

Finding Your Place in God's Story of Redemption Winter/Spring 2015

In the previous lesson we explored the biblical truth that God is *the* great evangelist. We saw, through the scriptural account of the conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch, how God is always working in the lives of his people to draw them to himself. Today we will explore some experiences we can expect as we come alongside of the Holy Spirit and seek to engage the culture around us with the truth claims of scripture.

- 1) *Engaging culture may make us uncomfortable* – The first place we will look is at the biblical account of the Apostle Peter's stay with Simon the Tanner. There is, perhaps, no more reluctant of an evangelist in all of scripture than Peter. In **Acts 10:1-23** we read of an interesting account in the life of the Apostle. A gentile, Roman Centurion named Cornelius, who was a God-fearer and worshipped God daily, had a vision. In the vision he witnessed an angel that instructed him to send to Joppa and invite Simon Peter to come to his house. Cornelius obeyed and sent two servants and a trusted soldier to escort Peter safely to Caesarea. Meanwhile, the Apostle Peter was having an interesting experience in the lowly house of a tanner. Here amidst the uncleanness of the dead animal skins, the Apostle was being stretched. He was clinging too tightly to the embellishments of religion, and was unable to see how he could engage an unbelieving gentile world with the truth of the gospel.

God gave the Apostle a disturbing vision of a giant sheet let down from heaven full of every kind of bird, and reptile and beast. A voice came to Peter saying, "Rise Peter, kill and eat." Peter, being a good Jew, had never eaten anything unclean or forbidden. His reply was, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." How quickly he had forgotten the teachings of Christ when he stated, "*it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a person.*" **Matthew 15:11**. More importantly, he had forgotten the commissioning of our Lord who stated before ascending into heaven, "*...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth*" **Acts 1:8**. Yet here he was, a few years removed from Pentecost and still exemplifying the same prejudices he had inherited as a child.

How often do we do the same? Cultural engagement often requires us to leave the comfortable zone of what is familiar and allow the incarnate mission of Christ our King to lead us into places that might initially cause discomfort. The challenge to confident evangelism in the twenty-first century is identifying the "unclean associations" that we have developed against our culture that might hinder us engaging the culture at large (our friends, neighbors and coworkers) with the truth claims of scripture.

- 2) *Engaging culture requires us to discard our prejudices* - According to our text (**Acts 10:24-48**), Peter rose up and accompanied the three men waiting at the gate. However, his response upon first entering the house is somewhat embarrassing. He begins, not with a cordial expression of gratitude for the invitation to share the gospel with them; in fact, sharing the gospel with them does not seem to be on his radar. He seems confused why he is there in the first place. His words of introduction were, "*...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...*" The most interesting thing about this story is that God used the Apostle Peter to bring salvation to the house of this God-fearing gentile, despite Peter's shortcomings. Contrast this response with that of Christ in **Luke 7:1-6**. After making the above disclaimer for why he had agreed to condescend to enter the Centurion's house, Peter then asks a very interesting question: he states, "*...I ask then, why you sent for me.*"

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- 3) *Engaging Culture Requires us to Listen* – Even though it is interesting that Peter did not know why he had been summonsed (even after listening to the Centurion who knew more about why he was there than did the Apostle) , he still took the time to listen to the Centurion and hear what he was seeking. This is a very important point for us to consider when confidently engaging the world around us. We should always be patient, and listen to what they are saying. We are certain of this: it is impossible to live in God’s world and operate from a worldview different from the biblical worldview, and live a life consistent with reality. We often make the mistake of assuming we know how God is working behind the scenes in the lives of others and jump in answering questions they have not asked, and because we have failed to take the time to listen to them, we miss the opportunity to speak truth into their lives along the pressure points where God is working. To reiterate a point that was made last week: we should always pray that God would enable us to identify these areas of pressure in the lives of others, and come alongside of him in the evangelism process. This will require more than simply walking up to someone on the beach and sharing a cookie-cutter, memorized presentation with them. This will require taking the time to develop a relationship with them. A relationship that enables them to feel comfortable enough with us to let down their guard and “invite us into their house”. It is then that we will, by the aid of the Holy Spirit, identify what they are seeking and be used of God to speak truth into their lives.

Conclusion: Think of someone in your life right now who is not a believer. It can be a family member, friend or coworker. Do you know the questions they are asking? Do you know what they are truly seeking? Could it be that the objections they have made to the faith so far are due to your attempt to answer questions they have not asked? How do you think the Holy Spirit is working in their lives right now to bring them to saving faith in Christ? How can you come alongside of the Holy Spirit and assist with this process?