

From Racism to 'Gracism'

Acts 10

Big Idea: God wants me to show His love and grace to all races of people.

Some people think that racism is new! Not!

Others think it's simply a white/black problem. Not!

ILLUS. "A Chinese man and a Jewish man were eating lunch together. Suddenly, without warning the Jew gets up, walks over to the Chinese fellow and smashes him in the mouth, sending him sprawling. The Chinese man picks himself up, rubs his jaw and asks, "What in the world did you do that for?" And the answer comes back: "For Pearl Harbor!" His response is total astonishment: "Pearl Harbor? I didn't have anything to do with Pearl Harbor. It was the Japanese that bombed Pearl Harbor!" The Jew responds, "Chinese, Japanese, Taiwanese--they're all the same to me. With that they both sit down again, and before too long the Chinese man gets up, walks over to the Jew and sends him flying with a hard slap to the jaw. The Jew yells out, "What did you do that for?" And the answer comes back: "The Titanic." "The Titanic? Why, I didn't have anything to do with the Titanic!" Whereupon the Chinese man replies, "Goldberg, Feinberg, Iceberg -- they're all the same to me!"

Racial prejudice is as old as the human race and has been seen and displayed in every nation in the world with every color and race of peoples. Someone has said that the worship hour on Sunday mornings is still one of the most racially divided places in America.

ILLUS. I heard about an African-American who tried to attend a church. Sadly, the church wouldn't even let him attend a service. The pastor said, "You just need to pray about it."

About three weeks later the pastor saw him and asked, "Did you talk to the Lord about it?" The man said, "Yes, and God said, 'Don't worry, I've been trying to get into that church for 20 years and I still can't get in.'"

In the Bible in Acts 10 we read the story of Peter's transformation from race relations to grace relations - we discover some important principles that will guide us to maturing in our faith so we truly believe and practice "God so loved the world..."

Turn in your Bibles to Acts 10 as we see this story unfold:

The story illustrates the need for continual growth as followers of Christ. Peter was blessed to spend three incredible years with the Lord Jesus. He received personal instruction from the world's greatest teacher. He witnessed miracles and even performed miracles under the Lord's supervision. Peter walked on water, and he was invited to be a "backstage guest" at the glorious transfiguration of Christ. Somehow, even with all the special instruction, Peter had failed to grasp the significance of spreading the gospel to the Gentiles.

1. Grow spiritually

God graciously leads Peter through a series of visions and sends a special group of visitors to grow Peter's faith in this area of race relations. (illustrated from the text)

Acts 10:14 But Peter said, "No, Lord! I have never eaten food that is unholy or unclean."

15 But the voice said to him again, "God has made these things clean so don't call them 'unholy'!"

Peter was prejudiced because he lacked spiritual understanding.

Peter wrote to crave the Word of God like a newborn so that you would grow in the faith.

1 Peter 2:2 As newborn babies want milk, you should want the pure and simple teaching of the Word. By it you can grow up and be saved,

ILLUS. A first grader went on her first day to a newly integrated school at the height of the segregation storm in the 1960's. Her anxious white mother met her at the door to inquire, "How did everything go, honey?" "Oh, Mother! You know what? A little black girl sat next to me!" In fear and trepidation, the mother expected trauma, but tried to ask calmly: "And what happened?" "We were both so scared that we held hands all day."

Wow! Shows me you have to "learn" prejudice!

What about you?

Are you still growing? Are you growing up spiritually?

When was the last time you outgrew something other than a pant size?

God is inviting you to grow beyond the shells that limit your ability to experience His abundant life, adventurous calling, and amazing grace.

2. Go faithfully

Acts 10:19 While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Listen, three men are looking for you.

20 Get up and go downstairs. Go with them without doubting, because I have sent them to you."

When we begin to grow spiritually, God will send us to go faithfully. Notice verse twenty of chapter ten says, "Go with them for I have sent them."

In the book *Experiencing God* Henry Blackaby says "You can't go with God and stay where you are."

Our God is a sending God.

The seeking Saviour - *Luke 19:10 "the Son of man is come to seek and save those who are lost"*

...will always find the seeking sinner *Jeremiah 29:13 "And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart."*

He sends His followers out of their comfort zone to places and circumstances that require faith to accomplish God-sized tasks.

Like Peter, we face obstacles that threaten to keep us in our shell.

Fear of failure or the unknown often keeps us in our shell.

Apathy and coldness toward those who need the love of Christ keeps us confined.

Busyness blinds us that we are living in the shell.

Bad habits and what the Bible calls "vain tradition" keep individuals and especially churches in bondage from trying to use new things to reach the lost for Christ.

False teaching has also crippled the church. Of particular interest in this story is false teaching about the fact of the gospel including the Gentiles.

Jesus taught and demonstrated throughout His ministry that his kingdom included all people regardless of race, age, nationality, or gender.

In our evangelical churches, pastors have sometimes presented evangelism to the "average believer in the pew" in a manner that creates unfair and even unbiblical expectations.

One example - teaching that the "soul-winner" must sow seed, water the seed, and harvest the seed by leading the lost in the "sinners' prayer" in one 15-20 minute encounter. That kind of spontaneous soul-winning can happen, but it is not the picture the New Testament paints for evangelistic followers of Christ.

Jesus used the phrase "fishing for men," which indicates a disciplined process with appropriate training and resources. Can you imagine cleaning the nets, charting tides and movement of fish, trimming the sails, preparing the boat, and catching fish in 15 minutes?

When the apostle Paul described his evangelistic ministry and his partners in the ministry, he said,

"I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow." 1 Corinthians 3:6

Fear, apathy, busyness, and prejudice are just some of the chains that keep us from getting out of our shells to go with the gospel.

Where and to whom is God calling you to go?

"Go out into the highways and byways and compel them to come in that My house may be full." Luke 14:23

3. Show mercy

We need to grow spiritually, go faithfully, and show mercy.

Without a proper understanding of the context in which this story occurs, it is hard to appreciate why Peter was reluctant to take the gospel to the Gentiles.

We see examples of the racial divide in the contemporary conflict in the Middle East where Jews and the Arabs live with ongoing hostility. Think of the hatred that exists in Bosnia between the Serbs, Muslims, and Croats.

As bad as racism was and still persists in the United States, it doesn't compare to the hatred in some other parts of the world. American racism was based upon the ungodly belief that white people were superior to other races.

While it's true, there have been atrocities committed by those who call themselves "white supremacists," the primary attitude expressed in American racism by most whites was perhaps more arrogant superiority than hatred. But here the white ruling class did not seek to destroy Blacks, Jews, or Hispanics as a military enemy like the Gentiles did the Jews and vice-versa.

In this story we find Peter receiving a divine revelation to take the gospel to someone who is not only a different race, but the centurion Cornelius represents Rome, the conquering enemy of Israel.

The Bible says that Peter "*entered the house*" (v. 27) and declared that "*God does not show favoritism*"(v.34).

Christ-honoring evangelism is not telling people what to do; it is showing them where to go to find Christ.

Peter's willingness to enter the house was a major factor in the walls of prejudice being torn down to provide an atmosphere of receptivity or openness for the gospel. Peter entered their world and boldly proclaimed the gospel.

When Peter stepped through Cornelius's door, he had to step over hundreds of years of hatred, false teaching, and cultural differences. He had to be willing to experience the criticism of the traditionalists, legalists, and racists.

Peter had to walk away from the applause of men and seek the approval of God. This is the story of obedience more than a story of amazing compassion. As Peter obeyed God, mercy began to flow from his soul. We mistakenly think we must feel merciful before we obey. Not!

the Bible reveals that obedience precedes emotional feelings.

Good/right actions always come before good feelings!

ILL. Listen to this true story. Rabbi Michael Weisser lived in Lincoln, Nebraska. And for more than 3 years, Larry Trapp, a self-proclaimed Nazi and Ku Klux Klansman, directed a torrent of hate-filled mailings and phone calls toward him.

Trapp promoted white supremacy, anti-Semitism, and other messages of prejudice, declaring his apartment the KKK state headquarters and himself the grand dragon. His whole purpose in life seemed to be to spew out hate-ridden racial slurs and obscene remarks against Weisser and all those like him.

At first, the Weissers were so afraid they locked their doors and worried themselves almost sick over the safety of their family. But one day Rabbi Weisser found out that Trapp was a 42-year-old clinically blind, double amputee. And he became convinced that Trapp's own physical helplessness was a source of the bitterness he expressed.

So Rabbi Weisser decided to do the unexpected. He left a message on Trapp's answering machine, telling him of another side of life...a life free of hatred and racism.

Rabbi Weisser said, "I probably called 10 times and left messages before he finally picked up the phone and asked me why I was harassing him. I said that I'd like to help him. I offered him a ride to the grocery store or to the mall."

Trapp was stunned. Disarmed by the kindness and courtesy, he started thinking. He later admitted, through tears, that he heard in the rabbi's voice, "something I hadn't experienced in years. It was love."

Slowly the bitter man began to soften. One night he called the Weissers and said he wanted out, but didn't know how. They grabbed a bucket of fried chicken and took him dinner. Before long they made a trade: in return for their love he gave them his swastika rings, hate tracts, and Klan robes.

That same day Trapp gave up his Ku Klux Klan recruiting job and dumped the rest of his propaganda in the trash. "They showed me so much love that I couldn't help but love them back," he finally confessed.

Now, if that could happen in Lincoln, Nebraska, what could happen here in our community, in our neighborhoods, if we truly began to live lives that showed the love of Jesus to those around us?

ILLUS. Did you ever stop to think we were all made of dirt, that there's white dirt, red dirt, yellow dirt, brown dirt, and black dirt, so we all came from the same place, we're dirt! You would think it crazy if you saw one clump of dirt telling another clump of dirt "I'm better than you are." That is exactly what we do, when we tell someone who's not the same color that we are, I'm better than you, or I'm so different than you that we can't associate with each other. We're all just dirt and no matter what color dirt we are, we're still just dirt!!

Application: Do you know who needs mercy? Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, the rich, the poor, fat and skinny, young and old.

Jesus said, "God so loved the world." Are you willing to climb out of your shell to grow, to go, and to show mercy? You never know who will respond. It might change your life. I know it can change someone else's life forever!