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“A Wider Grace”

Sermon Series: “Forgiveness,” No.6

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Acts 10:34-43

34 Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism 35 but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. 36 You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. 37 You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached— 38 how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

39 “We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, 40 but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. 41 He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. 42 He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. 43 All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

You’re welcome to turn back with me, if you’d like, to the book of Acts, the tenth chapter.

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The story’s told that C.S. Lewis, when he was young, announced one day, “Daddy, I have a prejudice against the French.”

When his father asked him why, Lewis replied, “Well, if I knew *that*, it wouldn’t be a prejudice,” which is absolutely right.

A prejudice is, by definition, a “pre-judgment ... a premature verdict” that we come to about an issue or a person...or in Lewis’ case, a whole nation. Prejudice ... is making up our minds before we know all the facts.

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Usually, our pre-judgments are accidental.

At times, though, they *can* be intentional, can’t they?

People enjoy some prejudices so much that they learn just enough facts to support their opinion ... and then conveniently *ignore* any facts that *don't*.

That's what's known as living in an echo chamber; listening to only those *people*, those *programs*, those *politicians* who share our prejudices, so as to not leave room for any *new* information ...

and let me say, that is neither an *honest nor* a *responsible* way to live,
especially for a Christian.

The Apostle Peter discovered this, but God had to, personally, convince him.

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I wish we had time to read this whole chapter, because the verses *before* ... these that were read for us show us, not only the tremendous *power* of God, but also the *precision* He uses to accomplish His purposes.

At the beginning of chapter 10, God speaks, through a vision, to this fellow named Cornelius...a good man, a soldier, compassionate and caring and open to the things of God ... *but* ... horror of horrors ... Cornelius was a *gentile!* A *non-Jew!*

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That the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob could *ever actually engage* with a *gentile* just did not register as reality, *ironically*, with most first century Jews, including Peter...and so there you have Peter's prejudice: God likes Jews ... not gentiles.

But that was soon to change ... and look at all God did to make that change!

Just after God's vision to Cornelius had unfolded in Caesarea, God *also* provided *Peter* with a vision ... 40 miles away ... in Joppa ... a vision about what *should* and should *not* be considered *clean* or *appropriate* or *good* in the eyes of a Jew.

Back in verse 13 there, in the midst of the vision, God told Peter what to do, and when Peter essentially responded, "*I will not do that,*" God replied to him, "*Oh yes you will! I am breaking into your echo chamber, Peter! I am giving you all the information, whether you want it or not!*"

It took three times for God to get the message to Peter ... and of course, we can understand why.

All his life, Peter kept God's laws for the Jews about clean and unclean people and food; laws that were fine and good; laws that God Himself put in place for specific purposes.

For *generations*, God called the Jews to be *different* –

to *eat* and to *not* eat certain things,

to *marry* and to *not* marry certain people,

to be set apart from the rest of the world in very specific ways.

And for those days and times, all of that was very valid and purposeful.

But now ... God was doing something ***different***; something ***new***, and to continue to live in right relationship with Him meant being willing to accept what He says, even when what He says is ***different*** than what we're used to ... ***different*** even than what ***He's said*** in the past.

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It was a big step for Peter, which is why God did all that He did to make it happen. Look at the precision timing of all of this! Even while Peter was still wrestling with ***his*** vision and what it meant, he hears the knock on his door of the men God sent to take him to Cornelius, which would become the ***living illustration*** Peter needed to accept the truth that he had a prejudice problem.

Peter did not want to imagine that ***gentiles*** could receive mercy from God...and that needed to change in order for God's purposes to move forward.

Peter needed to see that, with Jesus, there was a new reality.

Peter had to wrestle with what it meant, now ... in light of Jesus ... for Israel to be "a witness;" to be "the light for the world."

Peter had to wrestle with what Jesus meant when He said "people would come from the east and the west into God's new creation."

And what that meant for Peter was ... he had to face his prejudices.

All his life, Peter had only watched one channel: "God's News for Jews." Now, he had to be willing to watch a different channel ... he had to apply this new thing God was doing to his own life and values.

Specifically, Peter had to accept that God would forgive gentiles and welcome them into His Kingdom.

eter had to accept that God's grace was wider than He'd thought, and in order for him to really grasp that, Peter, apparently, had to stand, face to face, with Cornelius.

Face to face.

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Ah, it's ***easy*** to maintain prejudices at a distance, isn't it?

It's ***easy*** to make our determinations about people when we're far away from them.

"We don't like the Russians, we don't like the North Koreans, we don't like the Iranians."

"We don't like the French." That's easy to say when they're thousands of miles away.

In our age, it's ***also*** easy to maintain prejudices ***electronically***.

We don't like northerners, we don't like southerners,

we don't like liberals, we don't like conservatives,

we don't like rich people,

we don't like poor people;

so from the comfort of our living room, we can very easily post nasty things about them, or write them rude e-mails or texts.

And we can even *more easily complain about* the people we *don't* like to the people we *do*.

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But...when we have to actually face our prejudices...

when we have to make our determinations while looking into the person's eyes...

while hearing their stories...

and meeting their families...

and sharing their tables...

that's a different game!

It's one thing to drop bombs from 50,000 feet on an enemy *nation*.

It's another thing to kill a soldier of that nation in a battlefield trench...where you can see their eyes and feel their breath...which I think is why God took Peter to Cornelius' home...so Peter to look him in the eye...and even on his own turf!

God wanted Peter to get the whole story ... the fact that God loved Cornelius the gentile as much as He loved Peter the Jew ... *and* ... God was willing to *forgive* Cornelius the gentile as quickly as He was willing to forgive *Peter* the Jew.

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And you know...Peter got it! Peter got it!

Peter accepted that that visions were too much of a coincidence to be a coincidence.

But even more, when Peter arrived at Cornelius' house, there was this whole crowd...of *gentiles*...all of Cornelius' family and friends; they were there waiting for him.

Now, for a careful, pious Jew, that would be like walking into a herd of pigs.

But Peter's coming around, you see?

And then, on top of all that, on behalf of his family and friends, Cornelius says to Peter there in verse 33, "*We are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.*"

"Please...speak to us of God! We're here to listen to what you have to say!"

Every pastor I know would give their left arm to hear that from their congregation.

Their genuine willingness, openness, eagerness...that's when Peter admits, in verse 34 there, "*I now see very clearly that God does not show favoritism, but accepts those from every nation who fear Him and do what is right.*"

"I now see the different thing God is doing."

Wow...what a shift for a guy like Peter!

Years ago, the slogan of Virginia Slims cigarettes was, "You've come a long way, baby."

That could be said for Peter right here, "You've come a long way, baby!" though maybe without the "baby."

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And you know, if that wasn't enough, before Peter is even finished giving them a simple gospel message, as if to put an exclamation point on this whole event, verse 44 says the Holy Spirit came upon everyone there.

I don't know if, by that time, Peter needed that extra shot of proof or not, but seeing that...that's when Peter says, "***Can anyone keep these people from being baptized? They've received the Holy Spirit, just as we have!***"

Wow! You've come a long way, Peter!

You know, I'm not sure there's a personal transformation in the New Testament that's any more important than Peter's here; and Peter's little sermon in today's text there...that may have been the most important sermon of his life...not so much for the sake of Cornelius and his family, but for ***Peter's*** sake, because it's here that Peter loses his prejudice.

It's here that Peter realizes...God has no favorites.

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Now, let me say, this doesn't mean our world is now a free for all, and that God has become the great "softy in the sky." Tom Wright puts it like this: "This ***does not mean*** that God runs the world as a democracy, or that He...accepts everyone's opinion about everything or everyone's chosen lifestyle. No! But what it ***does mean*** is...because of Jesus, there are no ethnic, geographical, cultural or moral barriers...in the way of anyone and everyone being offered forgiveness and new life."¹

In other words, this is ***not*** the ***tolerance*** that our culture loves to talk about, where everyone is right and no one is wrong.

God doesn't just tolerate us. He doesn't walk stiffly by us as we pass Him in the hall or on the road.

God doesn't pretend to like us when, really, He doesn't.

He doesn't treat us as some sort of second class being.

Through Jesus, God the Father offers any'll who admit their need and ask...***forgiveness***...grace that is wide enough to welcome and embrace us, and powerful enough to heal and transform us.

And of course, in that same spirit, God calls ***us***, just like He called Peter, to offer that sort of forgiving grace.

And if we hesitate, like Peter did, God might just follow up with some pretty amazing "coincidences" in our lives.

Maybe He'll use a vision.

Maybe He'll speak through something we read in the Bible or somewhere else.

Maybe He's trying to get our attention through that nagging, sleeplessness we struggle with.

¹ Wright, N.T. Acts For Everyone. Westminster John Knox. 2008.

Maybe God will bring that person's face to us...either in our mind's eye, or maybe in person...down the aisle in a store.

Maybe God's even trying to say something to us through the Sunday sermon...that's talking about forgiveness – *again* – for...what...the *fifth* week in a row!? Can't he talk about something else? This is getting really hard to ignore!

You may not want to think God is behind all those coincidences...but really...He is.

And that's because God loves both *you and* that person who needs your grace. God wants you both to have peace, but the only path to peace is through His grace...grace that is wider than we may have realized.

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And you know, He'll help us!

If God's asking us to face our prejudices...if He's asking us to see someone differently...if He's asking us to forgive someone...He'll provide the grace we need to do it.

We just have to agree to do His thing...His new thing.

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Hey, if God's asking you to see someone in a new way...

to realize that God deeply loves that person...as much as He loves you...

if He's asking you to go to them; to look them in the eye...

to understand who they are, and to offer them grace...

If God's asking you to do that, that's only because Jesus has already done that for you.

He came to where we are...

He looked us in the eye...

He met our family and friends...

And though He could have, He showed no favoritism...

He offered us forgiveness and grace.

He did that for us, so He has all the right in the world to ask that of us.

And you know...to say "yes" to Him about that might just be the most important thing you do for God's Kingdom. In your life, it might be the most important contribution that you make to His Kingdom.

I mean, look what happened in Peter's life when he was willing to shed his prejudice and forgive.

Who knows what amazing things might happen in ours?

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If God's Spirit is pointing out a prejudice in you that He'd like to address ... if He's saying something to you about forgiveness, then I urge you to say to Him even as we come to His table, "Lord, show me where my prejudices limit You, and take them away ..."

take them away so I can see others as You see them ...

so I can be free to forgive ...

so You can be free, Lord, to use me in any and every way You might choose in your Kingdom.

Let the grace I show to others be as wide as the grace you've shown to me."

Lord Jesus, may it be so ... in every one of us here who walk with You today ... who claim the name of Christ. Help us to see the wideness of your grace as Peter was able to see. Help us to contribute to your Kingdom in just the way You have for us. In Jesus name, Amen.

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Let's take a moment as we come to the table this morning to let the Spirit speak ... with heads bowed and eyes closed, let the Spirit speak. Is there some way that He is trying to move us like He moved Peter ... past a point of prejudice and on to a wider grace for someone else? Let's let Him speak for a moment.

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**Communion:**

**Closing Song:** "Amazing Grace"

**Closing Word & Benediction**

The last verse of that song contains the promise given to all in Christ:

"When we've been there 10,000 years bright shining as the sun,  
We've no less days to sing God's praise than when we first begun."

That is the destiny of all in Christ because of His grace for us ... because He's forgiven us and held no prejudice against us.

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Thanks for coming to worship today. The Lord bless and keep you.



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