

1/3/16

Acts 10:1-8

Defined by the Gospel

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, ² a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God.³ About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, “Cornelius.”⁴ And he stared at him in terror and said, “What is it, Lord?” And he said to him, “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. ⁵ And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter. ⁶ He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea.”⁷ When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those who attended him, ⁸ and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.

(Pastor Prays)

We are all defined by something: the color of your hair or the size of your wallet or the level of your success. Maybe it's the place of your birth or the state of your marriage. Sadly, maybe it's the color of your skin or the clothes on your back.

Yeah, we are all defined in some way by something. Sometimes it's a definition you don't ask for, you don't want and don't even agree with. But you've been labeled with it and labels have a long shelf-life. I wonder if you are tired of how you've been labeled or defined. That can change, you know. By God's grace, your defining mark can change. It did for the man we meet in Acts 10.

Acts 10 is a three-part story that we are going to explain together over the next 3 weeks. The first part we are going to look at revolves around a man named Cornelius.

Cornelius was a common name like John or Mike. We have two John's and three Mike's at Hickory Grove. We have two Justin's at North Campus.

For Cornelius, there was nothing really special about his name. And although his name was not poetic, we get some indication from the story in Acts 10 that Cornelius is an unusual man: respected and reliable, intense and committed. He was responsible, faithful and family-oriented. And all of these admirable qualities stacked up to make a really impressive man. He's kind of a rock-solid Dad that you would want coaching your little league baseball team. He's trustworthy and devoted. He's a lot like some of you. He was a genuinely decent guy, but this genuinely decent guy had a great big hole right

through the middle of him. What St. Augustine said in his prayer is true when he says to God, "You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they can find rest in you!"

I don't want an imposed definition. I want to be defined by the Gospel of Christ, so that the prevailing sense of who I am is wrapped up in the person of Christ. And regardless of where you're from or what you've become, I want your life to be sewn up in the Gospel of Christ.

In 2016,

Don't let anything but the Gospel define who you are

In 2016,

Don't be defined by achievement – achievement is empty

The man we meet in the text was like some of you are, he was an achiever. With a name like Cornelius, there's nothing that really singles him out, but his name notwithstanding, this man knew how to work, how to impress and how to inspire.

The Bible says in Acts 10:1, he was a centurion of the Italian cohort. He was a gentile Roman army officer. He was part of the occupation of the Promised Land. As a centurion, he was a non-commissioned officer, an enlisted man, like a Sergeant Major (Army) or Master Chief (Navy). He had calloused hands and a clear code he lived by. Everything to him was black and white. He believed that hard work builds character and being late was a sin. He was in charge of 100 men and they all respected him. He was a centurion and that's what defined him. And yet, even with all his achievement, when the day's work was done and his mind got still, the hole inside him was still there.

There is a danger we face. I face it. That danger is you and me letting external forces or internal longings define who we are: a college student, a housewife, a parent, a business man, a preacher. If those roles define us, and things don't go well, if your grades are not good, or the home is not stable or the kids are not well-behaved or business is down or the church doesn't grow – if these roles define us, we become empty failures in a hopeless droning existence.

What I'm asking you to do is to shift your defining markers to God's design. You were made in the image of God. Sin inherited and practiced has separated you from God. Jesus Christ lived perfectly and then died in the place of sinners. God raised Him from the dead and, in 2016, I'm asking you to turn to Christ and believe on Him and be defined by the cross of Jesus and not by achievement. Don't be defined by achievement – achievement is empty.

This year don't let anything but the Gospel define who you are. Achievement is empty.

Don't Be Defined Be Religion – Religion is Cold

Let's not forget the prevailing attributes of Cornelius. Who wouldn't want a man like this in the church? Look at the description. It starts in v. 2. Let's just stroll through the words there without spending too much time on each one. He was a devout man, diligent, committed. He's the kind of rock-solid guy that's at the church in his place on Sunday, friendly to speak to, glad to help and really loves the church. He's like some of you. Except, I pray, this doesn't describe you. He didn't have Christ and so his incessant religion was sort of his way of earning his salvation. He had a grasp of the law. He didn't know much about grace, and sometimes I hear that in the evangelical church. We end up with a pragmatic, works-based salvation, that being good and doing good and acting good gets us into Heaven. And we forget that our righteousness is like filthy rags and our salvation is a gift, a gift you can't earn and certainly don't deserve. We sum it up with 5 "soles" (Latin for "only")

We are saved by

- God's grace alone
- Through Faith alone
- In Christ alone
- Based on Scripture alone
- To the glory of God alone

Cornelius was a devout man and not only that – he feared God. It is important here to be reminded that Cornelius wasn't Jewish. He was a gentile Roman soldier. He couldn't go into the temple. He was what is called a "God fearer.". He believed what the Bible said about the God that made Heaven and Earth. He wasn't a Pagan or Atheist.

There is a growing category in America of people who classify themselves as having no religious affiliation. They're called "nones" (not "nun"), disaffected and walking away from the church. That's not Cornelius. Even though he wasn't allowed to participate in all of the religious activities, he feared God.

But is that enough to save you? Doesn't Jesus say in James 2:19 that "*You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!*" He is telling us that fearing God isn't enough. James will also say "Faith without works is dead." Well, Cornelius had just the opposite. He had works without a saving faith, and that's what I'm getting at. V. 2 tells us he was a religious man. He had influenced his whole household to be religious. (V. 2) He gave alms generously to the people. He wasn't greedy or materialistic. He would've worked in the clothes closet or food pantry. He would even show up at prayer meetings.

But all of this religion left him cold -- all of his efforts and activities and goodness, all of his strivings and reaching and trying. And it came up short as it always does. And that's what the rest of the story is about.

Our faith is not just man reaching up to God. Our faith is different. Our faith is God reaching down to where you are, past all of your barriers and walls and hurts and hang-ups and all of your attempts to complexify your life and realizing you in Christ and

awakening your heart to believe. It's what the Holy Spirit does, awakens you to the beauty of Christ and Him crucified.

Open your eyes and see that Christ is Lord of all. Today, turn from your sin, your goodness that has defined you. Turn to Christ and don't let anything but the Gospel define who you are.

(Pastor shares the Gospel, offers the Invitation and Prays)