Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon, who is called Peter. ⁶He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea.”

And that is exactly what Cornelius did. He immediately sent a couple of his servants to go find Peter and bring him back.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You love the way Luke sets this up. Luke, the writer of Acts, as in Luke’s Gospel, Luke does not usually drop in details just randomly. He always sets things up – you know, the great Christmas story in Luke 2, mentioning all of the Roman officials and so forth – so, also here he piles on how outside – to Peter’s perspective, certainly – this Cornelius is going to be. He is Caesarea, which used to be called Naphtali, but now it is Caesarea, so it is Caesarville, right?

DAVE BAST

Right, and it is the capital of the Roman province of Palestine.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, you are in Caesarville; this guy is an Italian in charge of the Italian Regiment – a good man – a God-fearing man, but to Peter’s eyes, this guy is going to be way outside; way out of bounds of Israel.

DAVE BAST

Also a tough guy; a soldier. You did not get to a centurion in a crack regiment if you were namby-pamby. So, he is a member of the occupying army. Throughout the New Testament, we have these really interesting stories of people who should be completely men of the world; and yet, they are kind of interested in God, they are drawn to God, and somehow or another they meet the Lord.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Cornelius is a good example, and this would be a lesson and a reminder for us yet today, you never know where the Holy Spirit is working. The Holy Spirit clearly was working in this man’s heart. He is a good man; he gives generously and God says – the angel says: You have been such a generous guy; we have seen your work. It rises up before us like a fragrant offering. But clearly, that is the work of God in this man’s life. So, to most people’s eyes, to the eyes of Peter and his fellow Jews now following Jesus as Messiah, this guy would look like not a candidate for salvation, but the Holy Spirit is at work and has softened him up. So, you never know who you need to talk to or who you need to witness to, because the Spirit is always well out ahead of you, at work.

DAVE BAST

The other thing we are told about him is that he is a God-fearer, and that is actually a bit of a technical term in the New Testament. There were, throughout the Mediterranean world, Gentiles who were attracted to the God of Israel. It is no surprise when you consider the glory and grandeur of the revelation of the character of God in the Old Testament; a God who is holy; a God who is righteous; a God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in compassion; and a lot of gentiles, thoughtful gentiles, had grown tired of the rather silly stories of the gods – the various myths – and so, they were attracted to the God of Israel, but they could not really come all the way, because to do that – the only way to do that was to become Jewish and to undergo circumcision if you were a male, and there was some hesitation to that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

A lot of other rituals, and you would have to give up a lot of the food you used to eat, and enter a whole new world; which true, anytime you are converted to a new faith that is what it involves, but there were some obstacles there.

DAVE BAST

But even the question of would they be fully accepted.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, they would always, maybe, have an asterisk by their name: Not fully... These are the kinds of people that, when the Christian faith began to come with its acceptance of all and the dropping of a lot of those ceremonial regulations, these people were wide open to receive the Gospel. But, where you stopped the reading a few minutes ago, Dave, we are in the middle of things. So, Cornelius knows God sees him. He has been told to call for someone named Peter, and in just a moment when we come back, we are going to see what happens when God brings this to Peter's attention.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we are, today, digging into Acts 10. This is a pivotal chapter in the story, not just of the early Church, but of the entire Church; and in fact, if anyone is listening to this program as a Christian, but is not a Jew by birth, was never raised Jewish, is not a part of the household of Israel, then this is our story because this is the part of the story of the early Church where it turns directly to the inclusion of what are often called Gentiles, which is anybody who is not Jewish.

DAVE BAST

Right; and the individual in question is a Roman centurion named Cornelius, and he is a devout person; he is a God-fearer; he has been praying to the God of Israel, even though he is not part of the covenant promises extended to Israel, but he has been giving generously to the poor and he gets a response. God sends, actually, a vision telling him to get in touch with a man named Peter; and it is a wonderful illustration, you know, Scott, of the promise of Jesus: Ask and you will receive; seek and you will find. Nobody ever – I believe – nobody ever searches honestly and sincerely for God without ultimately finding him, or being found by him maybe is a better way to put it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But God knows – now he has answered Cornelius – but God knows this is only going to work if Peter is willing to go along; and so, God is going to have to do some – I was going to say, lay some groundwork – in Peter's life because what we often forget is that until this point in the book of Acts there are some hints and whispers, and you could go to the ministry of Jesus and see how Jesus reached out to outsiders and non-Jews and gentiles, and the like, but after Pentecost even, the Apostles still saw themselves as Jews – as now Jews who had found the Messiah – fulfilled Jews, but the term "Christian" was not even being used just yet. That will come up just a chapter or so later; but until then, they saw themselves still as Jewish, and therefore requiring, if you were going to become a follower of Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, then you would still become a Jew first; and that is how Peter thought. So, God has to get through to him now with a brand new message to get him ready for the brand new day that the Holy Spirit is, even now, unleashing.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and there is another very practical problem as this story unfolds because Cornelius can send all he wants to Peter, but unless he takes him with an armed squad of soldiers, Peter is not willingly going to go with some strange people to visit a Gentile because it was taboo, religiously and culturally, for a Jew to have any interaction with Gentiles. They did not eat meals with them; they would not go inside a gentile house; it was thought to be unclean. This was just engrained in them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

This was who they were.

DAVE BAST

And it is not necessarily part of God's original law or purpose; it is how they interpreted it; and these cultural prejudices had grown up and encrusted everybody. Even Peter, even the Jewish Christians, have not broken through this yet.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so here is how the Holy Spirit is going to break through the crust; picking up in Acts 10 at the 9th verse. So again, in your mind's eye picture the men from Cornelius's house in Caesarea; they are scampering toward Joppa, to where Peter is, and now meanwhile, this is going on:

⁹About noon the following day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up to the roof to pray. ¹⁰He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. ¹¹He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. ¹²It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles, birds. ¹³And then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." ¹⁴"Surely not, Lord," Peter replied, "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." ¹⁵The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." ¹⁶This happened three times and immediately the sheet was taken back up into heaven.

DAVE BAST

I love Peter's reaction there: Ew, unclean food! I would not dream of eating that!

SCOTT HOEZEE

No, I am not going to eat lobster, I am not going to eat pig, I am not going to eat anything not kosher. I have never done it.

DAVE BAST

And it would have been physically revolting to him – even the idea. When you are raised that way – I remember once I was in India on a ministry trip and we were in New Delhi, and the last night there before we went to the airport we were going to just get a bite to eat, and there happened to be a new McDonald's at the time. They have been there for a while now, but this was just newly arrived in New Delhi, and we went to this McDonald's, and there was a sign on the door into the restaurant: There is no beef on these premises. Because the very thought of that would be revolting to...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, you do not eat beef if you are...

DAVE BAST

Right, if you are a Hindu. Cows are sacred – sacred cows. So, they were afraid that somebody was going to riot and torch the restaurant if they thought this... and that is exactly how Peter reacted.

SCOTT HOEZEE

With horror!

DAVE BAST

I cannot stomach this; I have never done this, Lord.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I think all we need to do, no matter who we are, is just think about something that has been, as it were, taboo in our own religious tradition. When I preached on this some while ago, I said, “Can you imagine a devout Christian Reformed family or Reformed family in the 1950s, very strict on Sabbath observance, very strict on not going to the theater or to the movies, can you imagine the Holy Spirit coming to a Christian Reformed person on a Sunday afternoon and saying, “You must go to the movies today. I want you to take your family to the movies on Sunday.” “No, Lord. We cannot break the Sabbath and I am not going to the theater. It is the devil’s den.” For Peter, it was something at least that scandalous. This is what religious people do not do.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you just brought an unhappy memory – true confession time, Scott. I remember when I was in seminary I went to a big league ballgame once on Sunday afternoon.

SCOTT HOEZEE

On Sunday.

DAVE BAST

And I did not enjoy it, I was so guilty; but here is the point of the story, and the punch line comes in what Peter is told: Do not call unclean that which God has purified or made pure – and it is not talking about animals and food anymore – although, incidentally, Jesus does say that all food is now clean. We do not have to observe those dietary restrictions; but the point is not about food, the point is about people.

SCOTT HOEZEE

About people; and that is why the thing about this story, Dave, that I love the most – and I remember when I saw it some years ago when I preaching on it – you just made me very, very excited: Where is Peter when he gets this vision? He is in the city of Joppa. There is only one other story in the whole Bible that involves Joppa, and it is the city to which the prophet Jonah fled when God told him to go preach to the foreign, gentile Ninevites, and Jonah said: No way do I want any non-Jews in our club, so I am not going to go the Nineveh; and so he goes to Joppa instead because he wanted to keep it an all-Jew, all-Israelite-only club. Now, here is Peter thinking the same thing in the same city – the only other time in the Bible it is mentioned – and God is saying: I am sending you to a new people; and that is what we are going to see coming up in just a moment.

DAVE BAST

That is a great connection, thanks; yes, because Peter does get up and go. He obeys the vision from heaven that has been sent to him, and he is going to come into Cornelius’s house and preach a dramatic sermon, and something even more dramatic will happen as a result of that, as we will see in a moment.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*. Now well into the 10th chapter of the book of Acts, we have seen the Holy Spirit being very busy over in Caesarea. The Holy Spirit has talked to a man named Cornelius, saying: You need to send for someone named Peter to help bring you to faith in the Gospel. Then in the city of Joppa, where Peter happened to be, the Holy Spirit said: I am getting you ready to go to people you think are unclean, but I am telling you they are clean. And no sooner does the Spirit say that – we did not read this part – but there is a knock at the door. So, Peter is still stunned by this vision of eating non-kosher food and accepting... and there is a knock at the door, and here are Cornelius’s servants that he sent and they say: You have to come with us. And he does. God has softened him up, and so he goes.

DAVE BAST

So, he arrives in Caesarea and he goes to Cornelius's house, and he does not exactly start in a warm and gracious way, does he?

SCOTT HOEZEE

No; no, he walks in – we can read this in the 28th verse: Well, you are well aware it is against the law for a Jew to associate with Gentiles or even visit them. Nevertheless, what do you want?

So, Peter went, and he knows the Spirit is up to something, but that is not exactly the greatest way to start an evangelistic encounter – kind of saying: If it were up to me, I would not be here; but I am here, so what do you want?

DAVE BAST

Way to be gracious to your audience. So, Cornelius tells him his experience of seeing this angel in a vision and the message that he has had. Clearly, this is all God's doing because they did find Peter where the angel told Cornelius he would be, and Peter had been prepared; and so, what could he do but come along; and so, Peter begins to preach to them and he says this:

³⁴I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, ³⁵but accepts those from every nation who fear him and do what is right. ³⁶You know the message God sent to the people of Israel announcing the Good News of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.

He goes on then to really focus on Jesus; what Jesus said and did; and then the characteristic line from Peter's preaching and sermon, again and again and again this phrase: ³⁹We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, ⁴⁰but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. (We are witnesses of that basic Gospel truth.)

SCOTT HOEZEE

No sooner, basically, does Peter say that – and we could pop down to verse 44: While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. And these people start to praise God; there is even some speaking in tongues, we are told; and Peter apparently – we were not told this earlier – but some other people went along, so there were some other Jewish people there with Peter, and they just cannot believe it. The same thing that happened to the Apostles on the Day of Pentecost, as we read about that back in Acts 2, there is another Day of Pentecost, but it is all these Italians! It is these Gentiles, and once Peter sees that he says: Well, that's it. Let's baptize them. I am not going to stand in the way of the Holy Spirit. God wants these people in his Church, so baptize away, and the whole household, we are told, gets baptized.

DAVE BAST

Right; and probably the reason for that special outpouring of the Spirit in such a visible way again is to make exactly the point that this is a sort of second Pentecost. At the first Pentecost, only Jews were present – Jewish believers in Jesus – now these people have come to believe in Jesus; and incidentally, at the climax of Peter's sermon, there is a call to repentance and faith. He says: All the prophets testify about him (that is, Jesus) that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. You know, this is very striking to me because most of us would look at Cornelius and say: Wow, what a righteous person. He is a God-fearer. He prays, he gives to the poor, he is a good man.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Maybe he is all set.

DAVE BAST

Yes; what more does he need? And yet, God responds to Cornelius's prayer by sending someone to share the Gospel with him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, he still needs to believe and to repent and get saved by grace the same way – he did not get saved by his deeds – good though they were – he gets saved by grace.

DAVE BAST

No; he needs to hear about Jesus. As good as a person may be, it is not about religion; any religion, including even the Christian religion. It is about the Lord Jesus and this basic truth that he is the way to God; he came as God among us; he died for our sins; God raised him again; and he is going to judge the world, and you need to believe that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And he is the way to God for everybody; Peter, Paul, Cornelius, the Ethiopian in the chariot we saw in Acts 8; it does not matter who you are; you come to God the same way; and so, this household gets saved and Peter ends up staying with them, under their roof, eating at their non-kosher table. I always like the line Fred Craddock – the great preacher, Fred Craddock, had in one of his sermons on this text years ago. He has kind of a high, squeaky voice, but he said: Yeah, so Peter stayed with these people; ate at their table; can you imagine that? Pizza with ham and pepperoni and... Peter is eating non-kosher.

DAVE BAST

Well, it is Italian food, probably, right?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, Italian food.

DAVE BAST

The great theme that comes through is in that first verse that I read of the sermon, where Peter says: Now I understand; God does not show favoritism.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is a perennial struggle for us all, right? We will see that there will still be some arguments later – Peter and Paul eventually – we will not be covering this in this series, but in Acts they really have a little bit of a falling out temporarily because when Peter was with some Jewish people later he pretended like this never happened, and so Paul calls him on the carpet. Even in the next chapter, in Acts 11 when Peter goes back to all of the other apostles, they heard what happened and they said: Well, now! They had their hands on their hips saying: You had better explain yourself, Peter! How dare you! You are not kosher anymore. You are not pure.

So Peter tells them the whole story, and I always like that he said: The Holy Spirit got poured out on them, so what could I do but baptize them? Luke says near the end of Acts 11: Having heard that, no one had any more objections. It is like: Well, okay.

DAVE BAST

Right; except that later on they did object.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It takes a long time.

DAVE BAST

Yes; we could also talk about Acts 15, and these are chapters that we are going to skip over because this is quite a selective series, but in Acts 15 the first great council of the Church is convened to struggle with this issue of how far do we go in accepting Gentiles? And what do they have to do? They have to do some things to show that they are now living the Christian life and following God, but does it have to include circumcision and the dietary laws, and all that?

As you mentioned, Peter and Paul will disagree over this, and Paul says: I confronted him to his face. The problem of prejudice is so deeply rooted in us, including the Church today.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Once all of those specific Jewish things disappeared from Church history, other things cropped up, as we met different people groups, different skin colors, different ethnicities, the Church as it has moved out into the world continues to struggle with that. The whole civil rights movement in recent times, in the 20th Century, and we continue to struggle with accepting the other. We continue to struggle – I have seen it as a pastor with people in my congregations – I have struggled with it myself – the line: God does not show favoritism...

DAVE BAST

There it is.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is the greatest line there is, and yet we struggle with it.

DAVE BAST

We have to absolutely let that truth search our own hearts and lives and root out whatever sinful attitudes we may have.

Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Dave Bast with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. Visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what topics or passages you would like to dig into next on *Groundwork*.

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