

Time of Grace Ministry
The Power of Christ: For Racial Reconciliation
Acts 10:34-43
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Pastor Michael Novotny

Today's headlines can be so discouraging, especially when it comes to the topic of race. But the power of the good news of Jesus Christ can overcome every racial barrier and help us to celebrate every nation, every culture, every skin color, and every language. Pastor Jeske tells us more next on Time of Grace.

Pastor Mark Jeske

At least 3,000 Roman soldiers were garrisoned in Caesarea. That effectively was the real capital of Israel, the land of Judea and Samaria at Jesus' time. That was the belly of the beast, you might say, and most Jews hated the Romans, hated that occupation. They felt towards the Romans the way the French did toward the occupying Germans in World War II. So that was a very dangerous place for a Jew to have to live and God appeared in the mind of Simon Peter and said, "I want you to go to Caesarea."

I'd like to invite you to take your Bible and open it up to Acts 10 and read something so amazing if God hadn't put it in his word you wouldn't even believe it. In Acts 10, we read that in Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion with the Italian Regiment. And he and his family were devout and God-fearing. They had found Israel's God and were really impressed. Probably didn't know a lot about this God but it made more sense than the many gods of the Greeks and Romans, perhaps that he'd been brought up to respect. So he's like halfway there and God saw that there was a window of opportunity to get through to this man and bring him some good news that would change his life. So he's going to bring him a brother. Reaches into Cornelius' mind, says I'm going to be sending you somebody you need to listen to. Reached into Peter's mind and said you need to go up to Caesarea. Peter probably thought, "No! I don't want to go to Caesarea! Dangerous. I might never get out of there. They could arrest me just for looking funny. This is no place for me to go." But he went anyway. Took some friends and now these two gentleman are in a room together. A Jewish fisherman who had been a graduate of Jesus' three-year seminary and had been turned into a salesman for the gospel for the kingdom and a Roman military officer, polished and part of the educated class and was hoping to make his money, put in his time, and then get the heck out of Dodge and get back someplace peaceful where he could retire on his farm with his family; just hoping that this land did not blow up on his watch.

And here they are in the same room and Peter thinks, "Is this guy going to arrest me? Are they going to have me beaten? What's going to happen to me?" And Cornelius is thinking, "This man is a representative of the God that I've been learning about. Am I going to be punished for my sins?" And so the first thing that happens when they meet each other - it blows Peter's mind - is Cornelius drops to his knees in respect and Peter is just flabbergasted. "Get up! You're my

brother." And he says, "I've got something; I have a message to share with you." And this is what I'd like you to listen to today on this King Sunday.

If you'd jump to verse 34, we've got to skip over most of this. Please read this chapter on your own later today; read the whole thing. Read it real slow; take about 25 minutes to get through it. And Peter says, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts people from every nation who fear him and do what's right."

There's a crazy word in that sentence and that's the three-letter word, "now." "I now realize." You want to say, "What do you mean, Peter? Now you realize that God's love is for all people? What were you thinking? What do you mean 'now' I get it? Didn't you go to Jesus' seminary? You've been licensed as an apostle for crying out loud. You don't even know the first thing about mission work, do you? What do you mean, 'Now I get it?' How many times did it have to be explained to you?"

Well, let's be gentle with this brother because he grew up in an era when the races were separate. Part of that was God's design. He had put fences around the Jewish people with an extra load of rules to keep them separate from the Gentile world. Not to keep Gentiles out of the synagogues and out of the temple; it was to keep the Israelites in. They had shown in their history such a weakness for blending in and assimilating with the heathen nations around them that God was worried not so much about their racial purity, he was worried that they would lose their loyalty to the word of God. They ran after Baal and Ashura and Chemosh and Moloch, even the gods of Egypt, so easily and readily, God said I've got to put my people in protective custody. So he put all kinds of rules on them like the food rules. They're called the kosher rules. There's certain foods you can eat and can't eat and that makes - I want you, for instance, to look at everything that comes off a pig as evil and ugly and should make you want to throw up. No pork, no bacon, no pork chops, no nothing off the pig. A pig is an unclean animal to eat. Because God hates pigs? No, that has nothing to do with it. God made pigs because he knows how good bacon is on pretty much - pretty much everything! Some people even like bacon ice cream, I guess, because bacon makes everything better. God loves the pig but he said to the Jews, "You can't have it." Why? To keep them different. To keep them separate.

Unfortunately, that isolation had gotten them used to being separate and some bad things came in, too. They began to think that they were superior to these gentiles. They looked down at the gentiles as being moral pigs and inferior; they were heathen and idolaters. And that distaste and scorn was repaid viciously and fully by the Romans who scorned the Jews for being semi-literate, semi-educated barbarians. In fact, that's the name, Barbarian, that the Romans called them was because they had beards. The Romans shaved. If you look at their statues, most of the Roman statues have - their heroes, their military and sports heroes - had shaven heads because that was the sign of an educated man. A beard was a sign of a peasant; somebody who had no education. So this is nothing personal to all you guys with beards out there; this is just back then. That's where the word "Barbarian" comes from and the Roman's scorned the Jews and thought them as second-rate human beings. They viewed them almost like animals, like wild animals, they had to pen up and manage and herd like they were manning a zoo. When Pontius Pilate had Jesus standing in front of him he said, "Am I a Jew?" Basically, like saying am I a dog? There was fear, suspicion, and separation keeping them apart. And the early Jewish

communities, even after Pentecost, after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all this diversity of people, was not making things happen fast enough for God. God's intent was that now that Christ has come, he has lived a perfect life on behalf of people, died the death to make us alive, was buried, rose again to predict our own resurrection, ascended into heaven to predict our ascension into heaven, and now God was ready to rock the world and the Jewish believers were not rocking the world. They just stayed together with people just like them. Now don't get too arrogant about that either because you and I do the same thing. When we're in a stressful situation, we always look for people like us to huddle together with while we look at the crazy amount of diversity, don't we? Man, we do that all the time.

If there's two women in a room with 30 people, do you think those two women are not going to notice where each other is, kind of slide over and eye roll a little bit and give each other the wink at men making fools of themselves as usual? You think that isn't going to happen? Of course it is. If there's a room full of black folks and two white folks, you think the two white folks won't spot each other and slide over to say hi? Of course; of course that's going to happen. Or vice versa. If there's two African Americans in a room full of white folks, do you think those two - that brother and that sister - aren't going to slide over and say hi and exchange a few words? Of course they will; that's how we roll.

But that's not the end game; that's not God's plan. He wants the gospel to be communicated and there were a world full of gentiles going to hell who needed to hear they didn't have to. But how's that going to happen? The people don't talk. How can you talk to people you're afraid of or despise or are suspicious of or basically want to get away from as fast as you can? So God had to mess with two key influence leaders - Cornelius and Peter - and had to use heavenly messengers to get them in the same room together and here's what - and Peter himself needed a push from God. "I now realize how true it is that God doesn't show favoritism."

"This is the message that God sent to the people of Israel telling good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all." Here's the message: "You know what happened throughout Judea, the baptism that John preached - how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power," at the time of his baptism. That's when Jesus became the Christ, the anointed one. How he, with healing, all who were under the power of the devil, demonstrating that God's friendly and likes people and he comes to give gifts of freedom and liberation. "We're witnesses of everything he did. 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 testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and dead." So here's why this really matters: "He is coming back to be the judge and perform a great separation of the saved and the damned." You better pay attention. "All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." He had been to Jesus' seminary, his traveling seminary, for three years and it took him a long time to realize the entire Old Testament is built around the message of Jesus Christ who - all the prophets testify about this - through faith in Christ, forgiveness of sins is given. We are saved by faith in him. "And while Peter was still speaking these words," nobody in the room believed a thing he said. And after talking futilely and vainly for half an hour, they all left and went back to their homes disappointed and frustrated.

I made up that last part. That is not what happened! Against all odds, though these two groups of people were so far apart, brought up to hate, fear, and despise each other, what actually happened is the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message and they rejoiced that day because that day they realized they were brothers. What a great day! And Peter himself had to learn this and he was probably kind of sweating because his homeboys back at the synagogue were going to sweat him out and yell at him for what he'd been doing. You're not allowed to fraternize with the Romans. Don't you know who they are? They're the occupying army. In fact, in only a few years after this took place, the annihilation of the Jewish people began with the fall of Jerusalem. By 73 A.D., there was hardly a Jewish community left in all of the land of Israel. The Romans drove them into what's called the diaspora, the scattering of the Jews, and they no longer had a political community that they could call home. And for many centuries, they would wander there: "Don't you know these are our bitterest enemies? Don't you know that right here in Caesarea there's going to be a bloodbath?" As soon as the Jewish rebellion broke out, God wanted them to say it anyway. It is never a bad time to share the gospel for only through God's love can there be racial reconciliation.

Frankly, nothing has changed. That gospel was the mighty power that drove the message and success of Dr. Martin Luther King for what gave him power was not threats, was not intimidation, was not yelling at white America he was going to unleash an angry revolution and African Americans were going to come storming the gates, set fires, burn everything down, start a bloodbath. He wasn't threatening race riots. In fact, he did the reverse. He absorbed injustice in his body and Dr. King - sometimes credited with getting his ideas from Mahatma Gandhi, actually got to go back farther than that. He actually got his ideas from the Christian's New Testament. He decided that two powerful ideas were not getting enough attention in America and more than anybody else, he laid this out there and inspired other people to believe the same.

Number one is the idea that all people have worth and dignity; all created by the same creating Father. All redeemed by the red blood of Jesus Christ our Savior. All have worth and all have gifts. The body of Christ that's missing anybody is missing part of its body; it's an amputee and needs to be restored. That powerful idea was not believed in his youth and he himself suffered grievously for laying those ideas out. Second, he believed in nonviolent ways of resolving conflict and absorbed in himself the injustices at great personal cost. This wasn't a lot of fun for him. Right now, we read these stories and it looks like a grand adventure. Hey, he didn't know how this was all going to end and plenty of other civil rights advocates before him had been arrested and died in prisons, languishing in prisons, were beaten, their bodies disappeared, were never found again. He had no idea what was going to be the outcome. He was personally assaulted; he was unjustly arrested and imprisoned. His home suffered arson attacks and finally his own life was taken on the balcony of a motel in Memphis, Tennessee 50 years ago this year.

But he chose to advocate nonviolence as a way to bring people together and under his leadership America was changed by love. He said, "Hatred cannot be driven out by hatred; only love can do that. Darkness cannot be driven out by more darkness; only light can do that." And today, I celebrate the sacrifice with you. He's a hero to me and I invite you to choose to make him one of your heroes, as well, for those two agenda items the work is unfinished. We still do not see each other as created by God, as loved and redeemed by Christ, and as gifted and empowered by the

Spirit. And our world still is torn by violence of people who have no patience for anything but anger. We still need his leadership and his words, his example, and his inspiration.

So to wrap this up, I've got some commissionings for you. If you are Caucasian like me, here's what I've got for you. First of all, realize that your skin does bring you some privileges. I rarely thought much about that myself but where it got brought home to me once - I'll just share a little story with you - our gospel choir was on tour and we were in Minnesota and we had some lag time before our evening concert and so some of us went shopping and went to a store to pick up some snacks or something to kill time while waiting for our thing to start. And I'm just walking around, you know, but two of the women, two of the African American women - you know where this is going, don't you? Got followed all around the store. Never in my life have I been followed around a store making sure I don't steal something. What an insult! Those women were just about in tears. Why didn't they follow me around? Figure it out. That's my privilege.

On the other hand, here's my message to my black friends: You've got some tremendous advantages by being black. See, you don't have to carry around the heavy guilt of slavery, do you? You've got the moral high ground here. Don't squander it though. Be glad you're black! You don't have to carry the weight of all that guilt. Love being black! You've got stories of overcoming. You have triumphs. You have incredible perseverance tales to tell. Learn your story. Learn the stories. Know your own stories, your own history. Don't waste the sacrifices made on your behalf. People got beat up and hosed down advocating for the right to vote. How can you pay no attention to politics and not be bothered to go and vote at election time? Other people suffered so that you could walk to the polls with your head held high. Don't waste that sacrifice.

Young ladies daring to walk into an all-white high school in Little Rock got yelled at, spit at, hollered every kind of bad name you can imagine. People angrily yelling at them, guarded by National Guard troops as this angry white mob looked at these brave girls who wanted to get an education. How can you drop out of school when people sacrificed and suffered so much to give you the right to walk into a school and get a decent education? How can you blow off your homework or give lip to a teacher when other people suffered so much to get you the right to get a quality education? How can you not kiss the sky and thank Jesus every day and give your educators your supreme cooperation and love so that you can honor the sacrifices that were made of equality to help you stand up and walk around like you are worth as much as everybody else in this country?

White folks, here's another thing for you, my fellow white folks. You get yelled at either way and I want to give you courage to still believe in cities. You got yelled at for white flight, for running away from cities, but paradoxically enough, you get yelled at for moving back in the cities. Don't let anybody shame you into calling, engaging in the city gentrification. That's a hate word and it drives me crazy. I want you to be engaged in the city. Work here. Study here. Live here. Play here. Go to theaters. Go to civic events. Make friends here and engage in the diversity that is cities. Don't run away just to find people just like you and don't let people shame or scare you into thinking that somehow is not appropriate behavior for white folks. The cities need you, too. Engage and be part of the conversation. Be part of the work.

Here's one for you black folks: You have a phenomenal advantage by being black because you are dialed into two cultures. See, when you're outnumbered, you not only got your own culture but you get to study the majority culture, too. So you've got two complete worlds you can take advantage of. That makes you rich! Most white folks don't have a clue what black culture is really like. They're just maybe scared of it, they maybe listen to a few musicians and watch a few basketball players, but they don't get anything of what really goes on. So here's my challenge to you, black folk: Find a white person you think has some promise and see if they'd like a tour guide to the real black world so that they get it! What you bring, what you have to offer, they get the family warmth. They get the vibe, they get some of the flavor so that they don't just view caricatures when they think of a black person; they get to see the coolness of being black. But they'll never know unless you are willing to be a bridge person and help explain it; got to help explain a few things.

Well, I can throw out another two dozen challenges today. That's enough; I've messed with your minds enough today. But I want to celebrate with you today that the gospel of Christ is an enormous power for racial reconciliation and our world so badly needs it. Every time I think we're making progress, we have another eruption of white supremacists and the clan starts marching again and it just seems we're going backwards; this is so crazy. What that tells you is that until the gospel of Christ is in people's heads, that's the only way is where people are going to end up - in racial isolation and bitterness. So I commission every man, woman and kid within the sound of my voice this morning, I'm drafting you into our army of Christians who are going to be God's agents of racial reconciliation, inspired by a Roman centurion named Cornelius who learned that this Jewish fisherman peasant was his brother. Inspired by Peter who had God mess with his mind and opened it up bigger to see this oppressor actually as his brother. Dr. King, who absorbed injustice in his body and gave us such an incredible youthful legacy - not just back then, not just nostalgia - it's stuff we need right now. And I invite you to make a difference as God's agent of reconciliation so that the gospel of our Savior can be shared in a community of trust.

Pastor Michael Novotny

Thank you so much, Pastor Jeske, for reminding us of the way the Bible ends; with a glimpse of Jesus on his throne surrounded by people - every tribe and nation and people and language. What a timely message for us today.

Let's pray.

Dear Jesus, we thank you that you don't love just one kind of people. And we're so grateful that you didn't just live and die for one kind of people. And when you rose from the dead, it wasn't just good news for one kind of people. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. And so I thank you, God, for the nations. I thank you for diversity. I thank you that we see your creativity and the people that we meet and do life with. I pray, God, that in this world that gets so divided over things that don't matter that you would help us to be the people who love like you love; that our love wouldn't be diminished or decreased because of the skin color of the person that we're talking to. But instead, we would see everyone as people that you have created and that people Jesus lived and died for. God, give us help to have love like that. Help the

Christian church to be the one place that overcomes every barrier and obstacle and division. Help us to be unique and help the light of our churches to shine. We pray this all, Jesus, in your incredible name, Amen.

For Time of Grace, I'm Pastor Mike Novotny and because of the blood of Jesus, no matter where you come from, no matter what the color of your skin, it all starts now.



TIME OF GRACE®

The Power of Christ: For Racial Reconciliation

Study Notes

Acts 10:34-43: ³⁴ “Then Peter began to speak: ‘I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism ³⁵ but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. ³⁶ You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. ³⁷ You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached— ³⁸ 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. ³⁹ We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, ⁴⁰ but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. ⁴¹ 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. ⁴² 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. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.’”

Points to Ponder

1. In what ways were Peter and Cornelius different? In what ways were they the same?
2. **Read Acts 10:34.** Who is God’s love for? Why do you think it took Peter so long to realize this? Hint: Think Old Testament.
3. Do you sometimes think that since you already have God’s Word you are superior to others? Or maybe better than others?
4. **Read Acts 10:42.** God commands us to tell others about Jesus. How can we do that if we’re afraid or suspicious of people who aren’t like us? We are alike—we’re all loved by God. In what ways can you reach out to others with God’s Word?

5. Do you believe that through God's love there can be racial reconciliation? How?

The gospel of Christ has enormous power for racial reconciliation, and our world needs it! You have been drafted into God's army to go out and tell all people about God's love for them in Jesus. All people have worth and purpose in Christ. All are equal in God's eyes, and you can create a community of trust and tell others the gospel message.

What else does God say?

1 Corinthians 12:13: We were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

Galatians 3:28: There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Homework for Next Week

Read Acts 3:17-26.