

PETER'S SERMON TO THE GENTILES

Acts 10:34-48

In the introduction to his sermon, Peter said he perceived that God is no respecter of persons, regardless of who the person is or where he is from. Reaching the heart of his sermon, Peter said, "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power: Who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with Him." Peter preached that Christ was the heaven-sent and anointed One. What a contrast to the kind of Christ so often preached today. Many try now to humanize Him. They try to apologize for all the mysterious and miraculous things about Him. Christ needs no apologies nor defense. Rather men should believe on Him, obey Him, live for Him and proclaim Him to others.

As we discovered in our last lesson, Peter portrayed Christ as the practical benefactor of humanity. He "went about doing good." He did not come into the world to make money, to find fault, nor to condemn, but to help. Of course, it was not necessary for Him to look far for such an opportunity in this world of ignorance, sin, sickness, tragedy and sorrow; His opportunity was on every hand.

Then Peter made mention of Christ's death on the cross. The death of Christ occasioned rejoicing for some; the Jews were glad when He died; they shouted themselves hoarse; He was now dead, and out of their way. His death was the occasion of sorrow for others. What a pity that anyone who went about doing good should be put to death in such a merciless way! But for Peter the death of Christ was an occasion of glad joy because it brought hope to all men; there was life in His death; there was liberty in His bondage; there was joy in His sorrow.

Christ's earthly ministry had been one of benevolence, and full of works and healing. He had been anointed of God with the Holy Spirit and with power. Yet he had been crucified. But God had raised Him from the dead on the third day. He had caused Him to be made manifest to pre-appointed witnesses. These witnesses not only saw Him, but also ate with Him and drank with Him, after He had risen from the dead. Peter identified this same Jesus Who died and rose again as being the One Who shall ultimately judge all men. He preached that Jesus was not only alive, but also the One before Whom all must pass in judgment. Many do not like to think on that phase of Christ's work. They are willing to acknowledge Him as their Saviour, but they do not like to acknowledge Him as the Lord of their life or the Judge of their souls. But such are the facts. He is Saviour, Lord and Judge of men.

What Peter said about the mission of Christ was, in substance the same as he proclaimed in his discourse on the day of Pentecost. He shows that His mission was divine in its origin, redemptive in its purpose, universal in its aspect, involving His death on the cross by the hands of wicked men, and His resurrection from the dead by the interposition of Almighty God.

Christ was the central truth of prophecy. All the prophets bore witness of Him. He was the one theme of all their writings. They had much to say about the national life of the Jews, about tragedy and pestilences, about the sin of the age; but all of their prophecies ended in Christ Who would come as the hope of the world.

Forgiveness was the central theme of Christ. Christ did many wonderful things, taught many wonderful truths and performed many wonderful miracles, but the highest note of His life was the gospel of forgiveness to sinful humanity. This was the greatest gift He could make to man. Greater than wealth, or health, or liberty or life itself was the forgiveness of man's sins. He stands alone in this, for there is none other name given by which men can be saved. There was but one thing that separated men from God; not their poverty, nor their color, but their sins. Their sins rose above all they had done, or all that they had, and all that they knew. A person may have many splendid qualities but his soul is

under an awful condemnation unless his sins are forgiven.

Faith is the central theme of Christianity; it is the one condition upon which a person may have forgiveness. "Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to thy cross I cling." How may one obtain faith? It is a gift from God. "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God." Faith is but the hand that appropriates the blessings of God. Preachers talk of mansions, when men are in hovels; they talk of robes of righteousness when men are in rags; they talk of joy, peace, and happiness when men are broken in heart and in life; they talk of treasures in heaven, when men must stand in the bread lines on earth, but through faith in Christ we are able to lay hold on these things.

In these verses we have the great notes of the gospel which were sounded to the Gentiles--the personal Redeemer, the witnessing church, and the universal invitation. Jesus was more than a philanthropist, he was a propitiation; he was more than a reformer, he was a redeemer. Never let that fact go; for if you do, everything else that matters goes with it. There is no use of anyone preaching to anybody, at home or abroad, who cannot preach the Christ Who lived, the Christ Who died, the Christ Who lives again, and the Christ Who can save anyone and everyone from sin now and forever.

Peter preached the only message that can bring about the salvation of anyone, any time, anywhere. The gist of his sermon was the death, the burial, and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. And he logically closed his message with an invitation--the way out of sin and self, and the way into the Saviour's fold.

The gospel of Christ is needed by all, is sufficient for all, is available to all, and may be received by all. Oh, what a grand and glorious gospel!

As a direct result of Peter's sermon that Gentile company was visited from on high by the Divine Spirit. They "heard the word." It was a message of full salvation through a prophesied, crucified, risen and exalted Christ--exalted to be their Saviour, and ordained to be the judge of the living and the dead. That full and gracious and solemn word they believed and received. Then followed the descent of the Holy Spirit. The Jewish believers who had accompanied Peter from Joppa were astonished and amazed when they saw what had happened. For on "the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost." When they heard these Gentiles speaking with tongues and magnifying the grace of God, there was no resisting the evidence that they, too, were made fellow-heirs with their Jewish brethren of the redeeming love through Jesus Christ. Peter recommended that all of those who believed should be baptized in the name of the Lord into the fellowship of the church.

When the leaders of the church in Jerusalem heard that the Gentiles had received the Word of God through the instrumentality of Peter in the house of Cornelius, many of them were extremely sad. The report greatly stirred the prejudices of the Jewish Christians. When Peter returned to Jerusalem, "they that were of the circumcision contended with him, Saying Thou wentest in to men uncircumcised, and didst eat with them." To a Jew, it was bad enough that a member of his race should talk to a Gentile, but to sit down at the same table with him was something that was strictly taboo.

Instead of rejoicing over the event, and congratulating Peter for the service which he rendered, they called him to account and treated him as a criminal. They cared more for maintaining their established rules than they did for doing the will of God. Their cry was: "Save the rules even if the people perish." They dared not cross the frontiers of new ideas. The old established ways were good enough. They preferred to die rather than have a blood transfusion of new life. They were happy in their narrow prison.

They censured a great man for a noble work. The work which he did was God-inspired, God-guided, God-strengthened, and God-blessed. How serious was the charge they brought against

Peter? He had offered life to the dying. He had given liberty to the imprisoned. He had pointed the way to a bewildered soul. What a charge this was! That is merely an example of what prejudice is and will do for one. Prejudice is an imprisoned idea. It is limited on one side by ignorance, it is shut in on another side by tradition, it is walled in on the third side by arrogance, and it is held in on the fourth side by stubbornness. There is not a window through which the light can come into this prison.

The Jews were peculiar in this respect: they did not want the gospel story to be told to anybody else. If the Gentiles shared in it, they did not want to have anything to do with it.

A great battle went on in Peter's soul, even after God had plainly showed him the divine will in the matter, before he would agree to have any dealings with the despised Gentiles. When the Spirit commanded him to go with the servants to the house of Cornelius, this word was added--"making no distinction." He was to go without wavering, and without discrimination.

How did Peter treat these fault-finders? He simply recited the facts to them. He did not offer any apology. He did not try to justify himself. He simply related the facts. He rehearsed the whole matter to them from the very beginning, presenting the story in detail with the hope that they might see the leading of the Holy Spirit in the entire transaction. He began by telling them about his being in the house of Simon, the tanner, and there in a trance he saw a sheet let down from heaven by four corners, descending to where he was at the time, on Simon's rooftop. When he saw what the sheet enfolded, he recoiled from so horrible a sight. God's call, however, was clear and decisive--"Arise, Peter; slay and eat."

To a Jew, nothing could have been as revolting and disgusting as that. And the worst thing about the matter was this: Peter recognized the speaker as none other than the heavenly Christ, Himself. He replied, "Not so, Lord: for nothing common or unclean hath at any time entered into my mouth." The term, "common and unclean," was the one most frequently used among the Jews in describing the pagan Gentiles. But to this, the risen Lord answered: "What God hath cleansed, that call thou not unclean." In other words, God was saying to His blundering and bigoted servant, that looks are sometimes deceiving--the Gentiles are not really as bad as they look, after all. The heavenly Beholder saw some good in them so why shouldn't His followers on earth share His estimation?

Peter continued his story by pointing out the fact that because of his obstinacy that same sheet was lowered three different times, each time with the injunction to "eat," after which it was finally gathered up into heaven, from whence it came. At the very time he was gazing up into heaven to see the last vestige of it disappear, the firm hand of a soldier, knocking at his front door, succeeded in bringing Peter back to a state of consciousness. While he was endeavoring to gain his mental equilibrium, the Holy Spirit commanded him to go along with the waiting men, "making no distinction." In order that everything might be done properly and in order, Peter wisely insisted that six of the Jewish brethren accompany him to the house of Cornelius. He wanted them as witnesses, for he realized what it would doubtless cost him to enter the home of a Gentile, and he wished above all to play safe. The spirit of Peter throughout this entire incident was one of extreme caution.

Peter gave God credit for it all. God gave him that vision. God sent those men after him. God commanded him to go with the men, nothing doubting. God broke down his prejudice, and God moved the hearts of a whole group of Gentile hearers. God had him to preach the message which he did. God poured out His Holy Spirit on the people. God shook those Jewish witnesses who went with Peter until they became sensible men. Now is it any wonder Peter said, "What was I, that I could withstand God?" Our world needs men who are willing to obey the voice of God at whatever the cost. When those men saw what God had done, it took all the fight out of them. They held their peace; they even glorified God for doing it in

spite of them. They praised God that He had provided amply for the redemption of both Jews and Gentiles, making no distinction between them.

This is the proof and fruit of a new spirit. Some mighty power had overcome them and revolutionized their lives. They rejoiced that they were wrong. It takes a great spirit to see one's error; it takes a greater spirit to acknowledge it; it takes still a greater spirit to rejoice that the other person was right. Ordinary human nature will not do this. They were truly glad that their enemies could be saved. This was final proof that they had been changed themselves. Prejudice and hate cannot live in the light of the Spirit of Christ.