

(Message #6 of **The Church: A Devine Design**)

The Struggle of the Church

Acts 10: 9-20

I have always been interested in this particular passage of Scripture. It is a very unique and challenging passage. The early church was growing daily and the power of God was being manifested in many great and mighty ways. Paul had been converted from a persecutor of the church to a preacher of the gospel. It would seem that this would have been a time of great encouragement and anticipation regarding the church. I am sure for the most part it was, but this passage reveals a struggle the church faced.

This chapter in the book of Acts deals with a blight that had surfaced in the church, an attitude of prejudice and partiality. Clearly Jesus has instructed the apostles to take the gospel to the Jews, His chosen people, but He had also commanded them to take the good news to the **uttermost parts of the earth**. Paul had been commissioned to take the gospel to the **Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel**. Peter and the others may not have had a problem with Paul preaching to the Gentiles, but they were not pleased with the idea of reaching out to those who were considered infidels.

That is the setting for the text that we have read today. Sadly this blight continues among the church in our generation as well. We seem to think that we have the right and privilege to determine who is worthy of the gospel and who is not. We think we have figured the “type” that God is looking for.

As we consider the church and its responsibilities, we must take an earnest look at this situation and learn how to deal with it biblically. We may not want to admit it, but we too face the same struggle that Peter did. I want to preach on the thought: **The Struggle of the Church**. If we can successfully overcome this struggle, we can see great things for the Lord.

I. The Authority of Ministry (1-6) – Before we actually deal with the struggle that the church faced we must deal with the authority of ministry. In the opening verses we find God dealing with the heart of a Gentile. We must remember that God has called us to do His work, not the other way around. Jesus built His church and He decides who is invited to become part of it.

A. The Seeker (1-2) – We find that there was a man in Caesarea by the name of Cornelius. He was a centurion, an officer in the Roman army who had the charge of a company of 100 men. That brought him recognition among his peers, but not among the church. There are some noble qualities about Cornelius that we need to consider.

- **His Character** – **He was a devout man that feared God.** He had not met the Lord in salvation and yet he feared the Lord and sought a godly life.
- **His Compassion** – **He gave much alms to the people.** He was not obligated or required to do this as a Roman officer. In fact, it would have been easy to take advantage of others. He was concerned for their needs.
- **His Concern** – Cornelius may have had all that one would desire as far as status and possessions, but he realized a need in his life. **He prayed to God always.** He was consumed with his need and earnestly sought the Lord.

- As we consider this man Cornelius, it would appear that any church would have desired to have him among their membership. There was just one problem. Most could not see his character, his compassion, or his concern because they were focused on his lineage. He was not of the right race and therefore it didn't matter how good or noble he was, they thought he wasn't worthy of the gospel or the church!

B. The Sovereign (3-6) – Cornelius had not yet met the Lord in salvation, but God was already aware of Him and divinely working in his situation. The deeds that he had done had not gone unnoticed and the prayers that he had prayed had been received by the Lord. Peter was not yet aware, but God was going to use him to bring Cornelius to salvation.

- We have no way of knowing what God is doing behind the scenes. We do not know how He is working in the lives of individuals. We must assume that everyone who comes through our door has been sent of God. We need to look at each one as an opportunity to lead them to Christ. That will not always be the case, but we have no way of knowing any differently.

I. The Authority of Ministry (1-6)

II. The Arrogance in Ministry (9-16) – Here we find some of the dangers associated with ministry. If we aren't careful we will end up doing good things, but avoiding the best things. In our fervency for the Lord's work we can easily develop an attitude of self-righteousness and arrogance. Peter found himself in such a condition.

A. His Activity (9) – Peter was faithful to spending time alone with the Lord in prayer. This was likely something that he did routinely. I am not making light of the fact that Peter spent time in prayer. It is needful and necessary. I'm sure that we could all be more committed and diligent in prayer.

- However, do you think it is possible that his time alone with the Lord was more of a routine at this point than it was a time of meditation and prayer? Is it possible that Peter had grown so accustomed to prayer time that he failed to listen to what the Lord had to say to him? I think this passage proves that Peter was good at talking to the Lord, but he had forgotten how to listen.

- Busyness will never take the place of obedience. We can busy ourselves with all kind of ministry related activities, but if we fail to hear what God has said and accomplish what He desires of us, then we have missed it altogether. Maybe we need to slow down a bit and listen.

B. His Attitude (10-14) – Here Peter had seen the vision of the sheet filled with all manner of animals, apparently clean and unclean. He was told to kill and eat of that which he saw. Peter refused because he had never done that before; the law forbade Jews to eat any unclean thing.

- Now, in Peter's defense, he didn't want to go against the law of God. He didn't want to abandon that which he had been taught all his life. The difference here is that the Lord had given Peter permission.

- I don't think Peter was purposely being disobedient, but he had the attitude that this had never been done before. Lord I can't do that because we never have.

- Have we not been guilty of the same? God may have revealed His will for our lives through His Word, we may have received a direct command, and simply because we've never done that, or maybe done it that way, we assume that this cannot be right or the will of God. It is not up to us to evaluate what God desires, just do it!

C. His Assumption (14) – Peter may not have even realized that he was being disobedient to the Lord. He may not have known that his attitude was not right, but in essence he assumed that he knew more about God's will for his life than God Himself did.

- We too must guard against making the wrong assumptions concerning the things of God. We are quick to judge and condemn. Often we assume to know whom God would have and whom He wouldn't.

- We have the benefit of considering this moment in the life of Peter after the fact. We have all the facts and can easily make a determination. But, as we think about it, was this not an absurd circumstance? Who in their right mind would not have wanted Cornelius to be part of the church? He had much to contribute. God used the vision to prepare Peter for the task ahead.

- There is much to be learned from this passage. Who are we to determine whom God would save? Who are we to judge whether anyone would be a viable member of the church? Who are we to keep the gospel from anyone who stands in need of salvation? May God help us to get beyond our prejudices and judgmental attitudes regarding others! I pray that we will welcome all who come within our doors and share Jesus with the world.

I. The Authority of Ministry (1-6)

II. The Arrogance in Ministry (9-16)

III. The Abundance in Ministry (34-48) – These verses deal with the impact that ministry had on the lives of all involved. Peter had made his way to the house of Cornelius where he heard how God had told Cornelius to send for Peter. This encounter brought about life changing results.

A. It Brought Conviction (34-35) – Peter realized that he had been wrong in regard to that which was considered unclean. God used a long standing principle among the Jews to touch the heart of Peter. He realized that Jesus had died for all men, Jew and Gentile alike. God was no respecter of persons and would save all who came to Him in repentance.

- Old habits and ideas die hard. These are some of the most challenging aspects of ministry. Most churches don't have a problem with the core doctrines of the Bible. Many are conservative in their theology. But many refuse to deviate from their long held traditions or ideas.

- I pray that God will help us crucify the flesh so that we might serve Him and along with the flesh put to death the preconceived notions concerning ministry and evangelism.

B. It Brought Submission (36-43) – Peter is no longer arguing with God about what is clean or unclean. He has submitted to the will of God and is fulfilling His will and purpose for his life. Peter is preaching the gospel of Jesus to lost souls who need a Savior!

- We have seen the error of modern thinking within the church, but what will we do about it. Are we willing to submit to the will of God and share Christ with those we meet regardless of race, social position, or level of spirituality and biblical knowledge? It isn't up to us to pick and choose those whom we deem worthy. It isn't up to us to keep a few and throw the rest back. We are called to be fishers of men!

C. It Brought Conversion (44-48) – Upon Peter's obedience in preaching Jesus, Cornelius and many with him received the Lord in salvation. Peter testified to the genuineness of their faith and conversion, baptizing them.

- If we can get beyond one of the biggest struggles the church faces, we can see results for the glory of God. Our blessed Lord is still in the saving business. The blood has not lost its power! If we can only see their need and reach out in Christian love, I am convinced that we can see lost souls come to know Christ.

I don't know what this passage has done for you, but it has certainly challenged me. We would be foolish to say that we don't face the same struggle that Peter did. Our church does a good job of reaching out to those around us, but I am convinced that we could do more.

If we would be honest, most of us have some prejudices and partialities that need to be abandoned for the cause of Christ. Why not come and ask the Lord to help us see others as He sees them?