

BREAKING DOWN PREJUDICE

ACTS 10:23–33

Introduction

Prejudice and partiality exist. From the beginning of time prejudice has existed (Cain and Abel, Gen. 4:1f). Prejudice is everywhere in the world — in every nation, state, city and neighbourhood. Prejudice (discrimination) even exists within families between parent and child, brother and sister, close family and distant relatives. Feelings toward and against people are a tragic reality. Note several facts about prejudice.

1. There are at least two basic reasons for prejudice.
 - a. People differ. They differ in nationality, colour, beliefs, religion, speech, looks, behaviour, ability, energy, position, status, social standing, possessions, wealth, birth, heritage. Prejudice arises when people feel they and their differences make them better than others.
 - b. Mistreatment causes prejudice, both mistreating others and being mistreated. When a person mistreats or is mistreated by others his nature is immediately aroused to become biased and judgemental. The mistreatment that gives rise to prejudice covers a wide range of behaviour: ignoring, neglecting, joking, gossiping, opposing, cursing, abusing, fighting against, persecuting, passing over, segregating, enslaving.
2. The present passage strikes a fatal blow against prejudice. It shows forever that Jesus Christ has erased all prejudices and barriers between people. Jew and Gentile are now one in Christ Jesus. This is the subject of the present passage. However, before launching into the passage, some background will be helpful in understanding just what is happening and the significance of it.

The Jews, like all other people of the earth, had developed their own laws and customs; and every Jewish child was born and reared in the environment of those laws and customs. And, like all other people, they were steeped in their own nationality and looked upon other people with suspicion. However, there were two factors that made the Jewish prejudice run deeper than most.

1. The Jewish people had always been mistreated, enslaved and persecuted much more than the other people of the world. Through the centuries, the Jewish people had been conquered by army after army, and by the millions they had been deported and scattered over the world. Even in the day of Jesus they were enslaved by Rome. Their religion was the binding force that kept Jews together, in particular their belief that God had called them to be a distinctive people (who worshipped the only true and living God) and their rules governing...
 - the Sabbath
 - the temple
 - intermarriage
 - worship and cleansing
 - diet, what foods they could and could not eat
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Their beliefs and their rules kept them separated from outside beliefs and from being swallowed up by other nationalities through intermarriage. Their religion was what maintained their distinctiveness as a people and as a nation.

Jewish leaders knew this. They knew that their religion was the *binding force* that held their nation together. Therefore, they opposed anyone or anything that threatened or attempted to break the laws of their religion and nation.

2. The Jews misread and misinterpreted God's Word and His purpose for them. God had called Abraham and given birth to the Jewish nation for one primary purpose — that they might be His people, His witnesses, His missionaries to the rest of the world. God had given the Jews His Word and instructed them to take His Word to the world and tell them about God. They were to bear witness that God is — that God does exist — and that men are to worship and serve Him and Him alone.

It was here that Israel failed. Instead of proclaiming God and His Word of righteousness and morality to the world, Israel separated itself from the world, hoarding and claiming that God and His law were theirs and theirs alone. They became *separatists*, extremely prejudiced, building barriers and partitions between themselves and the other people of the world (Gentiles). Prejudice became so deep-seated that attitudes such as the following were adopted:

- ⇒ They called other people “dogs.”
- ⇒ They would have no contact with a Gentile unless absolutely necessary, and then after contact, they had to go through a religious ceremony to be cleansed.
- ⇒ They would not help a Gentile woman who was giving birth lest another Gentile be born into the world.

It was into such a world that the church was born, a world of prejudice, the prejudice...

- of Jew against Gentile
- of Gentile against Jew
- of Gentile against Gentile

How was God going to overcome and break down the walls and barriers of prejudice that had been built up through the centuries of history? How was He going to get His church, His people, to break away from their Jewish roots in order to reach out to the whole world?

That is the point of the present passage. The doors of God's salvation are about to be gloriously swung open to the people of the world. Every man will soon have the wonderful privilege of hearing the marvellous message proclaimed: God is love and has sent His dear Son into the world that the world might be saved and not perish. The present passage shows how God broke through the prejudicial environment and customs of his dear servant Peter. God led Peter to swing open the door to a Gentile soldier who was desperately crying out to God.

The story is one of the great stories of history, and it should be studied by all people everywhere. A study of this event shows that God has broken down the barrier of racial and religious prejudice between men. He intends them to be erased forever — in the name of His dear Son who came to show that God loves all men and wishes all men to be saved.

This account of the passage can be titled: “The Breakdown of Prejudice” or “The Opening of the Door to the Gentiles.” The door could not be opened until the existing prejudices were dealt with; therefore, the story deals mainly with the breaking down of the prejudices between the Gentile Cornelius and the Jewish minister Simon Peter.

Because of the length of the story and *its significance*, the event is divided and dealt with in three parts.

Part 1: Breaking down Prejudice (Acts 10:1-33).

Part 2: Preaching Peace (Gentiles) (Acts 10:34-43).

Part 3: Receiving the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:44-48).

The present study is, Part 1: The breaking down prejudice. Note the major points:

- I. The breakdown of prejudice in the Gentile, Cornelius (vv. 1-8).
- II. The breakdown of prejudice in the Jew, Peter (vv. 9-22).
- III. The confrontation: lessons learned by the Jew and the Gentile, the prejudiced of the world (vv. 23-33).

Acts 10: 23–33 Lessons for the Jew and the Gentile

The confrontation and lessons learned by the Jew and the Gentile, the prejudiced of the world.

1. The preparation by Peter. He took six Jewish believers, orthodox Jews, with him (Acts 10:45; 11:12). Peter knew he was treading troubled waters by associating with Gentiles; he sensed he would need witnesses to what he was doing. Therefore, he was preparing himself against attack (see 11: 1f).
2. The preparation by Cornelius. Note...
 - He was expectant, excited, eagerly waiting for their arrival.
 - He had “called together his relatives and close friends.” There were many present.

Note also the faith of Cornelius. He *knew* Peter would be coming, that God would fulfil His Word (v. 6) and do what He had promised.

Psa 37:5 Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this:

Psa 34:22 The Lord redeems his servants; no one will be condemned who takes refuge in him.

Isa 26:4 Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord, the Lord, is the Rock eternal.

Thought 1. Cornelius was already witnessing by bringing people to hear the messenger from God.

3. The confrontation of the Jew and the Gentile, two men humbled by God.
 - a. Cornelius had been humbled by the vision from God. He had been mulling over the experience for four days now, being humbled and prepared more and more to receive the Jewish messenger. When he confronted Peter, he was so humbled he prostrated himself before Peter in an act of deep reverence.
 - b. Peter demonstrated humility as well. It was the custom to bow before men of high honour, showing reverence and respect for them. But God had humbled Peter too. Peter forbade the act, disallowed it. No man is to be idolized or revered in the sense of being held in awe. Peter rebuked Cornelius: "I am only a man myself."

Thought 1. Jesus accepted such reverence and worship (see Mt. 2:11; 8:2; 9:18; 14:33; 15:25; 20:20; 28:9, 17; Lk. 5:8). and He accepted it from Peter himself (Mt. 8:2; Lk. 5:8). But Peter says no man is to bow or reverence another man, no matter who they are. We are all mere men, each one saved by God's wonderful grace.

Mat 18:4 *"Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."*

Rom 12:3 *For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.*

Phil 2:3-4 *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.*

1 Pet 5:5 *Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."*

4. The lesson learned by Peter. (See note, Acts 10:28-29.) Peter now knew that no man was impure or unclean. He now knew...
 - that Christ had abolished the distinction between Jew and Gentile.
 - that Christ had abolished the wall of partition between Jew and Gentile (see *Temple*, Jn. 2:14).
 - that Christ had abolished *all* distinctions between men, whether racial, social or some caste system.

No man was to treat any other man with anything but love and care, mercy and forgiveness, concern and compassion. Peter's prejudice was wiped out, erased and overcome. It had been overcome by God. The door of salvation was about to be thrown open to the Gentiles forever.

Note Peter's reference to how it was unlawful for a Jew to associate with a Gentile (v. 28). This law was not in the Scripture. It came from the Scribal law (see *Teachers of the Law*, Lk. 6:2).

Mat 5:45 “That you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”

Rom 10:12 For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile — the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him.

Gal 2:6 As for those who seemed to be important — whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not judge by external appearance — those men added nothing to my message.

Gal 3:27-28 For all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Eph 6:9 And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favouritism with him.

5. The lesson learned by Cornelius was threefold.
 - a. The man who truly seeks God moves God. Cornelius declared that God answered his prayer.
 - b. The man who seeks God must listen to God and obey God. Cornelius declared that he listened and did exactly what God said, and that he did it immediately (v. 33).
 - c. The man who seeks God must be receptive to the Word of God.

Acts 17:11 Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

1 Th 2:13 And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe. ■

ACTS 10:28–29
RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS, CHURCH,
PREJUDICE: GENTILES VS. JEWS

Jews were forbidden to eat certain animals because they were said to be unclean. This was a symbolic vision. God was teaching Peter that Gentiles (represented by the unclean animals) were acceptable to Him and were to be as much a part of His church as were Jews (v. 28). This is of extreme importance, for God was revealing

that this had been His eternal plan for the church from the beginning. It was the revelation made “by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets” (Eph. 3:5). Note that “apostles” and “prophets” are plural. Paul was not the only apostle to whom the revelation was given. Peter later shared this experience with the Gentiles at Caesarea (Acts 10:24-29) and with the Jews at Jerusalem (Acts 11:1-11). Peter says very plainly in Acts 15:7-14 that God was calling out both Gentiles and Jews to make up the church.

This move on God’s part stirred one of the most revolutionary movements in human history. Both Jews and Gentiles were gripped with the deepest prejudice against one another (see Lk. 10:25-37. See notes, Lk. 7:4-5; *Dog*, Mk. 7:27; note, Eph. 2:11-12; see Gal. 2:4; Eph. 2:13-18; 2:19-22. See Rom. 9:1-11:36. See notes, Mk. 11:15; Eph. 2:14-15 on the structure of the Jewish temple.)

Note the open invitation among the Gentiles: “We are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded...” (v. 33). The door for Gentile evangelism was thrown wide open! □