

# Cornelius and Peter

by Todd Atkinson

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*The story of Cornelius and Peter shows how God is at work in the world and in our lives, calling us to faith and connecting us to the right people and community.*

**Duration:** 1:02:36

**Scripture:** Mark 7:14-19, John 4:10, Acts 2:38, Acts 10:1-16, Acts 10:34-35, Acts 10:44-48, Acts 11:17, Romans 12:6, Ephesians 2:8-9

**Topics:** "Early Church", "God's Gifts", "Openness to Change"

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## Description

Todd Atkinson preaches on the transformative encounter between Cornelius and Peter, emphasizing the importance of recognizing God's gifts, particularly the Holy Spirit, and the need for openness to new understandings of faith. He highlights Cornelius as a devout man who, despite not being fully in the faith, exemplifies prayerfulness and generosity, while Peter grapples with his preconceived notions about clean and unclean. The sermon encourages believers to embrace the simplicity of the gospel, understanding that God's gifts are freely given and not based on merit. Atkinson calls for a community that welcomes all, reflecting God's grace and generosity, and challenges listeners to receive God's gifts without striving for worthiness.

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## Transcript

Good morning, everyone. Are you getting better at that? Thank you. Am I turned on? Can you hear me to the very back? Well, it is very nice to see everybody today.

Welcome to the third Sunday in the season of Lent, in the build-up to Good Friday and Easter Sunday, the celebration of the cross and the resurrection of our Lord. Both in my own prayer life and in listening to some of the prophetic words that have been given in our church in the last number of weeks, it seems to me that there's a bit of a reoccurring message that is happening, that God is wanting to get our attention on something. And I know it resonates with my heart.

When I've heard some of those words from numbers of different people, emails, I thought, yeah, I think He's saying that to me too. And so I want to preach in that direction this morning. There is a golden thread of truth that runs throughout the book of Acts that I'd like to draw some attention to.

Acts chapter 1 and verse 2, Jesus said, wait for the gift. My Father promised. He said that in speaking of the coming Holy Spirit.

Wait for the gift. My Father promised. Acts chapter 2, Peter is coming to the climax of his sermon and he says, repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the gift.

There's that word again, the gift of the Holy Spirit. Acts chapter 8, Peter says to Simon, may your silver perish with you because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money when Simon saw that the Holy Spirit was given through the laying on of hands. It's again a Holy Spirit type passage.

He said, I want to buy that power. I want that. And he didn't understand it was a gift that was given.

Acts chapter 10, when the first Gentiles come to faith, it says, and the believers were amazed because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. The gift of the Holy Spirit. There it is again.

Acts 11, Peter says, if God gave them, the Gentiles, the same gift as he gave us when we believed, who was I that I could stand in God's way? If God wants to give gifts, that's God's prerogative. Who am I to get in the way? But once the idea of a gift-giving God and especially the gift of the Holy Spirit. And so today I want us to take a closer look at just one of these instances from the book of Acts.

Acts chapter 10, which is a story about a man called Cornelius. So if you have your Bibles, I'm going to take a few readings today. But the first one, Acts chapter 10 in the first eight verses.

I'd like you to become acquainted with this figure called Cornelius. At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius. A centurion of what was known as the Italian cohort.

A devout man who feared God with all his household. He gave alms generously to the people. And he prayed continually to God.

About the ninth hour of the day, he saw clearly in a vision, an angel of God come in and say to him, Cornelius. And he stared at him in terror and said, what is it, Lord? And he said to him, your prayers and your alms, your giving, have ascended as a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is also called Peter.

He's lodging with another Simon, a tanner whose house is by the sea. When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from amongst those who had attended him. And having related everything to them, he sent them to the town of Joppa.

May God add his blessing to this public reading of the scriptures. So let's take a look at this figure called Cornelius. Comes from the city of Caesarea.

He is a centurion, which means he's a military man in charge of a hundred soldiers. He belongs to a particular regiment called the Italian Cohort. Caesarea was the city where the Roman procurator lived.

And so scholars think that this Italian Cohort was probably a highly specially trained military detachment with a special job of being a bodyguard to the Roman procurator. So this is a highly trained man, a highly responsible and trusted man from the highest levels of authority. But the Bible also describes him as a devout man who feared God.

And those phrases are big phrases. Sometimes they're used of what's called Jewish proselytites, people who had converted from another religion into the Jewish religion. But they're not used exclusively as proselytites.

Scholars think that this man probably, he wasn't a Jew, neither was he a complete Jewish convert, but he at least was a man who had come to see the truth and beauty in the Jewish faith. He had departed from the faith that he was raised in, and at this time of his life he'd come to believe that there is one God, not many gods like the Romans had said, the one God who would have revealed himself to the nation of Israel. He likely attended the local synagogue in Caesarea, and it says that he prayed continually, which means that he followed the prescribed times of prayer as practiced by the Jewish people.

So the number of different times of prayer, when those people traditionally met to pray, he followed those, and he grew to love prayer, and he gave generously to the Jewish people. He was a supporter of that community. But one day as he was in prayer at the ninth hour of the day, which is one of the traditional Jewish times of prayer, the hour of evening sacrifice, something happened to Cornelius that had never happened to him before.

He had a vision. It was a dramatic, a supernatural occurrence, never happened to him before. He prayed and saw the importance of prayer, but he'd never had anything like this happen before.

He had a vision, and in that vision, an angel of God actually came and spoke to him. So the fact that he attended the synagogue means he probably at least was somewhat familiar with the Old Testament. He understood that angels are messengers of God, and God dispatched angels to give messages, but he'd never been on the receiving end of an angelic encounter.

He'd never actually personally received a message from an angel. And so this is an amazing day. And in this message, the angel says to him, your prayers and your alms, your giving, has ascended as a memorial before God.

And it's striking language. It's Old Testament sacrificial language. The idea of a sacrifice, and it's a Roma ascending, and it's an act of worship, and it's pleasing and acceptable to God.

The angel says to this guy, who's not even yet fully in the faith, just learning about the Jewish faith, learning about the one true God, nevertheless understands enough to know that there's something about prayer that's pleasing to God, and there's something about giving to God's people that's pleasing to Him. And that's what the angel says, your prayers and your giving has come up as a memorial before God. It's been a kind of incense.

It's been a kind of early stage of worship to God. And then the angel directs him to send a delegate to another town called Joppa, and to bring back a man, one Simon, who is called Peter. Send some people over to this town called Joppa, gives them instructions of where they'll be able to find him, and bring him back.

And as soon as the angel had departed, he did as he was commanded, and he dispatched three men to find this person called Peter. And so over the last couple of weeks, I've thought a little bit more about Cornelius than I ever have before, and I've come to some conclusions that Cornelius, for someone who is very new to the faith, has an awful lot of admirable qualities. He's got some things that are definitely worth emulating, and here's some of the ones that I found, and maybe you've got some others.

But he's a man that God is reaching out to. He's not fully in the faith. He's kind of in a transition from leaving the faith that he was grown up in to adopting a new faith, but there's no doubt God is reaching out to this man.

The eye of God is on him, and so that's why there's a vision, that's why there's an angel, that's why there's a message from God. One of the things I like about Cornelius, he's a man who is willing to see things in a different way, because he didn't grow up in this faith. He grew up as a soldier in the Roman Empire.

This is almost the opposite of what he would have been taught. In the Roman Empire, you would have been taught that it's probably good to worship all of the gods. That's called the Roman Pantheon.

And you wouldn't want to leave any out, in case one of them that you did leave out ended up becoming particularly powerful, and you didn't give him the worship that he was doing, so you'd all be in trouble. So why don't we just worship them all and cover our bases? So this idea of monotheism, of one true God who made the heavens and the earth, and being responsible and directing all your worship to that one true God, is nothing that he had ever heard before. Not what he grew up with.

It's not what he was taught. And so there's something about Cornelius. He's willing to see things in a new way, even though he was taught another way all of his life.

Cornelius doesn't have all the light. He doesn't have all the understanding. He doesn't have all the knowledge.

He doesn't have all the revelation. But the thing I like about Cornelius is that he knows how to live up to the amount of light that he does have. And one thing that we need to see happen as a kind of corrective measure in the Canadian church is this idea that we just want to accumulate more and more, more understanding and more knowledge and more everything.

But if we're not careful, we can have so much and do so little with it. Here's a man who only has a little, but he does a lot with it. So he's praying continually and supporting God's work and giving alms to the people of God.

And it comes up and God notices and says, thanks. So he's not even fully there. He's at a stage of infancy in his spiritual journey, but he knows how to do something with what he does know and I can appreciate that.

There's other qualities that I like about him. He's new in faith and yet somehow he realizes the utter importance of two things, which is prayer and he understands that giving is an act of worship. Oh, that we would all understand those two things.

I love the fact that he's obedient. When the angel instructs him to go and find this guy called Peter, he acts upon it immediately and without hesitation. And sometimes I wondered if it's his military background.

Here's a guy who knows how to follow instructions. He didn't get to the kind of high rank that he was in, but the fact that he didn't know how to heed instructions and the hundred men who were under him knew how to follow his instructions. And so being a military man when someone who now God, the highest possible authority speaks to him, this is a guy that knows how to carry out his wishes and to follow instructions.

Again, there's much to learn from Cornelius. I don't like it when I see it in me when God speaks to me and there's a bit of a wrestle and I want to decide whether I want to obey or not. So I've got to go back to Cornelius, back to the infancy.

What I should have learned in the very first stages of my Christian faith is that when God speaks, I want to follow his instructions out to the very full. I like Cornelius because he's a leader in his home. The Bible says he feared God with all of his household.

So not only was he on this path into a more correct understanding of God and following God, but he brought his entire household with him. His wife, his children, his household help. Everybody was caught up into this new journey.

And I like that about him. He wasn't just a leader in the military, outside of the home. This was a man who was a leader, a spiritual leader inside his own family.

And then lastly, the thing I like about Cornelius is he realizes that faith is not a private venture. That in order for him to move on in his new faith from levels of infancy to levels of maturity, he realizes that he needs others. So there's something about the message of this angel that I find amazing.

An angel comes and says, if you want to move on in your Christian faith, go find this guy called Peter. It raises lots of questions. Well then, why didn't the angel just tell him everything Peter was going to tell him? I mean, why not the shortcut? I mean, surely the angel could do a perfectly good job of it.

The word angelos for angel, it also means messenger. Why didn't he just give him the message of the gospel? Because it's not the designated way of God. The angel just wants him to come and he wants Cornelius to be connected in with other believers.

He wants him to be connected in the church. That in order for him to go to the next stages of his faith, connection to the right people is going to become important. And so this angel just serves as one that comes and connects the right people together.

And so sure enough, he understands that faith is not a private venture. We belong to a community and we grow as a community. And he goes out now in search of this new community.

There's lots of things we could say about the story to this point, but one of the things it does to me is it certainly increases my confidence in mission, doing mission, reaching people here in our city. It tells me that God is at work in the world because here's a guy that grew up one way of thinking and now believes something completely different. He's maybe one of the guys you would have said he'll never change.

He's a Roman military leader. He will always believe the way that the other Romans did. And yet God is at work in this guy's life and there's shift inside of him.

There's change inside of him. He's beginning to believe things that he never would have believed only a few years earlier. God is at work inside of our world.

He is creating a dissatisfaction in people for the faith or the non-faith that they were raised in and he's giving them a hunger to know the true God and the true gospel for themselves. So this guy has never met a Christian. He's actually never yet heard the true proclamation of the gospel.

But yet watch what's happening. He's coming to true faith. He's at the early stages of it.

He's having visions. He's never been inside of a church and he has a vision. He's never been inside of a church and he's having an angelic encounter.

He's never been inside of a church and he's getting messages directly from God. That's a pretty good start. Do you think your city like that? What happens if our entire mission to this city is go find the Corneliuses? Go find the people that God is doing that kind of stuff in.

Because the message of the story is God is trying to connect those kind of guys to Peter. He's trying to connect them to the church. What happens if that was our entire mission strategy? Go find the people in whose lives God is doing all that cool stuff.

You know, sometimes you go fishing hoping you catch something but this is like you know, attaching a fish to the end of your hook before you even throw it. It's like easy catching. God's like, okay, let's get this and he just catches you up and then he puts the thing in the drink and you get the joy of pulling up.

It's like fishing with your kids. You distract them for a minute, tie something to the end, throw it over the side. So they're thrilled when they pull it up.

Mission is not meant to be so complicated. Here's a guy that's never been in a church and he's never met a Christian and there's incredibly spiritual and supernatural things happening in his life that is bringing him to wonderful conclusions. Now from verse 9 the story turns for a few minutes and it talks about another individual called Peter about the kinds of things that were happening in his life before Cornelius and his group ever reached him.

So I want to take a reading from verse 9 and following. So here's Peter one day. He has no idea what's about to happen to him, who's looking for him.

The next day as they were on their journey, so that's the people who Cornelius had dispatched. They're a day to a day and a half journey from Caesarea to Joppa. As they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the house top about the sixth hour to pray.

And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, which I... Why do they put that... Isn't that a great phrase? He went up to pray and suddenly thought, I'm kind of hungry. This is... He's a man through and through, just in case you're wondering. Just somehow, if I could like eat and pray at the same time, he's trying to figure out a way to do that.

I love that the author of Acts just has to throw in that. Just the thought of prayer made him hungry. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance and he saw the heavens open and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth.

In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter, kill and eat. But Peter said, By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.

And the voice came to him a second time, What God has made clean, do not call common or unclean, Peter. This happened three times. And the thing was then taken up at once to heaven.

Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision that he had seen might mean, behold, the men who were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry for Simon's house, they stood at the gate. And they called out to ask whether Simon, who was also called Peter, was lodging there. They're at the gate.

Is there a guy here? Simon, who's also called Peter. While Peter was pondering this vision, what in the world could this mean? The spirit said to him, Behold, three men are looking for you. Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation.

Important phrase. For I have sent them. I want you to consider something that Acts chapter 10 is in some ways a study of contrasts.

There's a figure called Cornelius, but there's another figure called Peter. Notice that Cornelius is praying at the ninth hour of the day. But notice that Peter is praying at the sixth hour of the day.

They're both men of prayer. Traditionally prescribed Jewish times of prayer, they're men of prayer. Stuff is happening while they're at prayer.

Okay, that's a little hidden advertisement for the prayer vigils. Cool stuff happens when we pray. Notice that while Cornelius is praying, something supernatural happens.

But while Peter is praying, something supernatural happens. While Cornelius is praying, he has a vision. While Peter is praying, he has a trance.

In Cornelius' vision, there's a message from God. But in Peter's trance, there's a message from God. It's a story of contrast here in many ways.

Acts chapter 10 is not a story only about God at work in one man, Cornelius. It's a story about God at work in the life of two men. It's a story about God at work in the world.

That's Cornelius. But it's also a story about God at work in the church. Peter.

It's a story about God at work in Cornelius' life in the world. And he's bringing him to the church. But it's also a story about God at work in the church preparing them to receive people from the world.

Cornelius. It's a story about a man who wants to know the gospel. More deeply.

That's Cornelius. But get this. It is also a story about a man who's supposed to know the gospel but has a foggy understanding of it.

What do I mean he has a foggy understanding? This is Peter. This is one of the Twelve. At this stage, early stage, he's actually the principal spokesman for the Twelve.

What do I mean he has a foggy understanding of the gospel? You think if anybody knew the gospel, Peter would. If anybody would seek to safeguard the gospel, Peter would. What do I mean he has a foggy understanding of the gospel? Well, God has to prepare him because where he stood this day, he was not yet ready to receive a visitation from Cornelius.

He wasn't going to manage himself well because he had ways of thinking that were actually going to disqualify this and spoil this whole wonderful opportunity. See, because up until now, the mission of God had been almost exclusively amongst the Jewish people. But Acts chapter 10 is a decisive moment where God says, let's go reach the whole world.

Let's go reach all the nations of the world. And this is the first point where they go from a primarily Jewish mission to a primarily Gentile mission. And so they don't really realize that there's all kinds of stuff inside of

them that have not yet been flushed to the surface, but they're going to undermine that Gentile mission.

So in a vision, God comes to him in this trance and gives him this kind of crazy vision of this big sheet. It's being held at four corners, which might very well represent the four corners of the earth. And this sheet descending.

And then when Peter looks inside the descended sheet, there's all kinds of animals there. And then a voice saying, Rise, Peter. Kill and eat.

But Peter takes a look and these animals were not all animals that Jewish people would traditionally eat. Some of them were traditionally called unclean animals. So he says, Not so, Lord.

I've been a good Jewish boy. I would never eat anything that the Jewish law told me not to eat. I would never do something like that.

So the Lord has to speak to him three times and with a sense of urgency says, Peter, do not call something unclean that I am calling clean. And then the sheet lifts. And he's actually perplexed.

What in the world does this mean? But when suddenly this group who have come over from Caesarea called his name, and they're Gentiles, come over and we want you to meet this guy called Cornelius. And they talk on the way. As this day unfolds, he begins to piece it together that God is not sending him a message about dietary laws.

God is sending him a message about people. He's not sending him a message about what he should eat or shouldn't eat. He's giving him a message about how he should treat people different than himself.

Who don't come from his own background. He's teaching him a message about how to love and value people like God loves and values people. Because though it was part of the Old Testament law that one of the things that distinguished Israel from other nations, that they were given certain dietary laws.

Certain foods were called clean. Certain foods were called unclean. And God only wanted them to eat the clean foods as a way of separating them from the other nations.

Around that commandment, certain other ideas had built up. It was like they had reasoned, well if the other nations eat unclean food, that must make them unclean people. And if they're unclean people, we shouldn't go in their house.

We shouldn't have contact with them because it could rub off on us. And so when Peter even meets this group, he says later in the passage, do you know that as a good Jewish guy, I shouldn't really go into your house because it's unclean. He says, my law prohibits me.

Now get this, that's actually not true. There's not a single law that says that. That was just simply a cultural taboo.

It was by means of reasoning, by means of extension. If this food is unclean, then anybody who eats it is unclean. If I shouldn't eat this food, I shouldn't associate with people who do eat it.

But God had never actually said that. It just become part of their culture, become part of their church culture, become part of their national culture. And so here's Peter, he's supposed to go reach out to Gentiles.

He can't because in his heart of hearts, he actually thinks they're unclean people. He actually thinks that they are morally and spiritually inferior and that if he comes even in contact with them and goes inside of their house, it could spoil something in his own heart. That is not going to actually help you sense a mission.

You go to your neighbors and send out the message, by the way, I think you're all unclean. And just the fact that your property even borders on mine is putting me in kind of a spiritual jeopardy. I just thought I'd tell you that.

That will not win their hearts. Just in case you haven't figured that out. It will not give them warm fuzzy feelings.

And it will not make them think, I really got to get to know their God. Where did Peter get this idea from? So you understand it's not just a story about Cornelius wanting to understand the true gospel. It's a story about Peter needing to understand the true gospel.

Let me tell you a little about these food laws. Because if anybody should have known, it should have been Peter. Turn with me to Mark chapter 7. Mark chapter 7 verses 14 to 19.

Wonderful passage. And Jesus called the people to him again and he said to them, hear me all of you and understand, there is nothing outside of a person that by going into him can defile him. He's talking about food.

But the things that come out of a person are what defile him. If you read the whole passage, he's talking about the things we think that come out in the words we say. That's what comes out of a person.

You ever left a conversation and someone has been very cynical or sarcastic or judgmental and you actually, it is defiling, isn't it? You feel like, oh, I got to have a bath. It's like hearing so many negative things. It's like so many people spoken ill against.

Judgments made. You just kind of feel like, wow. Didn't really make my day to hear all those negative things.

Read the rest here. And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. And he said to them, then are you also without understanding? And it's okay.

I mean, they're saying, Lord, this is against everything we have always been taught. What about our Old Testament Levitical food laws? We are always taught that be careful what we eat. Jesus goes on to say, do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him? Since it enters not his heart, but his stomach.

Now, don't get me wrong. You can eat unhealthy food, but it doesn't spiritually defile you. Since it enters not his heart, but his stomach, and it's expelled.

Now, notice the brackets. Thus, he declared all foods clean. So right at this point, he makes a break from the Old Covenant.

He is already beginning to institute some of the changes of the New Covenant. Thus, he declared all foods clean. Now, just think for a minute.

Who wrote this? This is the Gospel of Mark. It was written by Mark. Who was Mark trained by? Who taught Mark the Gospel? Peter.

So at this early stage of Peter's ministry, he's still confused. How much of the Old? How much of the New? How much of my Jewish identification? Should I carry into here? He's still in a state of some confusion. But by the time he comes through Mark to painting the Gospel, I'll tell you what.

He gets it, and he wants to set the record straight. And so that's why the little part in brackets is added by Mark, who comes from Peter. Thus, he declared all foods clean.

But at the early stage, he was not getting this. And maybe for some of us, we don't get this. At this stage, it became apparent that even amongst the chief apostles, they had some very un-Gospel thoughts in their understanding of the Gospel.

Here's some questions. If the representatives of God consider these people unclean, then how does that reflect upon God? I would guess everybody who heard them said, well, I guess their God must consider us unclean and untouchable also. If the representatives of God consider these people inferior, then that would suggest that God thinks likewise.

That God actually considers all the peoples of the world inferior. If the preachers of the Gospel are hesitant to even associate with the Gentiles, even to go into their house, it would obscure the message that God is wanting to fellowship with the nations of the world. That God is wanting association with them to come into their homes and to come into their hearts.

And so here's Peter. There is an enormous discrepancy between his words and his practice. He would use the same words we use, that the Gospel is a free gift of God.

He would use the language of God being gracious. But those beliefs had not filtered down into his practice. He was actually doing things that were very contrary to that.

His message and his life were incongruent. What he lost sight of is the fact that God does not divide the world into clean and unclean. If he did, what side would I be on? What side would you be on? He doesn't treat people like they're untouchables.

The Bible says that for God so loved the world. Do you ever walk down your street? Do you ever go to work? Walk down the halls of the college or university and think to yourself, God loves these people every bit as much as he loves me. If you don't yet have a heart for mission, just begin there.

Tell yourself, for God so loved the world, he actually loves these people every bit as much as he loves me. What Peter had lost sight of is that God is infinitely gracious. He's immeasurably generous.

And actually, probably Cornelius got this more than Peter got this. The Bible says that he was generous. He was generous with his funds.

He gave freely, expecting to receive nothing in return. In other words, he got something about God. Even in the first stages of his faith, miserliness is not close to godliness.

But here's Peter, this guy who's just in the first stages of his faith, and he gets something about God's generosity. And so he reflects it back. And he himself is a prayerful and a generous man.

I want you to think about this, that God gives what he gives as gifts. We started with a whole number of quotations from the book of Acts. Remember what the key word is? Gifts.

What is a gift? Well, a gift is something that is given without payment. Because if you have to pay for it, what is it? It's not a gift. If you have to work for it, what is it? It's a paycheck.

So a gift is something that it comes to you without payment, without having to deserve it first. It comes to you as an act of grace. It comes to you without expectations back.

This is a gift. And if Peter, one of the arch apostles, lost sight of somehow that God is a gift giver. He gives gifts.

He gives the Holy Spirit as a gift. He gives salvation as a gift. Somehow Peter had lost sight of this, even though he was a representative of the church.

How much easier is it for us to lose sight of that a little bit too? We actually lose sight of the whole nature of God and somehow Christianity, we forget who God is, that he's a gift giver. And he gives generously and graciously without payment, without you having to prove yourself first. And so Peter's not the only one that drifts from that message.

Do you and I, do we relate to God like that? That God is the one that gives gifts? Or does that side of God still surprise you? I think I've told this story here once before, but when I was probably only about 20 years of age, I was at a friend's wedding in southern Saskatchewan. And it was just a rough wedding. There was lots of family dynamics and so I kind of escaped a little bit after the rehearsal to just go and catch my breath.

And I walked through the mall. And just something about the day, and it was so grim, that I remember just walking through this mall thinking, I just wish I could sin. I don't know what I was going to do at a public shopping mall, but I just felt like, let's just say I felt about as far away from holy as you could feel.

And just as I'm feeling really dark and my desires are not good, someone approaches me in the mall and says, is your name Todd Atkinson? I think, oh great. I'm having a horrible day. I feel absolutely sinful on the inside.

And now someone is going to want me to pray for them. Don't look at me like you never have days like that. Like you never have days that if a Christian ran into you somewhere, you'd think, oh, get lost.

So she's like, are you Todd Atkinson? With a sense of like, I'm like, oh, yes. And then to make matters worse, she goes, I had a dream about you last night. And I'm like, this is worse.

She's going to say to me, I had this dream, you were in a shopping mall and you were really sinful on the inside. So now God's going to like expose me in public. I'm just like, oh.

A woman with a dream in a shopping mall on a grim day. This is not a recipe for happiness. So of course it begs the question that you don't want to ask, what was your dream? You want to just go, you had a dream about me.

Hey, hope it was a good one. See you later. But of course it begs the question, what was the dream about? In your darkest hour, do you want someone having like prophetic dreams about you? So I begrudgingly asked her, what is her dream? And she told me this dream and said, in the dream God told

me I'm supposed to give you, I've started a new business.

I'm supposed to give the first fruits of my business that God told me to give the first thousand dollars to you. And I didn't know what to say because if God gives gifts because you deserve them, if God gives gifts because you've got to be worthy of them, then I didn't qualify for one of them. So guess why God decided to do that that day? Because sometimes the only time He can make a point like that is when you're having your worst day.

When you categorically know you don't deserve something. And you categorically know you're not worthy of something. That's the very day He just wants to say, can I spoil you a bit? Now that's a lot of years ago, 25 years ago.

So a thousand dollars would still be a nice gift. That was a lot more then. And she wrote me out a check, a thousand dollars.

And I went away and here's the verse that was in my head. The goodness of God brings men to repentance. Suddenly I didn't want to sin anymore at all.

Whatever is making my day dark, making me selfish, ingrown, looking for the worst in the day, I'll tell you what, I didn't want it anymore. The goodness of God brought me to repentance. That's exactly what God does in this story.

At the end of the story, the early Jewish Christians are actually struggling with these Gentiles. So Peter is preaching and as he's preaching, the Holy Spirit is poured out upon them, dramatically, before he's even finished his sermon. God just like generously gives from heaven.

Literally pours out his goodness. Pours out the greatest gifts of heaven upon this group of people. They're not baptized.

Normally you hear the gospel, you believe the gospel, you get baptized, you receive the Holy Spirit. But God wanted to show he's not hesitant with this group of people. That he loves them and he approves of them and he's got good gifts for them.

And so it's the Jewish Christians who remark later in Acts chapter 10, it says they were amazed. Some translation says they're astounded that God gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit. By the end of the story, they're starting to get it.

God is a giver of good gifts. They didn't need to deserve it. They didn't need to merit it.

They didn't need to pay for it. They didn't need to be Christians for a certain amount of years first. The reason I'm preaching today is just some of the things that the Lord has been saying.

Sometimes at the vigil, people have given me a message. God, I think the Lord is saying this to me. Bruce gave me one.

Part of me thought, hey, I think he's saying that to me. Steve gave some messages. Some people sent me an email message.

And I realized that we're on the brink of saying, God, we'd like more. We'd like more of your spirit. We'd like more of your presence.

We'd like to have wonderful heavenly encounters with you. Some of the stuff that happens in this story, you probably wouldn't mind. A vision, a trance, an angelic encounter, a word from the Lord, all this stuff.

But if we're not careful like Peter, we push into that with all our bad habits. Okay, well, I'll make myself worthy and then I'll ask for that stuff. I'll strive a little.

I'll push a little bit. Rather than just returning and saying, I'm not yet everything I'd like to be. And I'm getting it wrong in some areas.

Maybe even some significant areas. And maybe like Cornelius, I'm a bit infant-like in my faith or in some areas of my faith. But if God has a gift, I'd like to receive it.

That's the gospel. When we are during our last vigil, I found myself doing this. I'm around praying, kind of like I've got to figure something out in order to get the presence of the Lord here as big.

I've got to really work at this. Guess how far I got spiritually in the next couple of hours? I think I lost ground. Which is what you do when you don't practice the gospel.

The moment I said to the Lord, Lord, I'm not exactly even sure where I am. And I'm not totally sure where you want to take me. But why don't you just take me there? I just trust that you do it.

Because all my trying to figure this out isn't working. The Holy Spirit came on me so powerfully that night, last vigil. All he was waiting for me to do was receive him freely.

So yes, Peter had some things to teach Cornelius. But guess what? Cornelius had a few things to teach Peter. The simplicity of the gospel.

The simplicity of the gospel. I want to read out one thing. I don't know if you've followed a man who's now deceased called John Wimber.

But there's much to learn from him posthumously. And he was the founder of what's called the Worldwide Vineyard Movement of Churches. And I still learn from him.

But he's telling his story in this book of how his movement first started because there was a lot of healing. Like tons of healings. Went all over the world.

And he says this, suddenly in my mind's eye there appeared to be a cloud bank superimposed across the sky. So this is like an open-eyed vision he's having. Not in his mind's eye.

He actually thinks it's something outside, like in the clouds. But I'd never seen a cloud bank like this one. So I pulled my car over to the side of the road to take a closer look.

Then I realized that it was not a cloud bank I was seeing. It was a honeycomb. With honey dripping out on the people below.

It's a vision he's having. The people were in a variety of postures. Some were very reverent.

They were weeping and holding their hands out to catch the honey and taste it. Even inviting others, come, take some of this honey. Other people acted irritated.

Wiping the honey off themselves. You've got to understand that grace and mercy, while it warms some people's hearts, will annoy others. Others acted irritating, wiping the honey off themselves, complaining about the mess.

I was awestruck. Not knowing what to think, I prayed, and I said, Lord, what is it? He said, It's my mercy, John. For some people it's a blessing, but for others it's a hindrance.

There's plenty for everyone. And then he says this famous line, Don't ever beg me for healing again. I see my own self in that sentence.

I call it prayer, but really my form of prayer, it just looks like begging. Don't ever beg me for healing again. There's plenty for everyone.

The problem isn't on my end, John. It's down there. The problem isn't on the giver's end.

I got lots for everybody. The problem is on the receiving end. And that vision, I would say characterized the whole vineyard movement from that point on, and every time they sought God for healing, they just asked him, Pour out the mercy of healing.

And it happened all the world over. When we take a look at Cornelius and Peter, I know there's some people in our room, they're like, Cornelius, there's people who I don't want to point you out, but you've only come to faith in the last two or three weeks, come to believe in Jesus. You're our Corneliuses.

We love you. You've maybe come from a very different way of thinking. You've come to believe in Jesus and to receive his goodness.

So even our own congregation won't know there's numbers of people who have come to faith in the last few weeks. But it wouldn't be a good idea for me to point people out. They're our Corneliuses.

I hope we get hundreds of them. But when they come into our church, what are they going to learn from you and me? When they hear me pray, when they hear you pray, what are they going to learn from us? Because maybe we're a little like Peter, forgotten the simplicity of the gospel, that God is a giver of good gifts, and all you've got to do is receive them. It's that simple.

And it's time for us to go back to something simple and beautiful. How would you pray differently if you really believed that? What about worship? When we came to church and worship, and of course the Lord is very gracious and worship is escalating, but in order for worship to continue growing, in order for God's presence to grow, then we need a deeper revelation that he's generous and kind and good and he just gives good gifts. If we have to strive every time to go, we've got to figure out the next level, we've got to figure out how to do this, make ourselves more worthy of more of God, we'll even lose what we've got.

But if every new stage we just say, Lord, what you gave us before was a gift of grace, I'm ready for the next gift. I dare to believe it. I dare to trust you for grace.

And I can be at peace when I ask. Then the sky's the limits. Why don't you bow your heads? Let's spend a bit of prayer.

I don't know your heart and you don't know mine. So only you know if you're a little like Peter. I can see pictures of Peter in me.

He's like, the Gentiles shouldn't be receiving this. They're not clean enough. I've probably said something about my own life.

I shouldn't ask God for this. I'm not clean enough. But can we do something as a congregation in order for us to go the next places that God has for us to go? In order for us to receive the next things that he has to give, we must go back to this ancient apostolic foundation.

That God, as he revealed himself in Jesus, is gracious, he's generous. He gives good gifts. And the only way you can receive the gifts is just by faith.

The moment you try to work for them, the moment you try to make yourself worthy of them, they disappear in front of you. I would just love it if over the next couple of weeks there were a hundred stories like my mall story where someone said, you know what, I was in church, I wasn't even sure I wanted to be there, I was having a rough week, didn't think very highly of myself, felt very unworthy, and God sprung on me. And I see him differently now.

I see him differently now. I don't change so that I can encounter him, I encounter him so that I can change. Because having seen him, having encountered him, after that, there's nothing we wouldn't do for him.

But if you've got to make yourself righteous enough for an encounter, we nullify the work of the cross. We put it to one side and try to act as our own savior. So we are in lent.

God gives free gifts, but they cost him something. So what we're really saying is, I'm going to receive freely what you paid for painfully. That's the difference between something being free and being cheap.

The fact that he's paid for it already means I don't have to pay for it with my penance. I don't have to pay for it again with self-loathing. It means that when I'm in a community and I see someone sin and repent, I can freely forgive them.

I don't have to wait for them to do a hundred nice things to me for a year. What's given to me free, I can give freely away. There's a heart posture when we realize that God's gracious and he gives gifts.

It puts your heart at rest. And it also puts a tone of excitement in the air. When you're a kid, getting ready for your birthday party, you know gifts are coming your way? That's pretty exciting.

So we begin to rest in our heart to receive things just as gifts. There's a supernatural expectation that starts to fill the air. So we take our eyes off ourselves.

Even now in prayer, take your eyes off your own imperfections. My list is longer than yours. Just receive the grace.

Something to share with you this morning. I need to share all of this with you. A picture this morning, during the nine o'clock service this morning, I was praying.

Classy, sort of street side cafe. Some small round tables, four chairs around the table. The chairs were occupied by four people.

The people seemed like an odd group to be together. Male, female, black, white, old, young. Some dressed for dinner, some dressed in work overalls.

I can't tell whether I'm seeing different tables in the same cafe with different groups or whether it's the same table at different times of the day, but I certainly saw more than four people. In any case, these four people around the table order some drinks from the waiter who's dressed in formal waiting attire, white shirt, black bow tie, waistcoat. I can't hear anything, but the waiter returns with a jug of iced water.

But he's got no glasses, and the table is empty. And the waiter begins to pour the water from a couple of feet above the table, right down onto the center of the table. I don't know what it's like in your house, but we went through a phase in our house where at dinner time you could pretty much guarantee that one of the kids would knock over a glass of water, and that water seemed to gravitate more often than pure chance would dictate to my lap.

But this water that the waiter is pouring doesn't flow one way or the other. Instead, when it hits the table, it spreads evenly across the table in all directions. It flows over the edge evenly.

The water in the jug doesn't run out, it just keeps on coming. And it spreads out without preference or bias equally to each person at the table. Normally, in my experience, most people in cafes expect and prefer their drinks and glasses rather than their laps, but these people don't seem to mind, and in fact it seemed to be what they expected and what they wanted.

I believe there's a number of things that God wants to teach me and teach you with this picture. Firstly, the setting is a street cafe. Although it's a classy joint, it's accessible to all sorts of people, and it's used by all sorts of people.

No one who came there was worried about having to pay classy prices in a classy place. All comers were accepted. No dress code here.

Second, the patrons of this cafe asked the waiter for a drink, and it seemed that they asked for tap water, a free thing. Thirdly, the water isn't poured into a glass, it's poured out freely on the table. And it's spread out evenly, no bias, no preferential treatment.

And the water isn't just for drinking, but it washes us clean. It satisfies our thirst, but it also gives us more than we bargained for. The table represents this church.

The cafe may be the wider church, I'm not sure on that. The people are you and me. Anyone who walks in off the street, the upright and godly, the worst sinners, the whole and the broken.

The waiter is the Lord. He's there as the servant of all who came in off the street to those that ask him for water. The water is the water that Jesus talks about to the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, verse 10.

Like the centurion we've been hearing about this morning, she was someone that Jews wouldn't associate with, and Jesus himself offered her the gift. It's living water, eternal life, a gift and a blessing from God. So however you've come here this morning, whole, broken, hair done, nails perfect, hands and clothes dirty, heart right with God or hardened to Him, He's offering you this gift this morning.

It's a gift of water that satisfies and cleanses. So Father, we have ears to hear what you're saying to your church. We ask you to pour out living water on us.

Thank you that we're all welcome to the table. Whatever our stage or whatever our condition. If we'll pull up a spot at the table, drink.

Just take a moment. Let Him do that for you. Pour out your spirit.

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