

The Only Way to Overcome Racism

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[0 : 00] Well, this morning I want to talk about racism, because while apartheid in South Africa might be a thing of the past, unfortunately racism and discrimination is very much still alive in our country.

While it might not be official anymore, we still see it everywhere, don't we? The issue of racial tensions and racism rearing its ugly head over and over again, whether it's in politics or education or sport, whatever it is, we can't seem to get away from this automatic tendency of a person to look differently on someone of a different culture or a different skin color.

And it's not only white discriminating against black, it's also black discriminating against white. As I was reminded recently with a visit from our neighboring president, Robert Mugabe, who told the press that I don't want to see a white face in his visit.

I think he was disappointed, unfortunately. But we see discrimination everywhere. And whether it's discrimination of people in other countries, as we've seen recently in xenophobic attacks in South Africa.

See, discrimination seems to be everywhere. And it seems to be something we can't get away from, no matter how many political reforms we put in place. And it seems to be at every level of our society. I'm sure you have also been affected personally by discrimination in some form or another, whether it's skin color or whether it's culture or whatever it might be.

[1 : 31] But then we look further afield and we realize it's not just a South African problem, is it? Discrimination based on race or culture is just as prevalent all over the world.

In America, there's still huge tensions in urban areas, well, all over, urban areas and rural areas, between black and white, despite having a black president. In the UK, one of the most cosmopolitan and mixed and well-policed societies, in the UK, there are still over 100,000 racially motivated crimes per year.

You see, discrimination is everywhere, isn't it? But the reason it is, see, the reason discrimination is out there is because discrimination is in here.

Discrimination is in our hearts. Racism is not a problem with our society, like you might think. It's a problem with our hearts. The Bible makes that clear.

Because of our sinful hearts, that's where all this stuff comes from. And while we don't want to admit it, all of us in this room this morning, all of us have a natural tendency, even without thinking, to favor people who are like us and to separate ourselves from people who are not.

[2 : 53] To put up these invisible walls. We all do it. We put up invisible walls, without even noticing, between ourselves and other people.

Walls that determine who we are more likely to spend our time with, who we're more likely to speak to, who we're more likely to interact with. And we're all guilty of that.

Now, this term at St. Mark's, if you've been coming for any length of time, you would have picked up that we're considering the mission that Jesus has called us to, as his church on earth, as Christians, as his followers, the mission of sharing the gospel message.

And I think one of the biggest barriers to that mission is these invisible walls that we put up, that each of us put up in our lives. You see, our subconscious discrimination against other types of people stops us as Christians from being effective at the one thing we're here to do, which is reaching out over those walls with the gospel.

And I want to talk about that this morning, because this morning we're going to learn how we can do that. You're going to learn, if you listen, how you can reach out over those walls that you put up in your life to reach out with the gospel to people on the other side, to break those barriers.

[4 : 13] We're going to learn how to do that, because we're going to meet two men who had to do that, two men who had a major wall between them, and we're going to look at what God did to overcome that barrier.

So join me as we read this story together. You can page back right back to Acts 10, verse 1. That's really where the story starts in your Bibles. And it's then in verse 1 that we meet the first of these two men, and his name is Cornelius.

So, chapter 10, verse 1. At Caesarea, there was a man named Cornelius. He was a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment.

He and all his family were devout and God-fearing. He gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. One day, at about three in the afternoon, he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God who came to him and said, Cornelius.

Cornelius stared at him and said, What is it, Lord? He asked. The angel answered, Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon, who is called Peter.

[5 : 26] He is staying with Simon the Tanner, whose house is by the sea. All right, so here we meet Cornelius. Cornelius is a Roman military officer, and he lived in a port town, quite a busy military port town on the coast of Judea.

And we're told about Cornelius. One of the things that stood out about him was that he was a very religious man. We're told in verse 2, He and all his family were devout and God-fearing.

He gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. And so in all respects, this is a good, well-respected man, member of society.

A devout seeker after God, even though he came from a pagan Roman culture. And you kind of, you find many people like that today, don't you, in our world today.

People in all different cultures and societies, from all different backgrounds, in all different upbringings, who are, they seem genuinely devout. They want to do good. They want to seek after truth and justice.

[6 : 31] And you find people like that in every religion as well. You know, we mustn't, Christians often think, oh, it's only Christians who are truly devout and seek after good.

But actually, Cornelius was, and in every religion, you'll find devout people, you'll find devout Muslims. Maybe you know some at the office. You'll find devout Buddhists, and you'll find devout Christians.

These are genuinely decent people. People, you might think, automatically have God's favor because of their devotion, because of their seeking after good. And yet we know, if we've read the Bible, we know that's not the case.

If it were the case that people could be right with God based on their devotion, then Jesus wouldn't have had to come and die. No, the very reason he had to come and die was to take on the sins of the world because no matter how devoted humans are, they're all still sinners.

And we must get that right. Devotion doesn't cancel out sin. Every human has broken God's law, the Bible says, no matter what good they've done, and their sin against God must be punished by a holy God.

[7 : 43] He can't just sweep it under the carpet. Just as much as a convicted criminal in a court must be tried for their crime, no matter how much money they've given to charity. You know, it's not like the judge is going to go, yes, you've been convicted for that murder, but wow, you gave a really big donation to the Red Cross last week, so we'll just let you go.

No, it doesn't work like that. No matter how much good they do, no matter how much money they give away to charity, their crime must still be punished. And it's the same with us. You see, we must never make the mistake of thinking that any amount of good works or devotion is going to make up for our sins against God.

And yet, we often do. It's a human tendency to think we can make up for our sins. We can cover up our sins with good works and with going to church and with giving money to the poor.

It's not going to work. And that's what this story reminds us. Devotion is not enough. Coming to church is not enough. Devotion, giving money away, all these religious things we might do, it's not enough.

Because here we have Cornelius, who's a devoted man, and yet that still couldn't make him right with God. And that's really the first lesson we must get from this story.

[8 : 57] Devotion is not enough. However, his devotion did do something. As he was seeking after God, as he was giving money to the poor, as he was seeking after what God wants in his life, as he was praying, what it did do, while it didn't make him right with God, it did cause God to pay attention to him and send him a message.

A message that told him where he could find the very thing he was searching for. And God sent him this message through an angel who told him in verse 5, now send men to Joppa and bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter.

Peter. Now this is obviously a summary of what the angel said because we found later in Acts 11 that the angel also told him, Peter will bring you a message through which you and your, sorry, you and all your household will be saved.

So that's the message. So while his devotion didn't save him, his devotion did cause God to send him a message showing him where he can be saved, where he can find what he's looking for, being right with God.

And so we see quite clearly here in this story that no matter how devoted or religious or decent Cornelius or anyone else is, that's not enough to be right with God.

[10 : 20] And we need to understand that this morning. For Cornelius to be right with God, he needed to hear about Jesus Christ and put his faith in him. And so do you.

No matter how religious you might be, you need to put your faith in Jesus Christ to be right with God. You need to embrace and follow Jesus Christ because he's the only thing who, he's the only one who has done anything capable of taking your sins away.

You can't. No amount of devotion can. Jesus can though. Jesus can deal with your sins. He's the only one who can. And so if you've been living a life ignoring him, stop.

Stop. Pay attention to him. That's what, that's what Cornelius needed to hear. Cornelius needed to hear about Jesus Christ and so do you. And if you, if you haven't done that, if you haven't embraced and followed Jesus Christ, or maybe you don't know if you have, maybe you've been coming to church for ages but you don't yet know if you're a follower of Christ, please don't waste any time.

Please don't go into your week and forget about it. Come talk to me. Set up an appointment with me. I'd love to just talk you through what it means to really follow Christ and put your trust in Christ and know that your sins can be washed clean.

[11 : 32] If you don't, if you don't know that this morning, if you don't know if you are right with God, then you can know and you mustn't waste any time. I would not want anyone here to leave without knowing that they are right with God because Jesus did everything to make sure that you can know that and that's why God was so adamant to let Cornelius know there's a message you need to hear.

There's a message you need to hear as well. Please don't leave this morning if you don't know that you are right with God. Cornelius needed to know that and it's the same for anyone irrespective of culture or nationality, they need Jesus to be right with God and so a decent Muslim in Syria still needs Jesus to be right with God.

Okay, a peaceful Buddhist in Japan still needs Jesus to be right with God and your friendly neighbor over the wall who always lends you tools and sugar still needs to be right with God.

Despite how nice they might be, they still need Jesus to be right with God just like Cornelius did and just like Cornelius before that's going to happen, each of them need someone to tell them about Jesus because notice something interesting about the story.

the angel didn't tell Cornelius about Jesus which is strange because if Jesus is the one thing that Cornelius needs, you would expect that the angel would tell him but the angel doesn't.

[13 : 00] All the angel does is tell Cornelius where he can find someone who can tell him about Jesus which is strange. However, the reason is because we saw last week, didn't we, that God always communicates the message of Jesus through his field agents on earth, through his people that he's left on earth to do that.

And so, what that tells us is that not only do all these decent people around the world still need to hear about Jesus but they need us to tell them. Nobody else is going to. They need Christians, God's field agents on earth to tell them about Jesus.

So they desperately need Jesus and they desperately need us to tell them. They need God's messengers. And so that's as you would have picked up over the last few weeks is our mission.

That's why we're on earth. We've been reminded over and over again in the book of Acts that's why Jesus has left his people on earth and hasn't taken us home yet because we've got that task to do as his church on earth to tell people about Jesus.

But you know what's stopping that from happening? You know why they're all out there still and they haven't heard about Jesus? It's because of these invisible walls we put up, isn't it?

[14 : 21] These invisible walls that exist between ourselves and people who are different to us. It's so hard to break through those barriers to do what we're here to do. That is the single biggest impediment to us carrying out our mission on earth.

But what might surprise you this morning is that was the Apostle Peter's single biggest impediment as well. which is the second person we meet in the story. Peter.

You see, Peter was a devout Jew. He was a little rough around the edges. He came from a hard fishing life. But he was a Jewish Israelite through and through was Peter.

And as a Jew, Peter, like any Jew, was brought up to see himself as very different to people who weren't Jews, namely Gentiles. Gentiles. And there was a very deep prejudice that existed between Jews and Gentiles that went back thousands of years.

And you really, to understand what's going on in the story between Peter and Cornelius, you need to understand the background. You need to understand that deep prejudice that existed between Jews and Gentiles.

[15 : 33] You need to understand what a big deal it is. You thought apartheid South Africa was bad, which it was, of course. But in Peter's day, the discrimination was just on a whole other level.

For one, Jews never even stepped in the house of a Gentile, let alone associated with them in public. And Peter alludes to that in verse 28. See what he said as he came into Cornelius' house?

He said, you are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. And then secondly, another thing the Jews believed was that God wanted nothing to do with the Gentiles.

God was the God of the Jews and God had cut himself off from the Gentiles. Pretty much like every religion believes about the people who are part of their clan, part of their religion, that we're in with God and everyone else is out.

Well, that's what Peter firmly believed as well. And so Peter was a devout Jew, a bit of a racist. He discriminated against Gentiles, like all Jews did.

[16 : 38] But there was something else about Peter. See, not only was he a Jew, but he was also a disciple of Jesus Christ. And that made him one of God's field agents, whether he liked it or not.

And as a field agent of God on earth, he carried a message, the message of Christ, and he had a mission that Jesus gave him to share that message with the rest of the world.

And yet he had these huge barriers, you see, stopping him from doing that. These huge cultural barriers stopping him from being effective. And so Acts chapter 10 is really the story of how God helped Peter to overcome those barriers so that he could be an effective disciple.

And the reason we need to hear this this morning is because you and I are no different to Peter. We also have barriers we need to overcome, whether it's barriers of race, culture, whatever it is.

You know, in our typical kind of suburban westernized culture, one of the biggest barriers we have is this individualism. We just have higher walls between ourselves and our neighbors, don't we?

[17 : 46] Whether they're physical walls or whether they're mental walls, we just don't associate with other people unless they're part of our tribe. Barriers we all have. And we need to know how to overcome those barriers as well if we're going to be effective at living out the life that God has called us to.

And so I want us to see just two things this morning that God helped Peter to see in this story to overcome his barriers which I hope will help you overcome your barriers.

And you know what? There were two things about God himself. Two things that Peter learned about God himself that changed how he lived. And that brings up another point which I just want to mention which is that the way that you will change and be challenged is when you learn about God himself the very nature and character of God as you embrace who God is the God who made you that's that's what will change you the most learning about God not not finding you know don't open the Bible primarily to find rules and instructions to live by open the Bible so that you can learn about the heart of God because when you embrace who God truly is that will change you from the inside out and it changed Peter Peter learned two things that I want us to learn this morning about the heart of God and the first is that God is a missionary God is a missionary God and we see this throughout scripture throughout history right from the beginning

God's heart has always been to reach all the people he's made all over the world not to leave anyone out of his plans no matter who they are right from the beginning in his promise to Abraham which we read earlier God says and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you all peoples that was God's plan from the beginning and then in the great commission that Jesus gave to his disciples he said go and make disciples of some nations no go and make disciples of all nations you see God is interested in all nations all people in every corner of the world he's interested in the island inhabitants in the Tabutu Butu Islands or whatever he's interested in in the people who live in the Nile Delta he's interested in the Japanese he's interested in the Russians he's he God is a missionary God his heart is for all people he's made go make disciples of all nations

God wants to reach all people and yet his field agents aren't so keen are we and we see that in Acts you know we like being comfortable we like being where we're used to we don't like reaching out beyond our comfort zones and it's exactly the same you would think the apostles and the disciples of Jesus himself were the ones who would reach out but actually they were just as hesitant to go beyond their comfort zones as we are at this point in Acts in fact Peter and the other apostles were quite happy to stay in Israel and share the message of Jesus with people like them it it was God at each occasion who forced them out to share Jesus with people not like them they needed to be forced out so do we forced out of our comfort zones in fact if you flip back you see this in

[21 : 22] Acts 8 verse 1 just flip back in your Bibles to there Acts 8 verse 1 now what you need to understand is that Acts 8 really serves as a turning point in the story of the early church in the book of Israel but I want you to see right at the beginning what caused that what caused the gospel to start moving out beyond the borders of Israel was it because Peter and the apostles said hey you know what we should really go on a holiday overseas and go on a mission trip that would be great no they didn't you know what caused them to go beyond the borders of Israel Acts 8 verse 1 persecution broke out against the church persecution forced them out to take the gospel message where God wanted it to go unfortunately that's what was necessary to get the early Christians out of Jerusalem and into the world persecution and

God allowed that because getting the message out was far more important to God than people being comfortable I'm going to say that again actually because it's something we really need to take in to God getting the message out is far more important than our comfort the mission is more important than our comfort but even after that it's still even after this persecution it still took a lot to get these Christians sharing the message with people who weren't like them with foreigners people they weren't used to interacting with so we saw last week for example with the Ethiopian and Philip God had to basically set up the whole meeting Philip wasn't going to do it by himself and this week with Cornelius again God sets up the entire meeting because this was not what Peter would have chosen to do naturally it was totally out of his comfort zone but God doesn't care so much about his people's comfort as he does about saving people of every tribe and every nation that's the business our

God is in he's a missionary God and he always has been and that means that if you are one of his people getting on board with what he's doing on earth is not going to be comfortable I'm going to tell you that now if is going to take you out of your comfort zone to do things you wouldn't normally have done to cross boundaries you wouldn't normally have crossed to spend time with people that you wouldn't normally give the time of day and for some Christians that might mean going to be a missionary in another country but for others it might mean taking time to build a relationship with your neighbor across the wall which you wouldn't normally have done or visiting someone that you wouldn't normally have time to visit because God wants to touch their life through you or inviting that couple around for supper who don't go to church and who you don't really have that much in common with and yet you're the only

Christian they know do you know someone like that ask yourself do you know someone who is not a Christian and you are the only Christian they have any kind of relationship with because you see we all do we all know people like that and so I challenge you this morning if you call yourself a disciple of Christ do something uncomfortable this week for the sake of the mission that God has given you go visit someone invite someone around you wouldn't normally have meet up for coffee with someone who you wouldn't normally have to build a relationship or to talk about Jesus to them because you never know God may choose to reach out to them this week through you but that will not happen if you are not willing to step out of your comfort zone first see remember God reaches people in this world through his people and he calls his people to step out of their comfort zones to do that have you done that recently have you stepped out of your comfort zone for the sake of

Christ because God is a missionary God and he calls you like Peter to step out of your comfort zone to get involved in that mission are you willing to do that but then there's a second lesson that Peter needed to learn about God and which we need to learn about God this morning and that is that God has no favorites God has no favorites look at what Peter says in verse 28 as he walks into Cornelius house he says you are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile but God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean so Now we must appreciate that was a huge thing for Peter to say Peter who had been raised to see some people as less holy or worthy than others and finally after years and years and after a really weird vision that you can read about in

[26 : 55] Acts 10 finally after all that Peter has realized that while he might look down on certain segments of society God does not and he says in verse 34 I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right in other words Peter has realized that through Jesus God opens his arms to people of every culture and every nation and every language and every social level you see God doesn't draw the distinctions we do and yes you do draw distinctions and so do I distinctions between certain levels of people in society we constantly every day draw distinctions we look at a person and we automatically put them in a particular slot where they fit into our mind or in society God doesn't draw those distinctions though when he looks at people and Jesus himself made that clear when he came to earth you know who

Jesus hung out with when he came to earth the down and out of society the prostitutes the cripples the tax collectors the people who were scorned by society Jesus made a point of spending time with them because he didn't see them as any less worthy of being in his kingdom neither should we you know why he didn't see them as being any less worthy of his kingdom because he knew nobody is worthy of his kingdom nobody not even the most religious devout person because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God Romans chapter 3 but equally all who trust in Christ are justified freely by his grace and so there is no difference there is no difference in God's eyes the only distinction that he sees between people is whether they are in Christ or not whether their sins have been taken or not he doesn't look at your bank balance he doesn't look at your work situation he doesn't look at the clothes you wear when

God looks at you all he cares about is whether you have Christ dwelling in you or not do you because nothing else matters in nothing else matters than whether you have Christ or not that is the most important thing because that is all God cares about when he looks at you and if you do if you believe the gospel this morning if you are a member of God's new society if your sins have been washed away through Christ then I want you to remember one thing that if God makes no distinction between people in his new society then neither should you when we look at people all we should worry about is whether they know Christ or not not how much money they have not how decent they are not if they've washed lately God doesn't care about those things and neither should we instead

God is calling us to break those barriers God is calling us to break those invisible walls we put up and that's exactly what happened at the end of the story see how the story ends Peter preached the gospel to these Gentiles the Holy Spirit came down and they were all baptized into God's people to the astonishment of Peter and his friends and then verse 48 they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days which no doubt he did which was unprecedented it was unprecedented alone for a Jew to step into the house of Gentile but now here's Peter staying with him with Cornelius living with him eating food together and that's what the gospel results in you see the gospel breaks down barriers and brings us into close fellowship with people we would never normally have associated with people of all different races cultures ages social backgrounds and you know what when that happens when the gospel has that effect in your life when it breaks down those barriers and as a community we start mixing and interacting in a way that we would have never done without

Christ the world looks on and sees and is attracted because they want that the world that's full of barriers and full of discrimination and full of issues and racism and people just judging each other when they look in the Christian community and they see a community without those barriers it makes an effect on them Jesus himself said love one another as I have loved you in other words without discrimination without judging and when you do you know what he says this is how the world will know that you are my disciples this is how the world will see that something is special about St.

[31 : 53] Mark's church is when those barriers are broken down the gospel breaks down those barriers so I need to ask you as we finish has the gospel done that for you has the gospel broken down the barriers that you put up between yourself and other people in your life or does it still need to do that because God has no favorites there are no barriers in his kingdom and if you are one of his people then there can be no barriers in your heart either let's pray that he would help us to do that heavenly father we we have learned something about you this morning we've learned that you are a missionary God that your heart is for all people that you don't look down on certain people because of who they are but all you care about is whether their sins are covered or not by Christ and Lord help us to have that same view of the people around us in our daily lives help us to care for nothing except whether they are in

Christ or not and if they aren't Lord help us to be witnesses help us to break down those barriers so that we can spend time and build relationships with people that we wouldn't normally have so that we can tell them about Jesus who brings us together like nothing else can and Lord I pray again for anybody in this church this morning who is not to see that Jesus has done everything for them to be in right relationship with you that he has broken down the ultimate barrier of sin between us and you and I do pray that you would cause them to truly put their faith and trust in Jesus and to follow him and so we pray Lord that you would go with us as we leave this place as we go out into a to get involved with the mission that you have called us to in

Jesus name Amen