

Everyone may, and must become a Christian

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 14 August 2019

Preacher: Stephen Ballingall

- [0 : 0 0] Good afternoon, everyone. It's lovely to see you all. Thanks for coming on today. A particularly warm welcome to those who are Holiday at Home guests.
- We're genuinely just so delighted to have you, and we hope that you're really enjoying your time with us. And please do tell your friends about Holiday at Home. We'd love to have more with us, whether they want to come tomorrow or whether you would invite them next year. We would genuinely be delighted to have your friends along with us.
- This afternoon, we're going to be turning to the Bible and looking at Acts chapter 10 from verses 34 to 43, which is on page 919 of the blue Bibles you should have on your seats.
- If you could all turn that up, it'd be helpful as we go through this Bible passage together. Page 919 of the Bible's on your seats. Or was it not?
- Or was it not? Are we good? We're good to go? We're sorted? Glad to hear it. It's good to have someone keeping you on your toes, isn't it?
- [1 : 0 7] Great. Okay. Before we read the passage, it would be helpful just to set the scene a little. Our passage starts with the word, so. And if you've got no idea what's come before it, then we're just not going to know what's going on.
- The apostle Peter, he's the one who's speaking, and he's heard a message from God. So he has some important news to share, and he goes round to the house of a man called Cornelius to share it.
- There are two things you need to know about Cornelius. One, he's a Gentile, meaning a non-Jew. He's an outsider. And two, he's a good guy.
- Despite being a Gentile, he is a religious, decent, well-thought-of man with a good job where he takes on real responsibility. He's a centurion in the Roman army, so he's in charge of a hundred soldiers.
- He even gives to needy people. He's the kind of man who, if your daughter brought home to meet you one evening, you would be delighted. It's an absolute result.
- [2 : 0 8] He's a good guy. Well, let's hear what Peter had to say to this good man as we read together from Acts 10, verse 34 through to 43. Let's read together.
- So Peter opened his mouth and said, Truly, I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.
- As for the words that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ, he is Lord of all. You yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed.
- How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.
- And we are witnesses of all that he did, both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree. But God raised him on the third day and made him to appear.

[3 : 12] Not to all the people, but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead.

To him, all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. When I was in my early 20s, a friend of mine used to show me up at sport constantly.

It didn't matter what we were doing, whether it was football or badminton or tennis or anything like that. He was always making me look bad. We were good pals, but I just had to accept that whatever we did, he was coming out on top.

He was part of a mega fit family. Their whole family were just active all the time, going on walks, runs, adventure holidays. There's loads of pictures in their house of them, you know, skiing or running, doing this, that or the other.

They were a really healthy and active family. But one day, my friend's family received horrific news. My friend's big brother, who was only in his early 20s at the time, died very suddenly.

[4 : 34] The family were devastated. It came out of nowhere. He was the picture of health. But sadly, the story inside was different.

No one had any idea that he had a condition which stopped his heart functioning as it ought to. To the point where one day, it just stopped working. Like that, out of the blue.

He looked so healthy on the outside, but had heart problems within that no one could see. We're going to meet this man we just read about in Acts, Cornelius.

And he looks like he's all good on the outside. But there's something far more serious lurking within. And it's the never-ending problem of the human heart, which we all share.

Well, Peter had two big points to make here as he's talking to Cornelius. You can't miss them, and here they are. One, anyone can become a Christian. And two, even good people need Jesus.

[5 : 39] So let's get stuck in and see how, firstly, anyone can become a Christian. To our modern-day ears, the first couple of verses we read, they don't really seem like news at all.

Never mind big news. But this was a huge thing for the early church. It was big because there was a total distinction between Jews and Gentiles in Jewish society.

It was as fundamental as the difference between night and day. God wove it into the fabric of Jewish life, meaning that there were only two kinds of people. Jews and everyone else.

Every part of Jewish life was like a lesson for the people. Because the unclean things, like food or clothing, were treated as evidence of a deeper, heart-based uncleanness called sin.

So, every meal that was cooked, every item of clothing you wore, where you sat in the temple, who you had around for lunch, and what you served up, it was all affected by the Jew-Gentile divide.

[6 : 44] And it reminded people constantly that their hearts were unclean. People living as Jews today are still remarkably different from the rest of the world and their way of life.

There is total distinction. Jesus addressed this in his ministry on earth. And he made it very clear that the Jew-Gentile divide was over and done with.

There was to be no distinction like it. He ended this great division between the peoples. He said that what you eat or what you wear, it simply can't make you unclean.

Food just goes into the body and then comes out again. Clothes go on, then they get taken off. They were only symbols of what lay beneath. But the human heart is not like that.

Jesus made it clear that the human heart is where uncleanness lives. It's set up home there, making our hearts like factories, churning out uncleanness, producing sin that offends our good and holy God.

[7 : 47] And that doesn't mean just things like murder or sexual assault or tax evasion or whatever we demonize today. But anything which doesn't honor God as who he is.

Putting ourselves at the center of our lives, which leads to putting our needs before the needs of others. Every single one of us in this room is guilty of not doing that.

Of not loving God first and our neighbors before ourselves in everything we do. Because each one of us has an unclean heart. But thankfully for us, God offers us a way out.

A way of being right with him through trusting in his son. And that way is open to everyone. Absolutely everyone. Verse 34 says that God shows no partiality.

People from every nation can become a Christian. Peter's big news was that God accepts even the Gentiles. Those people who the Jews viewed as unclean if they trust in Jesus and live in light of his salvation.

[8 : 58] All may come to the Lord and trust in his son. It doesn't matter where you've come from. What your upbringing is. What your social class is.

Or even what your religious background is. You can become a Christian. Nothing in your past or even in your present if you have difficulties now. Can disqualify you from becoming a Christian.

Nothing at all. Because as Peter said. Anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him. In other words.

People who trust in Jesus as their savior. Which changes their purpose in life. Which changes their purpose in life. They live for God now. Rather than themselves or anyone else. Any one of us can become a Christian.

Not one person in this room or in the whole world. Can put themselves out of the running from becoming a Christian. Based on past sin. Upbringing. Or even how you've treated Christians in the past.

[9 : 57] Any of you here today could become a Christian. Wherever in the world you're from. Or whatever you've done. Even if you've lived a life which you are ashamed of.

Even if you have secrets which you don't want to tell a single soul. Even if you have deep regrets. Because you've caused your family, your loved ones, great pain in their lives.

Or any other reason you could think of. There is nothing that can stop you from coming to the Lord and asking him for help. Anyone may approach him because he is the only God.

And the God of the whole world. Of all peoples. You can come to him. And Peter's second bit of news he's sharing is this. Even good people need Jesus.

Cornelius as we've said was a good guy. Yesterday we saw with Paul that God can save even the worst of people. The unlikely Christians like the man Saul. If you weren't here yesterday then don't worry.

[11 : 05] Saul was a Jewish leader who actively pursued the death of Christians. And sought to destroy the church. He was the most unlikely convert you could ever think of.

And someone who was obviously on first glance. In need of saving and changing. If anyone didn't deserve God's kindness. It was Saul. But God saved and changed him.

He took Saul the persecutor and destroyer and murderer. Brought him face to face with Jesus. And gave him a new purpose. Instead of destroying the church.

God changed him to build up the church. And made him his apostle to the Gentiles. To the whole world. But Cornelius wasn't like that. He's a completely different kettle of fish.

Not like Saul at all. Let's paint a picture of what Cornelius would look like today. If you met him in the street. He's worked hard in his job. He's respected by his bosses.

[12 : 07] And even those who work under him. He's been careful with his money. So his pension package is looking great. He's married with a lovely family. Three kids and a dog.

And has loved his wife. And raised his children well over the years. He's very sincere. Goes to church regularly. And helps out at their food bank every Tuesday evening.

He's even started recycling recently. All of his friends think he's a great guy. They love spending time with him. His family look up to and respect him.

And he's happy with his life. But. He hasn't put his trust for salvation. In Jesus. At the end of his life.

When he's standing in front of Jesus. Who is his judge. What does that actually count for? Does his life of doing good work. Save him. From what his unclean heart deserves.

[13 : 08] That's why Peter shares the gospel with Cornelius. He's a great guy. But he needs Jesus. To save him. To be clean. He goes through Jesus life.

His preaching. His works. His death and resurrection. And it ends in Peter telling Cornelius. That Jesus has been appointed. As the judge of all. The living.

And the dead. So everyone. Answers to him. He's not just the God of this. Tiny little part of the world. In the Middle East at that time. He's the God of the whole world.

For all time. So the whole world. Must always look to his son for salvation. As verse 43 says. Everyone who believes in him.

Receives forgiveness of sins. Through his name. Everyone. Since he is the God and judge of everyone. Whether they know him or not.

[14 : 03] Or accept him or not. Everyone must look to him. For forgiveness. Let's just think about how Christ is your judge. For a moment.

This means that after you die. Whether that's years from now. Or it could be sooner for some of us. That you are going to come face to face. With him.

You're going to have to look at him. Eye to eye. And give him an account for how you've lived. Because this life. This world. And all that you hold dear and love.

Is a gift. And not only that. But God has given us his son. To find salvation in. One day. You personally.

Are going to find yourself. Looking eye to eye. With the creator. And judge. Of the whole world. The one who lived perfectly. Died.

[15 : 01] And was raised again. And you're going to have to tell him. How you've used the life you were given. If your defense for your life. Is anything other than salvation in Christ.

Through trusting in him. Then you're going to be left with nothing. Because the uncleanness. The sin of your heart. Will speak far more loudly. Than any good deeds you've ever done.

If you haven't been forgiven. By trusting in Jesus. Then. Anything you're doing. Doesn't please God. In any way. Because fundamentally. You're against him.

Without forgiveness. And reconciliation. You are his enemy. Standing against him. So all of your good deeds. However many. Or however noble. They don't count.

In that state. Our good deeds. That we think are so wonderful. And deserving of praise. Are like. It's like a repeatedly cheating husband. Going home to his wife. And offering her half dead flowers.

[16 : 04] That he picked up at the petrol station. On the way home. Is that really going to work? Is that act going to fix things? Is his wife really going to be happy?

After he's treated her so badly. For so long. And ignored her for so long. Of course not. Real forgiveness has to take place. Before you're able to please the one you've offended.

That's why trying to work your way into heaven. By doing good things. Is impossible. Your good deeds can't make up for a broken relationship. Maybe you're feeling quite comfortable right now.

Because you're like Cornelius. Maybe you think of yourself as a good person. Or maybe you're too modest to think that. But your family and friends do. Maybe you're religious.

And you're well respected by your Christian friends. Who you deeply respect too. I mean you respected them enough to accept your invitation here. So that's something. Maybe you even go to church.

[17 : 09] You went when you were younger. And you still go regularly. You're involved. You're on rotas. You're a pillar of the church. Sunday wouldn't happen without you. So why would you feel worried?

You're a decent person. Just trying your best. All of that is well and good. But the crucial matter is not whether you're a decent person.

That's not what decides whether you are right before God. That's not what he's looking for. The only question is. Are you trusting in Jesus? Being a good person isn't good enough.

Only trust in Jesus will do. Cornelius needed to hear that. This little section of the Bible we're looking at right now is Cornelius' conversion story.

He was a good guy. But being a good guy wasn't good enough for him. He needed salvation found in Jesus. Jesus. And this news is uncomfortable for comfortable people.

[18 : 13] Because Jesus is the judge of the living and the dead. Of all peoples. And he's going to judge everyone one day. You cannot ignore this. He's the one you have to answer to.

Face to face. And being a decent person isn't enough. It just won't cut it. Being religious isn't enough. Being honorable isn't enough.

Being loving and generous isn't enough. Loving your family well isn't enough. Being around the church and sympathetic to Christianity and respecting your Christian friends isn't enough.

Nothing is enough. Maybe you've been in and out of church your whole life. But being in the general net of Christianity isn't what makes you a Christian.

If I were to go and stand at the side of Hampden Park every time Scotland plays, it doesn't make me a player for the national team. You've got to be fully in on the pitch. Nothing we do is ever enough.

[19 : 20] If you're sitting here today and you consider yourself a good person, then you're in grave danger. I can't stress that enough.

There's a slight chance that by now you're all slightly sick of cruise references. But I've got one more for you. Only the one I promise. As much as we want you to be thinking about cruises this week, the church is not a cruise ship.

You don't just come to church to sign up and be a passenger. Sailing along quite nicely and comfortably without ever getting involved. Enjoying your comfort and making the most of the excellent buffet when it's time.

The church isn't a cruise ship. But it's a rescue ship. It's a place for people who realize that they aren't good enough in themselves.

Who throw themselves on board because they know they need rescued. We're not just here in church for a nice time. This isn't a social club.

[20 : 25] We're all here because we need to be saved. Because we're dead in the water on our own. We're dead without Jesus. That's why the gospel is so good.

God is in the business of saving people who don't deserve it. And need saving desperately. People who have sinned greatly against a holy and clean God. Who are struggling in the water.

People who might be clean on the outside. But have a deeper problem of an unclean heart. That's silently ticking away like a time bomb. That all the good deeds in the world just won't clean.

And to be honest, we're all in the same boat here. We're all in that position. Only trusting in Jesus is enough. Only bowing before him and asking for his help will make any difference.

So what will you do today? If you're not believing in Jesus, then what will you do today? Each of us here has the same problem as my friend's brother who died so suddenly.

[21 : 42] Our hearts are wrong. They're broken. Silently ticking away like a time bomb. And we might look like we're good on the outside.

As though we're safe because of that. But we are broken and unclean within. Our hearts are the problem for each of us. Anyone can become a Christian.

And that is wonderful news. God puts up no barriers to anyone. But everyone must become a Christian. Even if you think you're good.

Because you still have an unclean heart. Salvation is found in Jesus alone. Not in your good deeds. Not in your church association or service.

But in Jesus alone. So come to him. And ask him to save you. Today. Pray to the Lord and judge of all.

[22 : 40] And ask him to forgive you for your sin. Because he will. For as Peter said to this man Cornelius. This good guy Cornelius. Everyone who believes in Christ.

Receives forgiveness of sins. Through his name. So what will you do with him? I'm just going to finish my prayer.

Lord and Father. We thank you that your word speaks so clearly to us. And we're sorry that we are an unclean people.

With unclean hearts. Not holy before you. We thank you that while we're struggling in the water. You come to save us.

Please help us to look to your son alone for salvation. And see him clearly as our savior. We ask this in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[23 : 50] Amen.