

Cornelius Praying: Seeking Prayer

“Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God,” the angel tells Cornelius in chapter ten of Acts. And in what follows in this remarkable and very important story that arises out of the prayer lives of two men (Cornelius and Peter), we learn important lessons about what we might call “seeking prayer.” It is not too much to say that who we are today (as a church) is due to what happened then (as recorded in Acts 10).

Cornelius is a centurion of the Italian cohort living in Caesarea, a powerful, wealthy, influential man who knows the chain of command. He is also a God-fearing man, who, we are told, prays to God continually and gives alms generously (10:2). Cornelius is praying at the ninth hour when an angel of God comes to him in vision, tells him “your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God” and charges him to send men to Joppa to bring the Apostle Peter to Caesarea. Immediately Cornelius obeys the command and sends his servants to Joppa.

In spite of the fact that Cornelius is a God-fearer, prays and gives alms, he is a Gentile. He is considered by the Jews as “unclean.” He is not part of the covenant people of God. We might say today that he is not a Christian, but a “seeker of God.” In light of this, it is striking is to see the high regard that God has for Cornelius and his prayers and almsgiving and seeking; they have ascended as a “memorial before God.”

Peter, on the other hand, is the ultimate insider. He’s a Jew, one of the first disciples and now an Apostle of Jesus Christ. He has met the resurrected Lord Jesus, and been entrusted by Him to share the good news of the forgiveness of sins in Jesus’ name. Yet, in spite of his “insider” status, Peter’s understanding of the gospel, of what God is creating in the church, falls very short.

Peter too, is praying. He is on the rooftop at the sixth hour, when he sees a vision. He sees the heavens open and a great sheet descending,

being let down by its four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And an order comes to Peter: “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.” Though Peter knows this is the voice of the LORD Jesus, he refuses, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common and unclean.” And a voice came to him again a second time, “What God has made clean, do not call common” (10:9-16). This is repeated three times. Peter is much slower to obey the command than Cornelius is.

As Peter ponders the vision, the servants of Cornelius arrive. Peter accompanies them to Caesarea. Cornelius’ entire household waits to hear from Peter, and Cornelius even falls down at his feet to worship him. Peter lifts him up, charges him to not worship him and shares the good news of Jesus with them: that God does not show partiality, that he sent His son Jesus to teach, heal and free the oppressed, that Jesus was crucified but was resurrected from the dead, that Jesus is the judge of the living and the dead, and that all who trust in him will have their sins forgiven. Cornelius and his household believe the gospel. The Holy Spirit falls on them and they are baptized into the name of Jesus.

What a remarkable story. What are the lessons we can learn from it?

First, we learn that one does not have to be a Christian to pray to God. God is sovereign and omniscient. He hears the prayers of every person, and sees the actions and even thoughts of their heart. One way to think about prayer is that prayer is about relationship to God. All people are on a spectrum of either moving towards the living and true God in relationship, or moving away from God. Consequently, all people ought to make seeking God in prayer the main pursuit of their life. We can have confidence that when we seek God, he will let himself be found. We should encourage people who are not sure about the existence of God, to pray to God, to ask God to show himself to them.

Second, we learn that while a person may be a Christian, they may have many false beliefs and may not understand the full implications of the gospel. Thus Christians should also humbly seek God in prayer, and be

open to having God reveal where they fall short in their understanding and living. In their life of prayer, they should be open to growing in their understanding of God and the implications of the gospel of God versus being smug and self-confident that they have already arrived.

Third, we learn why the contemporary rejection of a true God and the celebration and affirmation of many Gods/many beliefs can't work. Think of it like a triangle. If there is a true God who is at the top of the triangle, and if there are two people on both corners of the triangle, when they seek God and move closer to God, they are also moving closer to each other. But if there is no true God, then the possibility of our moving closer to each other, of having a radically diverse and yet united community is impossible. But there is a true and living God. There is a Good News that has been preached to the world. There is a Holy Spirit that is poured out on all who believe. There is a church, a community of diverse people who are made up of all those who have been baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (10:44-48).

A beautiful thing happens out of the prayer life of Cornelius and Peter seeking God in prayer. They both come to a clearer understanding of God, the Gospel of God and the implications of that Gospel. They are bound together by the bond of the Holy Spirit making them a new society, a multi-cultural community, the church. Consider the beauty of that community today! The church is the only truly global society, affirming the diversity of each person and culture, yet uniting them all in Jesus Christ.

Whether we are a seeker, like Cornelius, or a Christian, like Peter, let us seek God in prayer. As we grow closer to God, we also grow closer to one another.

Individual Prayer Guide

Take time this week to pray to God. Cultivate an attitude of openness to God, of seeking God, of being aware that there is much in you that needs to shift and grow. Acknowledge that you do not fully understand God or His gospel or the implications of that Gospel. Pray also for your non-believing family, friends, neighbors and associates. Pray that their hearts would be open to seeking God in prayer. Ask God specifically for a chance to encourage them to seek God in prayer.

Community Group Discussion and Prayer

1. What strikes you about Cornelius praying and Peter praying and the community that arises out of their prayers?
2. What are the names of family, friends, neighbors, classmates, and associates who you would like prayer for that they might seek God?

Practicing Prayer in your Community Group

Take 20 (or so) minutes to pray. Pray for the following things:

- Ask God to make us a community of people who seek Him in prayer, who are open to a growing, dynamic relationship with God.
 - Pray that our church community would reflect how our God is not partial to any one nation or culture, and how God is building his church made up of people from every nation, tribe, people group and culture.
 - Pray for specific people who are not Christians who are your friends, neighbors, colleagues, family members, etc.
3. What was hard/what was good about this time of "seeking prayer"?