

# Introduction

– 1979 to 1981, lived in Arizona, attended Church of the Redeemer, about 600 members.

– Fresh out of seminary, wanted to learn about ministry, senior pastor offered to spend time with me for a year, every Saturday for breakfast, as well as giving me the responsibility of the Sr. Hi youth group.

– He had 2 rules: teachable and willing.

– “Teachable” meant that every critique, even if it was clearly unhelpful, would at least receive the response “thank you, I will think about that”.

– “Willing” meant that a request — for example — to pick someone up for church would not receive any excuses (not enough gas, might not have enough room, it’s too far away, etc.). I was expected to pick that person up and be seated in the front row with them – early!

– You may see elements of a man who was a former football coach. You would be right.

We will return to these rules in this sermon.

Last week, Pastor Phil introduced us to Peter’s change in perspective, not just about unclean foods, but also about what it meant to be a servant of Jesus. In spite of Peter’s failures and previously bad moral reflexes, nevertheless God’s grace has turned him into an effective tool for the kingdom.

Today, I am contrasting and comparing Peter and Cornelius and looking at their similarities and differences: especially as they relate to some of the chief characteristics of what a disciple looks like.

# Contrasted

When we contrast these two men, it may not immediately be clear that they are from two vastly different worlds.

– Peter is a Jew. Cornelius is Roman. This already implies a nearly infinite variety of differences in language, education, sports, music, and politics.

– Peter is a fisherman. Cornelius is a soldier. Vastly different lifestyles and experiences.

– Peter has extensive experience with Jesus. Cornelius has only heard of Jesus.

– Peter comes from a monotheistic religious background. Cornelius comes from a skeptical polytheistic culture.

– Peter comes from a conquered culture. The Jews had been under the heel of various rulers for about 600 years. Cornelius comes from a conquering culture, one that had conquered all the previous cultures that had ruled over Israel.

– Peter is a relatively powerless man compared to Cornelius. The hint in verse 1 – that he was “a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort” – suggests that Cornelius was part of an elite group of soldiers. He would’ve been in charge of at least 80 – 100 men, perhaps a captain in our modern terms. As a centurion, he had the authority to use brutal force, even on Roman citizens, something that was otherwise forbidden without due process of law. But who was Peter?

– History tells us that centurions often retired to farm life and would have their most faithful subordinates as tenants. Therefore, Cornelius was likely a relatively wealthy man. Peter is an itinerant former fisherman who probably owned what he carried and little more.

– Don’t forget, Peter is part of a sect that is being hunted by both Jews and Romans alike! And who would the hunter and enforcer theoretically be? Cornelius!

These men are from two fundamentally different worlds. It would be difficult to overestimate the cultural distance between them.

## Compared

Now, let’s compare these two men.

– These are both devout men. We already know that it’s true concerning Peter. And it’s explicitly said of Cornelius in 2, “a devout man and one who feared God”. Again in 22, “a righteous and God-fearing man well spoken of by the entire nation of the Jews”.

– They are both prayerful men: Cornelius (2, 4) and Peter (9).

– They are righteous men, moral men. We know this of Peter, since he is a repentant man. We know this of Cornelius because he is described as righteous in 22.

– From the fact that both of these men had heard from God in one form or another, they were clearly men with whom God was dealing.

– They were obedient men. Peter goes as he is commanded. Cornelius listens to Peter, as *he* was commanded (33).

– They were men who were courageous about the truth. We already know this about Peter, who went from timid mouse after the resurrection, to roaring lion at Pentecost. This is also reinforced for us in 28–29, when Peter boldly proclaims the truth to Cornelius. I think that it’s even more noteworthy how courageous Cornelius is about truth. A) his whole household were known as those who fear God (2), B) some of his soldiers were devout (7), C) he invites both relatives and friends to hear from Peter (24). I can’t help but wonder whether some of his colleagues might have thought that Cornelius had “gone native”. Is it possible that his commitment to the religion of a conquered nation may have even been dangerous for him?

– They are humble men. Peter was a humble man, perhaps especially because the Lord had humbled him. As the “subject matter expert” on religion, “when Peter entered, Cornelius met him, and fell at his feet and worshiped him” (25). Note that Peter will not take advantage of this moment of superiority. “Stand up; I too am just a man” (26). Cornelius is likewise humble. As a Roman conqueror he openly and freely appeals to a member of conquered race for spiritual direction. He is not offended by Peter’s observation that according to pharisaic tradition, Cornelius would’ve been considered unclean and not worthy of Peter’s presence in his home. Cornelius is meek and respectful in 33, “you have been kind enough to come”.

## Converted

As far apart as these two men are, there are also ways in which they are very similar. But until the moment that God’s Spirit does His work, they are not the same. Compare and contrast all you want, but it’s only when they are converted that something truly amazing happens. Then they become brothers.

“While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message.” (44) Soldiers and civilians, masters and servants, male and female, young and old, all were converted.

That in itself is remarkable enough. What ought to catch our attention most of all is how the vast gulf fixed between these two cultures represented by each of these men was instantaneously closed.

That was a result that was completely unexpected—perhaps by all parties involved! The Jewish/Christian converts certainly didn't expect this outcome, nor did they initially like it!

“And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him, saying, ‘you went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.’” (11:2–3) Peter had some ‘splainin’ to do!

It was only after a lengthy explanation (11:4–17) that “when they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, ‘*well then*, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life’” (18).

Because we are so far removed by time and culture, we may have difficulty grasping this. Nevertheless, these events completely upset the status of things. Things had never been done that way before!

The Christianity of the converted Jews was something familiar to them. It was still essentially Jewish in many ways: prayers, Scripture, worship style, sacred days, and liturgical language.

This business of Romans becoming Christians and with a powerful mini-Pentecost to go with it: that was a bit too much to absorb at first.

Peter had said to Cornelius (34–35), “I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears him and does what is right is welcome to him”. Peter’s friends and colleagues didn’t understand this at all, at least not initially. However, as Peter observed, “if God gave to them the same gift as he gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” (11:17).

## Conclusions

### What discipleship looks like

#### Teachability

Both were taught beforehand. In a sense, chapter 10 is incomplete, in that we are missing a great deal of the stories of the lives that are intertwined in this story. Both had been learning from God for years.

The teachability in chapter 10: listening to God's visions and impulses, obedience to his commands, these were the results of years of preparation.

It sometimes seems to me that we Westerners believe that information is the same as preparation, wisdom. But in the case of both of these men, they seemed to always be pressing deeper into the faith. They were hungry searchers after truth and were willing to not only have their minds, but their lives changed.

### **Willingness**

There is a meekness, a mutual respect, humility, mutual submission. Peter could have pulled a "Noah maneuver", not desiring the salvation of this conquerer of his nation. He could and probably was rightly nervous about visiting someone with the deadly power in his hands as Cornelius.

And Cornelius could well have kept his inquiries secret and quiet.

## **What discipleship results in True Christian Fellowship**

It was the experiences of Peter's life and especially his walk with the Lord Jesus that prepared him for this time. It was the hand of a sovereign father guiding and governing both the life of Peter and of Cornelius that led them to this moment. It was certainly the Holy Spirit's work that effected the changes in the hearts of each of these men and those around them.

Teachability and willingness had made their hearts open and receptive to the word of God. It resulted in making their hearts open and receptive to each other.

Both worlds had to stretch very hard toward each other. And they discovered that it could be done. The conquered and the conqueror became brothers.

In what ways are you being crafted by God in the experiences of your life?

Have you ever worked in clay, or seen it worked? It looks easy, but it's enormously difficult. Do you sense the power and pressure of God's hand forming the stubborn clay into unacceptable, lovely, and useful vessel? Are you humble before the truth? And are you willing to be obedient?

Are you the teacher? Or the taught? The master or the servant of Christ?

Your pastors are always asking ourselves, "How can we do a better job of equipping the saints for the work of ministry?" We want to have quality

teaching, preaching, and discipleship. And you must have teachable and willing hearts.

## Some Concluding Texts?

“At that time the disciples came to Jesus and said, “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, and said, “Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. “Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:1–4)

“Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.” (Ephesians 4:1–6)

“Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:1–8)

“Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed,

shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE.” (1 Peter 5:1–5)