

Alderwood Community Church
May 2, 2010

Dealing Honestly With Our Prejudices

Acts 10:9-16, 28-29, 34-35; James 2:1-12

Intro: In the Spring of 1992, violence inflamed the city of Los Angeles. When the smoke finally cleared, an estimated 5,200 buildings were destroyed or damaged, and losses ranged close to \$1 Billion. A staggering number of people were arrested- almost 17,000. The number of injured soared to 2,383, and tragically 54 people lost their lives. (Rodney King Civil Rights Case)

What could have fueled such a destructive rampage? In a word: Prejudice. Differences in color and culture had ignited misunderstanding, which had sparked antagonism, which had inflamed hatred, then anger, then revenge. The result was thirty-six hours of havoc and bloodshed.

We shake our heads at such horrible violence, but admit it or not, we all have that same volatile prejudice smoldering within us. According to Webster's, *prejudice* is simply a "preconceived judgment." Do you see in yourself a tendency to prejudge others?

Take a moment for a quick personal prejudice test:

What images come to mind when you think of: Blacks? Whites? Hispanics? Or Asians?
 How about the poor? The wealthy?

Do you categorize people by the clothes that they wear? If they have tattoos? Multiple piercings?

Politically, what about liberals? Conservatives?

How do you feel about people who have failed? Who have been divorced? Who have sinned?
 Who have been in psychiatric hospitals?

What about religious prejudices? How do you view those attend a different church? Who worship differently than you do? Or who have a different list of do's and don'ts?

If we are honest, it is painful to face our own prejudices. And like being trapped in a smoke filled building, it is hard to see through the negative preconceptions we've had all our lives. We're not alone, however, for the apostle Peter was trapped by prejudice too. Let's look how God rescues him in Acts 10.

The Ugly Truth: We all have prejudices!

"We are each burdened with prejudice; against the poor or the rich, the smart or the slow, the gaunt or the obese. It is natural to develop them. I noble to rise above them." Author Unknown

Context for Acts 10: In Acts 1-7, the church was born and established in Jerusalem. Opposition to the gospel soon arose, Stephen was stoned to death, and in chapters 8-9, a wave of persecution scattered believers into Judea and Samaria. As they went, they preached the gospel to the Samaritan Jews, and the church grew even more.

Our story this morning begins during this period of scattering, about A.D. 40, less than a decade after Christ's crucifixion and the coming of the Holy Spirit. There are two main characters, a Roman Centurion named Cornelius and a Jewish Apostle of Jesus Christ named Simon Peter. Cornelius lived in Caesarea and Peter lived 30 miles south in the seaside town of Joppa. But more than just miles separated these two men. As a Jew, Peter was taught throughout his life to despise people like Cornelius. Alfred Edersheim describes the extent of the inbred prejudice that Jews held against Gentiles.

“Every Gentile child, so soon as born, was to be regarded as unclean...The Mishnah goes so far as to forbid aid to a [Gentile] mother in the hour of her need, or nourishment to her babe, in order not to bring up a child for idolatry!.....It was not safe to leave cattle in their charge, to allow their women to nurse infants, or their physicians to attend the sick, nor to walk in their company...They and theirs were defiled; their houses unclean, as containing idols or things dedicated to them; their feasts, their joyous occasions, their very contact, was polluted by idolatry; and there was no security, if a heathen were left alone in a room, that he might not...defile the wine or meat on the table, or the oil and wheat in the store...Milk drawn by a heathen, if a Jew had not been present to watch it, bread and oil prepared by them, were unlawful. Their wine was wholly interdicted – the mere touch of a heathen polluted a whole cask; even to put one's nose to heathen wine was strictly prohibited.”

Because of his Jewish background, Peter had probably had these prejudicial sentiments lingering in his mind. Prejudice is a learned mindset. I once saw a billboard with a number of young children on it of many ethnicities and it simply stated: *“People are not born prejudice, they learn it.”*

Only God's grace could clear the air and open wide the church's door to a world of Gentiles waiting to follow Christ.

Our story begins with Cornelius, who was the first to experience the divine nudge that brought the two men together. (Acts 10:1-8)

While Cornelius' men journeyed from Caesarea to Joppa, the Lord had time to work on Peter:

Read Text: Acts 10:9-17, 27-29, 34-35 (pg. 1,088)

⁹: *About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray.* ¹⁰ *He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance.* ¹¹ *He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners.* ¹² *It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air.* ¹³ *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.”* ¹⁵ *The voice spoke to him a second time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”* ¹⁶ *This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven..*

Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people.²⁸ He said to them: “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean.²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection...

³⁴ Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism³⁵ but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.³⁶

Big Idea: In Order For The Gospel To Advance God Must Exterminate Prejudice From The Lives Of His Messengers.

1. Peter’s Example (Acts 10:9-16; See also James 2:1-12)

According to verse 16, the Lord had to show Peter the vision three times, and still Peter was “wondering about the meaning of the vision.”

How many times must God expose our prejudices before we learn that all people are equal before Him? Alexander Whyte makes this strong statement:

“All mankind, indeed, except Peter and a few of his friends, were bound up together in one abominable bundle. And Peter was standing above them, scouting at and spitting on them all. All so like ourselves. For, how we also bundle up whole nations of men and throw them into that same unclean sheet. Whole churches that we know nothing about but their bad names that we have given them, are in our sheet of excommunication also. All the other denominations of Christians in our land are common and unclean to us. Every party outside our own party in the political state also...They are four-footed beasts and creeping things. Indeed, there are very few men alive, and especially those who live near us, who are not sometimes in the sheet of our scorn.”

“But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean.” Acts 10:28

“I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts men from every nation who fear Him and do what is right.” Acts 10:34-35

Favoritism means literally “to receive the face” of someone or to accept his external appearance as the real thing and to make an evaluation on that basis.

God loves and accepts people from all nations. God has a soft spot for the poor. God is compassionate toward the widows and orphans. God calls us to do the same. He even adds, “Love your enemies and pray for those who spitefully use you.”

2. God’s Commands

“My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don’t show favoritism.² Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby

clothes also comes in. ³ *If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, “Here’s a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet,”* ⁴ *have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?...* ⁹ *But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.*
James 2:1-4, 9

Favoritism is not simply your own private opinion according to God. It is a sin. It is not just bad conduct, it is bad morals. It is totally incompatible with the Christian faith for a man or woman who professes to be a believer and yet show favoritism.

In Leslie Flynn’s book, *Great Church Fights*, he does a masterful job of describing just how petty and abrasive we can become. He includes this poem:

*“Believe as I believe, no more, no less;
 That I am right, and no one else, confess;
 Feel as I feel, think only as I think’
 Eat what I eat, and drink but what I drink;
 Look as I look, do always as I do;
 And then, and only then, I’ll have fellowship with you.”*

“Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.”
Romans 15:7

What does it mean to “accept one another”? It means *“to welcome and receive other people.”*

The ultimate aim of our text in Acts 10 and James 2 is that **we are called by God to change the way we** think, we feel about, we look at and the way we treat other people.

We are called to accept and love people as God does! Regardless of the color of their skin, their religion, their political affiliation, their social standing, their education, their physical features or their likeability.

3. The Call For Honest Self-Examination

We must be brutally honest with ourselves, and not sugar-coat our prejudices. We must honestly admit and confess our bias’, prejudices and favoritism.

The story of Cornelius and Peter, teaches us that there is no one the grace of God cannot liberate. Let God’s grace free you from your prejudices today!

We must learn to comprehend God’s grace and love. We must learn how to demonstrate God’s grace and love.

Will we allow ourselves to be so full of pride and superiority that we will refuse to love people as God loves them? Will we allow bitterness and unforgiveness to keep us from accepting and loving those whom Christ died for, and those he loves and accepts?

Illus: Philip Yancey in his book, "What's So Amazing About Grace?" told a true story about a friend of his who works with the down-and-out in Chicago:

"A prostitute came to me in wretched straits, homeless, sick, and unable to buy food for her 2 yr. old daughter. Through sobs and tears, she told me she had been renting out her daughter to men interested in kinky sex. She made more renting out her daughter for one hour than she could earn on her own in a night. She had to do it, she said, to support her own drug habit. I could hardly bear hearing this sordid story. For one thing, the pastor said, it made me legally liable- I'm required by law to report cases of child abuse. I had no idea what to say to this woman.

At last I asked her if she had ever thought of going to a church for help. I will never forget the look of pure, naïve shock that crossed her face. "Church" she cried. "Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse."

Yancy goes on to comment. "What struck me about my friends story is that women much like this prostitute fled toward Jesus, not away from him. The worse a person felt about herself, the more likely she saw Jesus as a refuge. Has the church lost that gift? Evidently, the down-and-out, who flocked to Jesus when he lived on earth, no longer feel welcomed among his followers. What has happened?

Would this woman be welcomed at Alderwood? If she came in to church this morning, tattered, smelling like alcohol, bringing her 2 year old daughter with her. If her story would become known in our church, how would you treat her?

My prayer is that Alderwood would be a safe place! A place known for it's grace toward sinners of all kinds.

Christian Counselor David Seamands summed up his entire counseling career this way. "Many years ago I was driven to the conclusion that the two major causes of emotional problems among evangelical Christians are these: 1. The failure to understand, receive, and live out God's unconditional grace and forgiveness. 2. The failure to give out that same unconditional grace to others.

We read, we hear, we believe a good theology of grace. But that's not always the way we live. The good news of the Gospel of grace has not penetrated the level of our emotions."

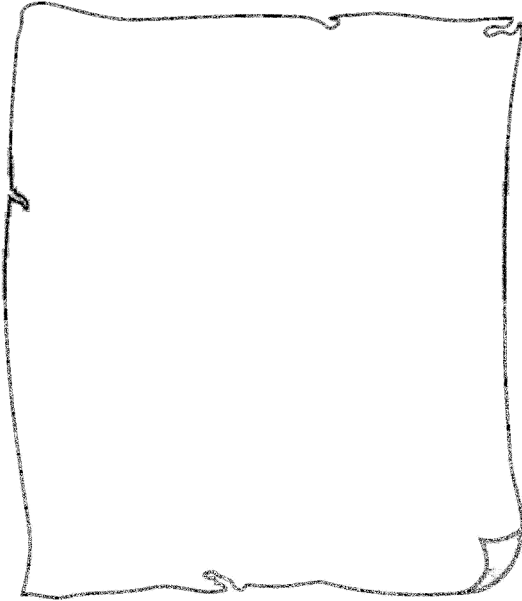
Do you know why people have a hard time accepting others? They confuse acceptance with approval. There's a big difference between acceptance and approval. You can accept somebody without approving of his lifestyle. He may be doing something totally contrary to the word of God, but you can accept him as a person without approving of the sin he's involved in.

"Accept one another just as Christ accepted you." Romans 15:7. At Alderwood we are trying to cultivate an attitude of acceptance. An atmosphere of Grace. The church is a hospital for sinners, not a hotel for saints. This is a church where people are growing. This is a church for people who don't have it all together, and who haven't arrived. If that fits you too, then you are welcome here!

Absolutely nothing can stop the church that's filled with love. Nothing. But it doesn't happen accidentally. It requires an all out effort by each of us. Everybody needs to contribute to the atmosphere of love and grace in this church. Would people come back to this church just because of you? Together let's renew our commitment to extend the grace of Jesus Christ to the lonely, the poor, the ugly, the prostitute, and the homosexual just as Jesus did!

4. The Need For Extermination!

- A. Make a list of your “unclean people”: (Parchment)



Alexander Whyte prescribes a healing but painful procedure to exterminate the disease of prejudice in our hearts:

“If you would take a four-cornered napkin...and write the names of the nations, and the churches, and the denominations, and the congregations, and the ministers, and the public men, and the private citizens, and the neighbors, and the fellow-worshippers, - all the people you dislike, and despise, and do not, and cannot, and will not, love. Heap all their names into your unclean napkin, and then look up and say, “Not so, Lord. I neither can speak well, nor think well, nor hope well, of these people. I cannot do it, and I will not try.” If you acted out and spoke out all the evil things that are in your heart in some such way as that, you would this get such a sight of yourselves that you would never forget.”

- B. Confess your sinful attitudes and behaviors.
- C. Remind yourself of God's gracious acceptance of you and them!
- D. Pray for these people on your list!
- E. Reach out to them and express God's love and grace to them.