

Does God Really Care About Gutam Ramudu?
(Evangelism, Missions)
Acts 10-11
9/15/91
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Do our prejudices affect our attitudes toward evangelism and missions?

Coming out of W/W II and Vietnam we had classified many human beings in prejudicial language: WOPS, SPICS, DINKS, CHINKS, DAGOS AND JAPS.

Without making any political comment on either the Vietnam War or the recent Persian Gulf War, it is interesting that most of us got so caught up in the self-righteousness of our political/military actions that the people we were killing ceased to be people and became "collateral damage".

A joke was circulating several months ago during Desert Storm that asked, "What do you call two Iraqi women entering a house? - Answer: "Incoming scud." We dehumanized people so that we don't have to care.

The Persian Gulf war was a slaughter...100,000 people killed in 6 months", says Jim Wallis in the May issues of "SoJourners." Our magazines and newspapers said the victims were "basically just setting ducks"; bombing them was like "shooting fish in a barrel". People were likened to "scurrying cockroaches". (Sept issue of A.D. Global Monitor)

How does such language affect us? Is it possible that reducing others to animals or insects allows us to care less? 65% of the Iraqis have never once heard the Gospel. Do our prejudices affect our attitudes toward world missions?

Unemployed "wetbacks", car thieves and pregnant teens! Isn't that how much of the Anglo-community sums up the Hispanics among us?

Do prejudicial ethnic remarks affect our attitudes toward evangelism and world missions?

And the black community too often gets summarized as a bunch of "Niggers, welfare queens, lazy-no goods, ignorant and drug-crazed ex-cons.

Do prejudicial racial slurs (even the subtle ones) affect our attitudes toward evangelism? Do we write off whole segments of our world and even of our city by classing them as different? Do we not even consider telling some of the people we have contact with on a regular basis about Jesus because they are poor, rich, black, Hispanic, or Asian?

Prejudice is not simply noting racial, ethnic or socio-economic differences - you can't help but see those differences; Prejudice however is going beyond seeing the differences and beginning to value people based on those perceived differences.

We devalue people based on certain standards we have set up - that is prejudice. And if whole groups of people, African Americans, Mexican Americans, foreigners, poor whites, rich whites can be devalued - can be lumped together and considered "other" (dehumanized) then if they haven't heard of Jesus isn't so bad. As long as people who matter (our family and friends) have heard.

Prejudice certainly affected the first Christians in the time of the Apostles. Not only did prejudice affect them but so also did PAROCHIALISM. Parochialism is an exclusivism, a provincialism - a focus on us and ours largely to the exclusion of others.

As you know, all of the first Christians were Jews, as was Jesus. In fact, for a number of years the Romans just considered Christianity as a Jewish sect - a variation on Judaism.

Through nearly 1500 years of disobedience the Jews had grown isolated, parochial, exclusive in their religion. Instead of them being God's people they thought the Lord of heaven was their God alone - parochialism.

When we were studying Acts 8 we came across a passage about a disciple of Jesus named Philip who went to the district of Samaria to tell of Christ. What was so remarkable was that any Jew knew that Samaritans were "half-breed compromisers" that no respectable Jew would have anything to do with because they worshipped differently - they wouldn't worship in Jerusalem - prejudice and parochialism.

Keep that in mind. Has American Christianity tried to turn the God of the universe into its own private god? Do even Evangelicals act as if God is our own God, that he exists to provide for us? We'll come back to that later.

Yes, prejudice and parochialism deeply affected the first Christians. And even though they were forced to admit their 1/2 Jewish Samaritan neighbors into the church they would not even consider GENTILES! I mean literally it never even entered their minds - so deep was the prejudice and parochialism. After all, God was the god of the Jews and he came to save his people - and everyone knows that God's people are Jews.

But in ACTS 10-11 that all changes - not easily mind you- but it changes none-the-less. And it changed through a man named Peter. Some Bibles title these chapters the "Conversion of Cornelius" but it would much better be titled: "The conversion of Peter". For in this passage we see Peter's prejudices and parochialism broken down, we see his understanding of God greatly broadened, and his mission in life opened up. Instead of Christianity as a parochial religion of the Jews only - Peter and the others got World Vision. Instead of Gentiles being understood as unworthy, that prejudice was crushed.

Find ACTS 10 in your Bible and let me remind you of the incident: Cornelius, a Roman Centurion (a captain in the military) was a God-fearing man who didn't know Jesus. One day while in Caesarea, he had a vision and an angel of God told him to send to the city of Joppa about 30 miles south along the Mediterranean coast and bring back a man named Peter. So Cornelius sent for Peter.

About noon the next day, Peter was waiting for lunch and he too saw a vision. Something like a sheet came down out of the sky and on the sheet were many animals, some were "unclean" meaning that Jews were not supposed to eat them. Peter was told to kill them and eat them. He refused because behind him was 1500 years of reminder that it could not be done. But the voice said, "Don't call anything impure that God has made!"

Three times that happened. Three times Peter was told not to call anything impure that God has made. No sooner did this happen than the men from Cornelius showed up to ask Peter to go with them. The Spirit had told Peter to go - don't hesitate.

Now you must understand that Peter is being stretched! All of his life and for centuries before him the Jews would have nothing to do with Gentiles - they were not even supposed to associate with them. Look at 11:3. He was later denigrated with the criticism that he had gone into the house of gentiles and had eaten with them. This was not always hostility against gentiles, it was worse than that - it was prejudice. Gentiles just weren't worthy of being associated with.

But God was working in Peter's heart. The next day, Peter along with several Jewish-Christian friends accompanied these Gentiles back to Cornelius' house. Cornelius had assembled a group of friends and relatives at his house to hear Peter. Peter first remarked to these Gentiles that in contrast to what he had believed all of his life, God had shown him that he(Peter) could not call any person unclean or impure. Before we couldn't have associated with you but now that has changed.

Now Peter asks what they want of him. Cornelius tells Peter about his vision and how God told him to send for Peter and then in essence says, We want you to tell us everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.

With that it appears that Peter's heart is opened further: Verse 34 He now understands that this new freedom to associate with Gentiles means further that God accepts men and women from every nation, every race and every culture - not just Jews. Vs 39 God let us witness the activities of Jesus. Vs 42 God commanded us to preach and testify that Jesus is the Judge of the living and the dead and that forgiveness of sins is available through Him. Vs 43 Key words: this forgiveness is available to EVERYONE!

It is now apparent to Peter that non-Jews can become Christians. As Peter was speaking the Holy Spirit came upon all those who heard the message. The Jewish-Christians present were ASTONISHED because the Holy Spirit came upon Gentiles. The evidence was that they received the Holy Spirit just as the Jewish Christians had (Acts 2) So Peter orders that they be baptized - This was a certain sign that they were accepted as one with the Jewish Christians.

Now looking at the incident once again - Remember that prior to this event, Peter not only did not have a heart for Gentiles he had a prejudice against them. Prior to this work of God, Peter along with all of the others, would have been very content to tell of Jesus only to the Jews.

How was Peter's prejudice broken down? The first thing that God did was give Peter TRUTH. Though all through the Old Testament God had indicated his desire to have all the nations of the world be reached - now after 1500 years of prejudice God used a dramatic way to get Peter's attention - a vision and a voice. Don't call anything unclean that God has made. There is no person who is beyond the scope of God's love, there is no person to whom you are not responsible to tell of Jesus, there is no person who is unworthy of hearing of God's grace.

The second thing God did was Command Peter to testify: Once Peter got to Cornelius' house he remembered clearly the words of Jesus to be Christ's witnesses to the "ends of the earth" - not just to Jews in Jerusalem, not even just to Jews and Samaritans in Judea and Samaria but to all peoples.

The third thing that God did was give Peter a specific opportunity to see God's desire and grace put into action. No sooner had God given Peter the vision than he sent Gentiles to put Peter to the test - would Peter obey, would he care, would he give himself to those he previously disregarded, even despised?

What is marvelous is that with that event the doors of prejudice were broken down - the Gospel was released from its Jewish parochialism to include all people - including us. As God had all along intended - the Good news spread beyond Jerusalem, beyond Judea and Samaria - now even to the ends of the earth.

But an equally amazing thing has taken place several times in church history and has taken place in the lives of too many of God's people: The Good News has been nationalized or tribalized.

God for too many Christians is their God. He exists to meet our needs. He is there to take care of our own - a form of discrimination. We care that our own kids get a Christian education but what about other's kids? We give money to help care for our own relatives and maybe even friends but what about reaching the Iraqis, the Indians, the black the Hispanic - the OTHERS? We will work our fingers to the bone to get and preserve for our future but never even considered answering God's call to testify to the grace of God to someone who isn't part of our group - isn't like us.

Has our parochialism kept us focused first and foremost on us and ours and has our prejudice kept us from truly caring about those who haven't heard?

God changed Peter through TRUTH, COMMAND and OPPORTUNITY.

The TRUTH is clear: God is not our God. We may be his people but he is the God of all. We can't put him in a box and pull him out just to be there when we want him to help us. He is not the God of the white middle class American church-goer. He is the sovereign Lord of the universe. He loves us no more and no less than he loves every Indian, every Chinese, every black, and every Latino.

It is true from Rev 5:9 that Jesus by his blood purchased for God men and women from every tribe, language, people and nation.

The COMMAND is clear: God has given to us the ministry of reconciliation – We are Christ's ambassadors. We are the means that God is using to reach his world. There is, as I've said before, no plan B - we're it!

The OPPORTUNITY is before us today and tomorrow: When God prepared Peter with the truth then God had Cornelius' men there to put the truth into action.

Who will God bring across your path in the next two days, a neighbor of a different religion, a co-worker of a different color, a sports club or gas station attendant of a different ethnic background?

Will I let the TRUTH of how inclusive God is, will I let the COMMAND of how responsible I am, and will I let the opportunities afforded me everyday break down my parochialism and my prejudices. Peter said, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism"