

A Gift to be Shared

Acts 10

Christmas is soon upon us and along with it comes the tradition of gift giving – a time where we reflect God’s amazing gift of Christ by turning around and giving gifts to others. Sometimes people give large gifts of money to bless family members and the people they love, and I want you to imagine that someone has given me a very generous gift of \$1,000 because they wanted me to take my family on a trip to Wisconsin Dells for Spring Break. They were excited and blessed by the thought of our whole family enjoying time together, having fun and making great memories.

But let’s say that instead of telling Amy and the kids about it, I put it in the bank and kept it a secret. Then in the weeks leading up to Spring Break instead of using it to book a hotel room at a family water park or hotel in Wisconsin Dells, I booked an ice fishing trip for just myself at a resort on Mille Lacs Lake in MN – a time to get away for personal retreat and refreshment while Amy stayed back with the kids. What would the person who gave that generous gift think when they asked me after Spring Break how our family enjoyed the trip? Would they be glad that I used the money on myself instead? What would Amy think when she found out about the gift and what it was supposed to be used for? Some gifts are meant not only for our own enjoyment, but to share that joy with others. And if we keep them to ourselves, it defeats the purpose and blessing of the gift.

This morning I want to point out the tendency we have as Christians to do that very thing with the gift of salvation and new life that God has given us through Jesus Christ. There is a familiar pattern that you can see in churches. When things are going well there is a lot of excitement. People are on fire for God and being spiritually fed in a way that’s really helpful. They make deep connections with other people and are so blessed by the relationships and the ministry of the church. They never want it to end. They want to keep enjoying a great experience and make sure things don’t change. And what often happens is things become inward focused in the church – people try to figure out ways to keep having the best experience possible and the best environment at church to meet the needs and wants of the current people.

When this happens, churches often forget about the people on the outside – people in the community who have never known the same joy or experienced the same blessing that a new life in Christ can bring. In fact, so much attention is spent on keeping themselves happy in church that there can be resistance to welcoming others in from the community: “What if they like different music than we do? What if their kids aren’t well behaved? What if things become too crowded and we get uncomfortable? What if the parking lot gets too full? What if someone sits in my pew?”

Our tendency is to take a gift that was meant to be shared and keep it to ourselves. And when this happens it defeats the purpose and blessing of the gift. When you look at the church in the book of Acts, as time went on, you can begin to see them struggle in that area. They were told to make disciples of all nations, but there was definitely a hesitation. Jesus Christ was given to the Jewish church and in their minds it looked like that’s where he was supposed to stay. But in the story we’re going to look at today, we’re going to see that it is God’s clear intent that the gift is meant for others as well. As we seek God’s vision for East Lincoln together, my hope is that this story will inspire us to guard against our tendency to have only an inward focus, but to always have an outward view and desire to share God’s gift with others.

After Saul’s conversion to Christ, the church in and around Jerusalem went from a time of persecution to a time of peace. Peter was able to travel around freely and visit new groups of believers who were gathering in the cities and villages outside Jerusalem and he ended up in the city of Joppa for a few days. Joppa was a port city on the Mediterranean coast, about 40 miles west of Jerusalem. He was there when the story we read about in Acts 10 begins. The story begins in Caesarea, another port city about 30 miles north of Joppa.

Read Acts 10:1-8.

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, ²a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God. ³About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, “Cornelius.” ⁴And he stared at him in terror and said, “What is it, Lord?” And he said to him, “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. ⁵And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter. ⁶He

is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea.”⁷ When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those who attended him,⁸ and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.

Cornelius was a military man of high standing who served in the army of the Roman Empire. Being a centurion, he was a commander of at least 100 soldiers and according to the NIV Study Bible he was part of a regiment of about 600 soldiers stationed in Caesarea known as the Italian Cohort. But perhaps the most important detail about Cornelius was that he was a Gentile. He was not a Jew. He was not part of the covenant community of Israel. He was a full-blooded Gentile. That’s a very important piece of this story.

Another very important piece is to look at his spiritual condition at that time. Luke describes him as a “devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God.” One of the commentaries I read pointed out that this guy’s devotion to God is something almost all of us as Christians would look up to. This isn’t some pagan, polytheistic, immoral Gentile. He’s a devout follower of God who also led his whole household to worship God as well. His devotion would have put the vast majority of Jews at that time to shame.

Was he already saved? Some think he was, some think he wasn’t. I think he was very similar to people in Muslim countries today to whom God appears in a dream to tell them to go somewhere to find someone who ends up leading them to Christ. Tim Lennox told us about such stories when he was here and I’ve heard other stories as well and I think Cornelius was the first person to whom this happened. God was clearly working in his life and had been for a long time, and now we see his plan for Cornelius continue to unfold with this dream he had. Later on when Peter was retelling this story to the Jews in Jerusalem, he recounted the angel’s words to Cornelius like this in **Acts 11:13-14**: “Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; ¹⁴ he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.” Cornelius did what he was told that very day. And the story continues...

Read Acts 10:9-16.

⁹The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. ¹⁰And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance ¹¹and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. ¹²In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³And there came a voice to him: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." ¹⁴But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." ¹⁵And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has made clean, do not call common." ¹⁶This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.

According to Jewish law, there were a number of things that Jews were forbidden to eat – things that were considered unclean. And in this vision, Peter recognized a lot of those things. So when the voice told him to eat, Peter was taken aback, "No!" He was a devout Jew and would never eat anything unclean. They were detestable to him. To do so would be to violate his conscience. It was wrong. There was clean and there was unclean and he would never have anything to do with what was unclean. But the voice contradicted him: "What God has made clean, do not call common." This happened 3 times and Peter was very confused. What did it mean?

Read Acts 10:17-23.

¹⁷Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision that he had seen might mean, behold, the men who were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry for Simon's house, stood at the gate ¹⁸and called out to ask whether Simon who was called Peter was lodging there. ¹⁹And while Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you. ²⁰Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them." ²¹And Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one you are looking for. What is the reason for your coming?" ²²And they said, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say." ²³So he invited them in to be his guests.

At that time Peter would have started to piece things together. These guys were Gentiles – unclean, detestable, common. Jews were forbidden to associate with them. And many in the Jewish church felt the gospel was not for them. And yet

here they were telling him that an angel had sent them. Had he not just had the vision, I think he would have declined their invitation and sent them on their way – Jews don't associate with Gentiles – but after what he just saw and the voice he just heard, he invited them into his home. He was beginning to understand what the vision meant.

Read Acts 10:23b-33.

The next day he rose and went away with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa accompanied him. ²⁴ And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. ²⁵ When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. ²⁶ But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am a man." ²⁷ And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered. ²⁸ And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. ²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me." ³⁰ And Cornelius said, "Four days ago, about this hour, I was praying in my house at the ninth hour, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing ³¹ and said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. ³² Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.' ³³ So I sent for you at once, and you have been kind enough to come. Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord."

In spite of the monumental racial barrier between Jews and Gentiles, here was Peter – a Jew and the most prominent leader in the early church – standing in front of a room full of Gentiles who, I'm sure to his amazement, wanted him to preach to them. So he did.

Read Acts 10:34-35.

³⁴ So Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

I want to stop here because what Peter said is incredibly significant. For the first time Peter realized that what God was doing among the Jews through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ wasn't only for the Jews. It was for Gentiles too. God had opened up his eyes to see that the gift of salvation wasn't a gift they were supposed to keep for themselves, it was a gift that was to be shared with the whole world. They had been told to go and make disciples of all nations, but that bridge hadn't been crossed yet. They had preached the gospel to Samaritans and that was surprising enough, but now Peter realized it was time to preach to Gentiles as well. And this is what he said...

Read Acts 10:36-43.

³⁶ As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), ³⁷ you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹ And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, ⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, ⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

That's all he had to say. God was already working in the lives of Cornelius and his whole household and as they heard Peter's message they believed. And upon believing, something incredible happened. The Holy Spirit was poured out on them as he had been upon the disciples on the day of Pentecost. This is sometimes referred to as the "Gentile Pentecost" and powerfully confirmed that the gift of salvation and the gift of the Holy Spirit was not just for the Jews to enjoy, and not only for Samaritans, but it was for the Gentiles as well.

Read Acts 10:44-48.

⁴⁴ While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. ⁴⁵ And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the

Gentiles. ⁴⁶ For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, ⁴⁷ “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” ⁴⁸ And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.

This was an extremely significant event in the life of the New Testament church – the first time that the Gentiles clearly believed the same thing they did and were baptized into the church the same way they were. Peter and his companions were amazed at what they saw, but they couldn’t deny what was clearly happening.

After a few days, instead of returning to Joppa, Peter went back to Jerusalem. He had some amazing news to share to the Jewish church leaders. Some were very upset that he had chosen to associate with Gentiles in the first place, but when Peter shared the story, their minds were changed.

Read Acts 11:18.

“When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, ‘Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.’”

They were astonished. They realized the gift that was given in Jesus Christ wasn’t given to keep amongst themselves. It was given to be shared with Gentiles as well, and that opened the door for all future efforts by the early church to send missionaries, especially the apostle Paul, to share the gospel with Gentiles throughout the world – efforts that resulted in all of us being here today.

The question that came to my mind throughout this week was: “Why did God send Peter to Cornelius? Who was the encounter primarily for?” I think we most often think, “Well it was for Cornelius and his household of course, so they could hear the fullness of the gospel and be saved.” And certainly God used it for their benefit. But the more I think about the details of this story the more I’m convinced that God did things the way he did primarily so that the Jewish people would see that the gift of salvation wasn’t only for them, but for people on the outside as well – all the Gentile nations too. God could have used any Jewish Christian in that area to speak to Cornelius’ household and they would have believed. But he didn’t. He used Peter. The most prominent leader in the Jewish Church. And once Peter’s eyes were opened, he was able to influence the rest of

the church leaders as well, especially those who wanted nothing to do with Gentiles.

The gift of salvation isn't just for one church or one people group to enjoy; it was given to be shared with others. That means the church of Jesus Christ always has to have an outward focus – even if it means things are going to change. Even if things are going to be uncomfortable. Even if things won't be the way they used to be. An inward focus that puts all attention on making things just the way we want them to be is like me going on a private fishing trip instead of taking my family to the Dells. And if we keep the gift to ourselves, it defeats the purpose and blessing of the gift.

So as we continue to seek God's vision for who we are and who he wants us to be as a church, we must always have an outward focus. We must die to the desire to keep everything the way we want it to be. We need to swing our doors wide open to welcome others in so that they too might enjoy the blessings of new life in Christ.