

Words and Deeds: The New Normal
By Jason Huff
September 30, 2018
Psalm 102:12-18; Matthew 15:21-28; Acts 10:19-48

My friends, our final Scripture reading today comes from Acts 10:19-48. May God bless the reading of His holy and sacred Word. “While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.” Peter went down and said to the men, “I’m the one you’re looking for. Why have you come?” The men replied, “We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to have you come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say.” Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests. The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa went along. The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. But Peter made him get up. “Stand up,” he said, “I am only a man myself.” Talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. 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. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?” Cornelius answered: “Four days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me and said, ‘Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.’ So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.” Then Peter began to speak: “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. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached – 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. We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. 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. 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. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

The new normal. How often we forget how things that seem so permanent, so normal, go out the window so quickly to be replaced by something else that becomes the norm. Seatbelts in cars are the new normal – many of us remember when they weren’t guaranteed to be in every car. A TV in every home is the new normal. Telephones that access the Internet and allow texting are the new normal.

Sometimes, the new normal is truly great – I don't think anyone really wants to go back to washing clothes by hand and hanging them out to dry. Sometimes the new normal is awful – the divorce culture in our country for example. Sometimes we hope that something is an anomaly that won't be repeated – like the confirmation hearings in the Senate this week – but we fear it will become the new normal. And then there are some things that we wish could be the new normal but won't be until Christ comes – an end to war, suffering, evil.

Today's passage gives us one the very best instances of “the new normal” in all of Scripture. One fateful day in Caesarea, God proved He had brought about His “new normal,” something promised since the day in the garden that sin entered into the world. God was not just going to have a kingdom filled with the physical descendants of Abraham, but He was bringing in His chosen people from every people group all the way back to Adam and Eve at the very beginning. But instead of tracing our lineage back to them spiritually, we have a spiritual head now in Jesus Christ. Let's explore this “new normal” together and how it speaks to us today.

Last week, we talked about the two visions God gave to Cornelius and Peter. Cornelius' vision is essentially repeated for us in this week's passage. You might ask why Luke decided to repeat himself so quickly, and it's not hard to figure out. Repetition stresses the importance. What we're seeing radically changes everything about the relationship the Jewish believers in Jesus have with every human being on the planet, so repeating how God is involved makes perfect sense. We need to sense just how groundbreaking this change will be.

You may also remember Peter's vision of a sheet let down from heaven of all sorts of animals, clean and unclean, that he was commanded to eat despite his protests. This part will be repeated again too for the same reasons. We talked about how the Jewish Scriptures forbid certain foods and how it was catastrophic for any Jew to deliberately eat unclean food. That comes into play from the very beginning of this passage, so we're going to talk about it again.

What we miss but ancient readers wouldn't is that Peter welcomes Cornelius' men into the home where he's staying, and then he enters Cornelius' home. First, this is against Jewish law – not the Torah, not the Law we read in the Old Testament, but in the oral law, the Mishnah, the law above the law that the Jewish people tried to follow in order not to break the Torah. You were never to go in a Gentile's home for fear of contamination. Second, this would have unnerved anyone taught this way. We don't have a taboo quite like this one any more, but imagine that someone invited you into their home and you saw black mold dripping from the ceiling and cockroaches scurrying away when the door opened. You'd probably think twice about going inside!

And yet, for you and me, that would just be a health and safety taboo. For them, this is a religious taboo and a cultural taboo. Gentiles served other gods, believed other things, raised their children differently, ate other foods, dressed differently, spoke differently, lived in different neighborhoods. And while you might be able to deal with them in the marketplace if you had to, you would never ever ever invite them into your home and show them hospitality. That was to call them a friend. Remember how much trouble Jesus got in when He ate with Jewish men and women who were known to be sinners. Ramp that up thirty-fold and that is the outrage that would be having table fellowship with a Gentile.

But Peter's vision showed him, as he repeats to Cornelius and all his guests, “God has shown me that I should call no man impure or unclean.” God has gotten him past the unwritten rule that he's to assume all Gentiles are unwelcome before God. It's not keeping Jewish law that makes you right before God; it's faith in Jesus.

This is where we can stop and bring it into our world today. A survey done several years ago found that only 20% of Americans spend any regular time with their neighbors. 33% don't know the names of a single of their neighbors at all. Most of us, myself included, would be considered bad neighbors by the standards of even the early 1970s. We don't have taboos against our neighbors like Peter had to face. We might have something worse – self-centeredness.

People are not hearing about Jesus because we have so much technology that can keep us exclusively in our own groups, our families, our interests, that we don't ever have to venture out and meet people who aren't like us who need to hear about Jesus. And we have something insane like this week's Senate hearings and we start to wonder if everybody outside of our group is nuts or irredeemably evil, all because some very loud and power-hungry people have turned things into a circus. Some people today are reluctant to talk to someone on the other side of the political spectrum for fear of starting a fight.

But folks, this is no different than 2000 years ago, when the Jewish believers, the Christians, the ones who knew Him, who had the right answer, who had the gospel, saw the Gentiles and thought, “No way this good news is possibly for them. No way they could possibly change. They're the enemy (and literally, at times in their history, that's precisely what they were). They worship demons. Too far gone. Not going in their houses, nope. Not telling them about our Messiah, the Messiah promised to us, to our people.” And God tore down those walls.

So should we. I'm not going to say who you might have over for dinner Heck, the speed the modern world is, inviting somebody out for dinner at the local diner is doing pretty good! It's not about where it happens or necessarily about a meal. It's being approachable and approaching others with a spirit of hospitality for Christ. It's about looking in the face of someone who's not at all like you and seeing that they were made in God's image just like us. It's recognizing that God wants all sorts of people in His Kingdom – fallen, broken people who come before Him through the righteousness of Jesus alone.

Now we get our neighbors, friends, coworkers, whoever at the table. All good. When we bring up faith, what should the conversation look like? Let's take a look again at the passage and find out. When Peter arrives in Caesarea, Cornelius bows down at his feet. Now here's something you may not know - “bow down” and “worship” are the same word in Greek. There's no differentiation. The context is all we have.

But the reason they use the same word is because they were one and the same thing in Greco-Roman thought. To prostrate yourself before someone or something was the position of worship. It was the position of dependence. Jews in particular were clear that they would bow before no man, since only God deserved their worship. It's one of the reasons Jesus was tried for blasphemy – He accepted worship. Either He was God in the flesh, or He was a fraud, but He cannot be just a man and accept worship due only to God.

Peter immediately has Cornelius stand up. Some ancient manuscripts even have Peter saying, “What are you doing?” in horror. Peter, Paul, Paul's friend Barnabas, angels – all of them refuse anyone bowing down to them. They know it's not their place to receive worship or veneration. That belongs to God alone. And that gets us back to the topic at hand. What does a conversation about faith look like?

Here's a key: *it doesn't focus on us or any other human being*. Remember how we talked a couple weeks ago about how it's not on us – how all we do because of our relationship with God is empowered by God and not ourselves? That's so awesome because then we know we really can do what He asks of us. In the same way, it's a relief to know that the focus of faith isn't really on us. It's on God.

Here's the thing: Peter, Paul, the other apostles, they all work sharing the gospel, they are good examples for us. But they never accepted the praise of men for what they did. It wasn't about them. In the book of Acts, the apostles rarely talk about themselves. Peter doesn't give a testimony about how God changed him from a proud, boastful, but ultimately cowardly guy into a man after His own heart. Paul only talks about what happened to him on the road to Damascus as part of his personal defense in the courts, as we'll see much later in Acts.

Here's the thing: a personal testimony is a good and beautiful thing told well. But it's not the gospel. If God leads you to share your personal testimony, that's perfectly fine. God has done amazing things in all of our lives that are worth praising Him about. But if you don't have a stunning testimony, if it's much like mine where you were raised in a church and grew up believing and then it became stronger over time but doesn't involve gigantic life changes or huge turnarounds, that's OK too. Because our faith is not about us. And our stories about what Jesus has done in our lives can wind up becoming about us rather than Jesus. But that's good news. You don't have to impress anyone with what God has done in your life. You don't need a special story. All you need is Jesus.

And that's where Peter turns, and where we turn. *How do we share our faith? We share the gospel*. The biblical gospel, which means “good news,” has particular content. The gospel is not the whole of the Bible. The gospel makes sense within the story of Scripture, but it's not every principle or concept found there. You may hear someone say, “God loves you.” True, God does love every human being no matter whether or not they turn to Him, and that is good news of a sort. But that's not the gospel. Some people use to say, “Repent and turn from your wicked ways.” Also true, and an appropriate response to the gospel, but not the gospel. “Jesus can fix you.” Gloriously true. Not the gospel.

What is the gospel, then? The good news *is* Jesus – His life, death, and resurrection. As Peter tells it, the good news is that Jesus was anointed by God with the Holy Spirit and power, that He lived a perfect life of service because God was with Him, and that despite His death on a cross, God raised Him from the dead and showed Him to many witnesses. He's been appointed the judge of all, and everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through His name. You want the gospel in thirty seconds or less, that's it. Now obviously this is a summary of what Peter said, but it's the gospel.

Now the good news is bad news to some. Judgment is coming. Jesus will be the judge of all. The question is whether or not you will face charges. Everyone on earth is guilty of treason against God; no one deserves a place in His Kingdom. And yet everyone who believes in Jesus – not just mentally saying, “this is true,” but living in a way that shows you actually believe it and want to serve God – will be forgiven their crimes. It is the best news to those who will trust in Jesus; it's the worst news to those who won't.

Jesus is the judge, king, and lord of all. It's what you do with that information that's important. As Dr. R.C. Sproul commented on this passage, it's wrong to say as some do, “I allowed Jesus to be my Lord.” You don't allow a king anything. You are in no position to do that. It's OK to say, “I asked Jesus to save me; I asked Him to give me faith; I asked Jesus to give me His Spirit.” But kings have the right to command their citizens to do anything they want. That's what being a sovereign means; they have authority.

Sometimes we hear, “he's not my president.” I've heard that for forty years - “he's not my president.” No matter who it is, someone from the other side of the political fence says that. Well, truth is, the president is the commander in chief of the United States, and if you're a citizen, then he is your president. Now thankfully, we don't live in the United Kingdom – we don't have to take the president's orders (unless we're in the military). He is not our sovereign by any stretch. But he is the president of our country.

Every creature belongs to God, every man, woman, and child. God is our King. We can say – and many people do say - “I don't believe in God. He's not my King.” Yet He is. We can't change it. Jesus is our judge, like it or not. We can't apply for another. He's it. As Pastor Tim Keller out of New York City says, “Most people want Jesus as a consultant rather than a king, and he does not come that way.” But the good news is, He is merciful. His forgiveness knows no bounds for anyone who believes in Him.

Now when we talk about our faith, it doesn't mean that a two-minute, love it or leave presentation of the gospel is all we need. Over and over again, the apostles reason with others as to why the gospel is true. There are a lot of conversations to be had. But there is no salvation apart from the good news, apart from Jesus. When we stay focused on Him, then we don't have to worry about our story. We don't even have to make Jesus look better to people – we don't have to sell them on Jesus plus something else. When we fully understand the good news, we don't need to sell others on anything else.

As we'll continue to see next week, there is a new normal. Our judge and king and savior has come. And it's the new normal for everyone around the world – every knee on heaven and earth shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. You are a part of the new reality of God's Kingdom. Will you live it today?