

Declared Clean

Series: *What is the Gospel?*

Act 10

To The Village Church, December 02, 2007

Main Idea:

When God declares us, even us, clean through Jesus Christ, our deep need is answered, so receive this declaration for yourself and others.

Meditation:

I saw God wash the world last night.

Ah, would He had washed me

As clean of all my dust and dirt

As that old white birch tree.

--William Leroy Stidger

Post-Sermon Song Theme: He has cleansed us.

Benediction:

May Jesus Christ, Judge of the living and the dead, cleanse you through faith.

Charge:

Go forth, cleansed, to call one another clean and call others to this cleansing.

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I. A Private Uncleaness

A. The Subtle Uncleaness of George III¹

1. Nothing wrong and yet something wrong. George III, one of the Hanoverian Kings of England, although he didn't get democracy, was a strongly moral man.² He had gotten to be king. He ruled in controversial times, but was well respected, a good marriage, no mistress(!) keen family man.³ But he felt something was wrong.
 - a. The story goes that a poor man at Windsor occasionally had a prayer meeting at his house.
 - b. George III heard about this prayer meeting, and, in order to go, he disguised himself and went. And he was so moved by what this poor man had to say about Jesus, that he kept coming back, disguised. He would go to this prayer meeting, just to talk about the state of his soul.
 - c. He repeated this enough times that people in the castle gathered where he was going and so one day, an attendant needed to talk to him and so went to the house and wrapped on the door, looking for the king. When found out, he couldn't keep coming but, with great regrets, thanked the man for his advice and piety.
2. Even a king felt this subtle need.

B. The Goodness of Cornelius

1. This is a landmark story: signifying the taking of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles.
 - You can tell how important the author sees it to be by the amount of repetition in these two chapters, **10 and 11** and again in **ch 15**.
 - Even in ch 10 alone, there is this slowing the action down through repetition: e.g. how Luke describes Cornelius' vision (**vv3-6**) and then Cornelius describes Cornelius' vision (**v29**). So you can tell that this event is important to the narrator. It is foundational to the book.
 - F.H.Chase: "The Pentecost of the Gentile world."⁴ The HS comes upon, not just the Jews, and not just the half legitimate Samaritans but upon the Goia. A Jew couldn't even enter a Gentile's house w/o being made unclean thereby.
2. **Vv1-2** It focuses on this individual, Cornelius, a capable and devout man.
Capable:
 - A centurion of Caesarea, the residence of the Roman governor of Judea.

¹ ASDM, 63-64.

² Jeremy Black, *The Hanoverians*, 119.

³ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁴ F.H Chase, as cited in Bruce, 264.

- Unlike tribunes or legates, centurions got to where they were by working hard, working their way up through military ranks.
 - About 80 men were under his command.
 - His pay was 15X that of an ordinary soldier.⁵
3. Devout:
- **V24**—Respected by his kinsfolk or, that word could also mean “countrymen.”⁶ whom he called together.
 - **V30**—He prays a lot. Praying at three in the afternoon. (Good idea to do).
 - **V22**—Respected & “Righteous,” even in the eyes of his employees. Good trick.
4. He had done well. He lived a good life. **V2**—His family was doing well, and his children were living life well. He has managed to keep them out of trouble. Everything was good. But it wasn’t.

C. The Need of Cornelius: Still Unclean below the Surface

1. It is very important that you read this story correctly. Because you can read what is going on here in two different ways. If you think that what the author is trying to say is that nice people get noticed by God, you are missing the point. If you think that what Luke means in this chapter is that Cornelius was devout, and god-fearing, and remembered the poor and so God took notice of him and said, “Whoa, a pretty nice unbeliever. I think that I will let him in to the Kingdom of God because of his good behavior,”—if you think that, then you have missed the point.⁷
2. The point is, rather, that there was something wrong. Cornelius had a great need, but it was below the surface. You can detect it though in the passage:
 - **V4** a way of saying your prayers have been heard. What were the prayers for?
 - **V31** “God has heard your prayer...” For what?
 - Why all the effort, going beyond what the angel says, to gather an audience for this Jew he doesn’t know.
3. Here is the point: Even with all the success of his life, He still wasn’t clean. There was an uncleanness that was not on the surface. Subtle. Nothing is wrong and yet something is wrong.

⁵ Keener, 350.

⁶ Keener, 352, prefers the meaning of countrymen for “suggenh, j” here, but, after checking the lexicons, I don’t agree.

⁷ Even v35 is not saying that Cornelius is acceptable to God through his good works like alms-giving, but the good work of believing the message of Christ, which Peter anticipates Cornelius is about to do. The passage is showing the role of the God-fearing (righteous Gentiles who stopped short of circumcision) in the expansion of Christianity. The recognition of Gentiles like these that salvation is of the Jews provided the runway on which the Holy Spirit landed in the plane of Christ’s work for them.

4. Another way to see it. In this beautiful story, I do not think that the circumstances of Peter's vision are inconsequential. What is Peter feeling when he falls into his trance? Hungry! There is a hunger in this story. But while Peter is only hungry to fill his stomach, Cornelius is hungry to fill his soul. He needs food for life.

D. Something just below the surface

1. In Florence there is a fresco by Giotto that for many ages was covered up by two thicknesses of whitewash. It is only within a very few years that the artist's hand has come and removed that covering, and the fresco has come out clear and beautiful.
2. The man who cried in the shower because the movie had a happy ending.

II. A Public Cleansing

The private uncleanness gets a public cleansing:

A. The Answer to Cornelius' Uncleanness is the Gospel

1. So Simon Peter, the answer to Cornelius' prayer, comes to meet this need of uncleanness. And how does He do it? He simply tells the story of Jesus Christ.
 - Doesn't just say, God loves you.
 - Doesn't try to say, there are better things coming for you, Cornelius.
 - Peter knows, without even knowing Cornelius, what He needs. That this successful centurion's great problem is uncleanness.
 - Read **Vv36-43** carefully. It is a summary outline of Mark's gospel.
2. The point is that Cornelius needs forgiveness. Even Cornelius. Even Excellent Cornelius, Centurion Extraordinaire. Man with it all. Even he.
3. And Christ gives it to him. Even him. I was speaking with someone recently to whom I was explaining what it meant to be a Christian and he said, "You never explained it so clearly like that before." So let me be clear:
 - Cornelius was unclean.
 - All that Cornelius did could not cleanse himself.
 - Jesus Christ lived a clean life and then died on the cross for Cornelius.
 - So God could declare Cornelius clean. And that is all that could cleanse him.
4. That is why Peter simply tells the story that is called "the gospel."

B. By that Gospel declared Clean

1. So by this gospel story, reaching out beyond the Jews, God declares Cornelius clean.
 - **Vv13-14** –Rise Peter, kill and eat! No, Lord, these are unclean. What God has made clean you must not call unclean.
 - In an amazing exegetical flourish of the OT dietary law (Lev 11), God compares Gentiles to animals. And then declares them clean.
 - **v28** (and 11:12 and 15:9): Peter has a vision of animals and then says that God showed him this "man" was clean.
 - Kind of shows you what the dietary laws were for in the first place, to demarcate a people, to set them apart in holiness, to work with them.
 - But now, that demarcation is unnecessary.
 - Because of Christ, being a Gentile is no longer unclean!
2. The official apostle, Peter, is called forth to break down this dividing wall.

C. So even you need cleansing too

- That means: if even Cornelius needed cleansing, so do we. Our problem too.
 - If being cleansed through Jesus Christ answered what was wrong in Cornelius' life, it will answer what is wrong in yours and mine.
 - 3 Symptoms of uncleanness, of needing cleansing through Christ:
1. You may live your life with, (and even as a believer, slip back into) the idea, that you have it in with God because:
 - you pray regularly,
 - you do the right thing,
 - you keep out of trouble.

But it is just as false for you as it was for Cornelius.

Conversation w/a man, who thought that I, a minister, could have an in w/weather.

2. Second symptom: Feeling like God owes you something. You've done all this,
 - how come you are not married,
 - how come you have not sold your art.
 - how come this area of your life is not working out.
 - And you lift your eyes to heaven and say—God, why do you deprive me? After all—I'm me! Aren't I one of those who are pleasing to you?

You need to realize—Christ is the One who is pleasing to the Father. You cannot cleanse yourself. If Cornelius had been able to be cleansed by his diligence, to recommend himself to God by his alms, he wouldn't have needed Peter to come.

3. **V26**—Another symptom is—what Peter doesn't do--Accept worship. Notice that Peter wouldn't take a smidgeon of the glory that belonged to Christ.
 - Things are great and you attribute it to yourself. You look at the successes in your life saying, "Isn't this the great Babylon that I have made." "Isn't my success due to my hard labors? I'm the kind of person who succeeds."
 - Peter was doing a lot here. He was risking his whole reputation in visiting the home of a Gentile. He was shooting his wad. It was wild and crazy enough that the HS had come to the Samaritans, through Peter. But Gentiles? At least the Samaritans had a semi-legitimate status. Every fiber of Peter's upbringing was shouting to him that he was making himself *unclean*. And yet, he was contradicting that to obey God. And the Christian Pharisees,⁸ back in Jerusalem, were not going to like it (so it was: 11:2) He was being quite brave.
 - But when Cornelius falls down before him, he won't take any rest in that homage. He won't receive any glory for all he is doing. "Stand up," Peter says.
 - "I also myself am a man." Do you say that to your successes?

⁸ Keener, 352.

III. Feeling Clean

So can we get what Peter gave? What Cornelius got?

A. Telling the Cleanness

1. If God could declare cleanness through this man's faith (as Peter later explains it in **Act 15:9**), so will He for you and I. **v43**—"Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness..."
2. And you can tell that cleansing in two ways:
3. **Vv44-45** First, an experience of it. Obviously, the HS becomes very real to Cornelius. He can feel it.
4. **V47-48**—Second, the acknowledgement of the community—
 - There is a call for an outward sign of welcome into the community of the cleansed.

B. Feeling Fresh

1. Such a cleansed life is one of joy. Instead of these symptoms:
 - You don't have to worry whether you are clean enough. Because Christ's cleanliness is yours. One time I said to a Jehovah's Witness: What would it feel like to know, for sure, that you were one of the 144,000? This question arrested her in the script.
 - You don't feel angry with God Who owes you something. Your basic feeling is gratitude. And an expectation of eventually, eternal good, since You have found Him so good.
 - You are marked with true humility. You want all glory to go to Jesus Christ.
2. A very different life. One that feels cleansed.

C. Call one another clean

1. So, CE Day next week.
2. Secondly, then, we can call one another clean. Like Peter, we welcome others in Christ in a way that tells them that they are clean.
3. The most beautiful part of the story is that last sentence. The Gentiles asked Peter to stay in their home for a few days. And he does. The Jew and Gentile together. And that told Cornelius, like nothing else, that he was clean.

D. All of God's trouble to make us clean

1. All of God's trouble for Cornelius. You can just see God arranging this:
 - A vision for Cornelius.
 - Joppa is about 30 miles south of Caesarea, a good half day's journey on horseback.
 - A delay of lunch for Peter, so he ends up on the roof.
 - A vision for Peter, just at the right time, when Cornelius' messengers approach.
 - The violation of Peter's cultural norms.
 - The Levitical Law, thousands of years before, to drive the message home to the heart of these Jews, Peter, just what Jesus had accomplished.
2. Do you see what this shows? This kind of setup shows great affection on God's part.
 - When you plan a date or a party for someone you love. You do it with great affection.
 - You go to a lot of trouble.
 - You spend more than you should.
3. All God's trouble to make us clean.

Christ's work will cleanse the uncleanness beneath the surface of your life, so receive His gift and be clean.