

ACTS - AN UNPREJUDICED INVITATION

November 13, 2022

I grew in a pretty blue collar family with blue collar values. We were a casual, down-to-earth kind of family. We were a practical, Midwestern family with Midwestern values. Fancy wasn't really part of our vocabulary.

So, it's no surprise that when I was invited to golf at one of the premiere golf courses when I was in college, I was unprepared.

A friend of mine had received an invitation to a premier course not far from my house and invited me along to make up the foursome we were going to play in. This was while I was in high school, mind you, and I was a pretty good player. But, I spent all of my time playing the local municipal course in my hometown.

And, one of the things this premier course had that my local course didn't was a dress code. That's right. Collared shirts and khaki shorts or pants only.

Unfortunately, nobody told me about this dress code. So when I showed up in a collarless shirt I immediately received some dirty looks. Not to mention, the country club was so nice and everybody around me seemed to be just a little outside my station in life. At first I didn't realize why I was getting some of the dirty looks, but I was quickly reminded once I checked in for our tee time.

The gentlemen behind the counter was quick to tell me I wouldn't be allowed to play unless I had on a collared shirt. I told him I had just driven 30 minutes from my house and didn't have one—was there anyway he could make an exception.

His answer was, "No, but let me check something." He went into an office and came out a few minutes later with THE ugliest shirt I had ever seen in my life. He then told me I was free to wear the shirt he had. It was purple with green and white horizontal stripes. I was an 18 year old kid in the late nineties.

Out of options, I took the shirt and decided to play. But, I looked like I didn't belong. I felt totally out of place.

Of course, I beat everybody that day, but it was not very much fun being invited to something where I immediately felt like I didn't belong. I wasn't invited as I was, I was expected to be something I wasn't prepared for. Needless to say, I never played there again.

Today we are going to look at a passage that paints a picture of a different kind of invitation. An invitation to come as you are. An invitation that doesn't require a collared shirt or a cleaned up look.

Go ahead and open up the **YouVersion** app if you haven't done so for an easy way to follow along with my message today. Go to "more" and "events" and you'll see Genesis Church listed as Live. If you have your Bible with you, open to Acts 10, starting in verse 17.

Last week looked at the first 16 verses of Acts chapter 10. In it, we are introduced to a Roman Centurion named Cornelius. Cornelius is described as a devout, God-fearing, generous man—well respected by both the Romans and the Jews in the city of Caesarea. During one of his times of prayer (around 3pm) an angel appears to him and tells him to send some men to fetch Peter in Joppa.

Peter has recently spent time in Joppa—a city straight west of Jerusalem on the shores of the Mediterranean. During his time spent there, he has performed the miracle of raising Dorcas, a beloved leader in the church community in Joppa. In addition, while praying at the noon hour one day, Peter receives an unusual vision from God.

The vision is of a sheet that fills the sky and on it are animals, reptiles, and birds of all kinds—many of whom were considered "unclean" by Jewish law. In Leviticus 11 God gives the Jewish people a set of dietary laws to help set them apart from every other nation. God wanted to give the Jews a unique identity—one that exemplified God's holiness. Because of this, the dietary laws (clean and unclean foods) wasn't just a set of rules, but a mark of identity. It was something that made them uniquely Jewish—different than the rest of the world.

The vision Peter receives, though, repeals the dietary laws. God tells Peter to, "Kill and eat." Something new is happening and God is telling Peter what once was considered unclean has now been made clean through Jesus.

However, Peter's response is bold. He straight up tells God, "NO! I won't do it. I have never eaten anything considered unclean by Jewish law and I'm not gonna start now." But, God isn't budging on it. He is doing something new. He is creating a new identity among the Jesus followers. And, so, God gives Peter the vision three more times—to solidify the fact that He is breaking down the barriers that have kept people from experiencing His love and grace. God's mission is to go to the ends of the earth—far beyond the confines of the Jewish people.

Which is where we now pick the story in Acts 10:17...

Acts 10:17-20

17 Peter was very perplexed. What could the vision mean? Just then the men sent by Cornelius found Simon's house. Standing outside the gate, **18** they asked if a man named Simon Peter was staying there. **19** Meanwhile, as Peter was puzzling over the vision, the Holy Spirit said to him, "Three men have come looking for you. **20** Get up, go downstairs, and go with them without hesitation. Don't worry, for I have sent them."

Peter is still reeling from the vision he just received—trying to sort out what it all means—when the men sent by Cornelius arrive at the home where he is staying. These men have traveled a good distance to meet Peter. Caesarea (where they came from) is about 50 miles north of Joppa. It was no easy task for these men to get to Peter in a days time.

Here is what happens when they finally meet up with Peter. Verse 21:

Acts 10:21-23

21 So Peter went down and said, "I'm the man you are looking for. Why have you come?" **22** They said, "We were sent by Cornelius, a Roman officer. He is a devout and God-fearing man, well respected by all the Jews. A holy angel instructed him to summon you to his house so that he can hear your message." **23** So Peter invited the men to stay for the night. The next day he went with them, accompanied by some of the brothers from Joppa.

So, after Peter and Cornelius' men finally make contact, they all spend the night at the home where Peter was staying and then head out to Caesarea the next morning. Verse 24.

Acts 10:24-27

24 They arrived in Caesarea the following day. Cornelius was waiting for them and had called together his relatives and close friends. **25** As Peter entered his home, Cornelius fell at his feet and worshiped him. **26** But Peter pulled him up and said, "Stand up! I'm a human being just like you!" **27** So they talked together and went inside, where many others were assembled.

Peter obviously has a reputation in Caesarea. So much so, that Cornelius bows down and worships him upon his entrance. Peter knows better than to let someone worship him though. He's just a man. He isn't worthy of the worship of anyone. We'll come back to this in a minute. For now, let's keep going in the story...

Acts 10:28

28 Peter told them, “You know it is against our laws for a Jewish man to enter a Gentile home like this or to associate with you. But God has shown me that I should no longer think of anyone as impure or unclean.”

Peter is breaking all kinds of Jewish laws by going into Cornelius' home. It was one thing for Jews to invite Gentiles into their homes—it was a whole other thing for a Jew to enter the home of a Gentile. To do so, would make them unclean, causing them to be excluded from Temple worship until they had made amends for their uncleanness.

In fact, one of the reasons Jews refused going into Gentile houses and eating with them was that they believed the houses were polluted because Gentiles forced women to have abortions and then put the dead fetuses down the drain or under the floorboards.

Similarly, Cornelius is going against all sorts of social protocol among the Romans. Gentiles avoided Jews because Jews were considered stuck-up, unsociable, and lazy. They wouldn't eat pork (the cheapest of meat at the time), they wouldn't join in the local festivals and social activities, and they took an entire day off from work every week.

Truth is: there is no substantial evidence for any of this. Jews and Gentiles just pre-judged each other based on conjecture and rumor. Even the Jewish laws prohibiting Jews from entering Gentile homes was more a preventive measure than a law.

As a result there is constant tension between Jews and Gentiles in the 1st Century. They don't seem to understand each other very well and are comfortable to just let it be that way.

But, God is doing a new thing and Peter is finally starting to get God's vision for him. As he enters Cornelius' home he says, “God has shown me that I should no longer think of anyone as impure or unclean.”

In other words, Peter is admitting that all of the prejudice he has against the Gentiles is a thing of the past. He is now setting aside all of the conjecture and rumors about people like Cornelius because God has changed the narrative. Gentiles are no longer to be seen as unclean. In fact, Jew and Gentile are now in the same boat. Where once the Jew was considered more beloved by God, now Gentiles are considered in the same manner.

Acts 10:29-33

29 “So I came without objection as soon as I was sent for. Now tell me why you sent for me.” **30** Cornelius replied, “Four days ago I was praying in my house about this same time, three o’clock in the afternoon. Suddenly, a man in dazzling clothes was standing in front of me. **31** He told me, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your gifts to the poor have been noticed by God! **32** Now send messengers to Joppa, and summon a man named Simon Peter. He is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner who lives near the seashore.’ **33** So I sent for you at once, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here, waiting before God to hear the message the Lord has given you.”

I have this image of Peter standing in the middle of Cornelius’ living room while Cornelius and his friends and family sit eagerly to hear what Peter has to say. I mean, up until this point, Cornelius still doesn’t know or understand why Peter is in his house. All he knows is that God told him to go find him and bring him back to Caesarea. Peter is a complete stranger to Cornelius—and Cornelius is the same to Peter.

In fact, Peter doesn’t even know why he’s there. All he knows is that the vision he received from God has changed the landscape of faith. The invitation of the good news is open to all people—including those who were once deemed unclean by Jewish standards.

This is a critical shift in Peter’s understanding of the mission and Kingdom of God. The invitation into the family of God is now available to everyone. From this point on, anyone and everyone has the same invitation to come to Jesus. No matter who they are. No matter what city they are from. No matter their heritage or genealogy. No matter if they once worshipped Roman gods or only worshipped the one true God. The invitation of Jesus is the same for everyone.

Next we will listen as Peter tells Cornelius and his friends about Jesus for the first time, but today I want to focus on God’s invitation to both Peter and Cornelius in this moment.

Peter—a Jew if there ever was one—carries the baggage and burden of following the law and looks down on others who aren’t Jewish. He’s pompous and arrogant. He is hesitant about God’s revelation in his life even though he seems to be getting the picture.

Cornelius—a Roman among Romans—wears Caesars name across his chest plate and has likely participated in all kinds of pagan worship and ceremonies.

Even though he has since converted to Judaism, Cornelius is bring a Gentile past and lifestyle to the table.

God brings Peter and Cornelius together to make sure they (and Luke's readers) will know a powerful and profound truth about God's heart:

Everyone is invited as they are to become who they are not.

Peter and Cornelius are invited to this moment just as they are. God does not ask them to make any changes or become something they never were at this moment. Peter is still an apostle of the church and a Jew by birth. Cornelius is still a Roman officer and a God-fearer in Caesarea.

They are invited just as they are. But, they are also being invited to be who they are not.

God's desire for both Peter and Cornelius is that through this moment in time they will be changed into the person God wants them to be—someone they have yet to become. And just like Peter and Cornelius experienced in Acts 10, so the truth still remains for us:

Everyone is invited as they are to become who they are not.

We are a "Come as you are" church. If you don't have it all figured out and don't have it all together, you're invited here. But, we also know that God doesn't want any of us stay there. God is in the work of changing lives. Through Jesus He is working in the lives of every person who has responded to His invitation—helping all people become who they are not. Helping people become more and more like Jesus.

The Apostle Paul talks about this extensively in his letters...

Ephesians 4:21-24

21 Since you have heard about Jesus and have learned the truth that comes from him, **22** throw off your old sinful nature and your former way of life, which is corrupted by lust and deception. **23** Instead, let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes. **24** Put on your new nature, created to be like God—truly righteous and holy.

And then again in Colossians 3...

Colossians 3:5-9

5 So put to death the sinful, earthly things lurking within you. Have nothing to do with sexual immorality, impurity, lust, and evil desires. Don't be greedy, for a greedy person is an idolater, worshiping the things of this world. **6** Because of these sins, the anger of God is coming. **7** You used to do these things when your life was still part of this world. **8** But now is the time to get rid of anger, rage, malicious behavior, slander, and dirty language. **9** Don't lie to each other, for you have stripped off your old sinful nature and all its wicked deeds. **10** Put on your new nature, and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him. **11** In this new life, it doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us.

Paul says, everyone is invited just as they are—sinful and broken and needy. But, the invitation God gives is not to stay there, but to allow him—regardless of who we are or what we have done—to reshape us, to change us into new people.

We are all Peter's and Cornelius'. We are all coming together as people from different walks of life and experiences. We are invited as we are to become who we are not.

Listen...eyes up here...YOU ARE INVITED. In love, God invites you—broken, sinful, grief-stricken, anxious, addicted, needy—you. You are invited to experience the rest and the healing and the grace of God through Jesus. You are invited to place your faith in Jesus—the one who died for your sin and rose again to invite you into a new life. You are invited as you are—scars and scabs and all—to become who you are not. As Paul says in Colossians 3:11

Colossians 3:11

11 In this new life, it doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us.

Peter stands in the living room of Cornelius' house, looks around at the Roman and Gentile faces, and realizes:

Everyone is invited as they are to become who they're not.

And like Peter, I am standing here looking at all of the faces in this room and remembering: Everyone is invited as they are to become who they're not. You are invited into a new life. A life of letting go of who you once were to become who are not yet. God is inviting you to let go of the shame and the pain

and the suffering and the sin and the addiction. You are loved and welcomed just as you are today. And you are invited to let go of who you have been in order to become who God wants you to be.

Will you receive that invitation? Will you give over your life to Jesus—to shape and change you in who you are not? Will you surrender your prejudices and preconceived ideas about God and others? Will you allow Jesus to robe you in a new life—with new hope, new peace, and new joy?

Pray.