

# **Christ Presbyterian Church**

**Edina, Minnesota**

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**"Reason for Hope: The Gospel"**

**Acts 10**

We are in the middle of our last series on the Gospel of Luke (Luke's story about Jesus) and the Book of Acts (Luke's story of how Jesus' work continued in the early church). All year we've been focusing Luke's story on different parts of our lives. This last part of this series is a primer course in what's called apologetics, answering the hard questions or, frankly, refuting the accusations of folks outside the faith about the faith. These questions come up and sort of catch us off guard.

I was struck by one of them the other day that surfaced at a party I attended. I am part of a Bible study that meets every week. Every two or three years we gather together with our spouses at somebody's house. During the party one of the wives, a good friend, came up to me and said, "I loved what you said the other day in church. You said that at the end, all we really have to do is love God and love other people. That is perfect." Then she said, "I think if people just try their very best, God lets them into heaven, right?" I was so glad that the next words I heard were my wife's saying, "Honey, I think we've got to go...."

I've thought of how hard that question is and, frankly, how common it is. If God lets good people into heaven, God knows who is good, He's making a list, checking it twice, going to find out who's naughty and nice. He knows who the naughty people are and they are in trouble. It's tied to these other concerns that people far from the faith have: I know many non-Christians far better than most of you church people; a good God wouldn't really send them to hell and let all you hypocrites in. There might be a couple sermons in there.

A second question comes from another friend with a Christian background. She says, "Do I have to have faith in Christ *and* live a good life to get to heaven?" We are going to look at Luke's story to see how the early church might have answered these questions. Frankly, this is not the passage I would have picked to answer this question. I am glad in some ways that it was assigned to us months ago because it reminds me of how the best answers that God gives tend not to be lectures like this; they tend to be stories. God says, "Well, let me tell you a story...." "Well, let me ask you a question...." People learn a lot more that way.

The first time I heard this passage taught was at a staff retreat with a pastor from Colonial Church teaching. He taught about this passage in Acts, Chapter 10. One reason I am thinking about this is because the folks at Colonial have a brand new pastor, Dan Harrell, who is

preaching today for the first time. I think it would be good if we pray for them as well as for ourselves as he gets ready to get up and preach his first sermon, so let's pray.

Lord Jesus, I thank You that You have brought Dan and Dawn at this place and that You will use them to lead this great group of brothers and sisters at Colonial into being an outpost of the Kingdom of God. As he gets up to speak today, I am sure very nervous, I pray not that he will be eloquent, not that he will be funny, not that he will feel he has to make an impression, but rather I pray that as people listen to him, they will hear Your Holy Spirit speaking through him as he lifts up God's Word. Lord, let it be here as well. Amen.

Acts 10 shows one of the principles of studying the Bible. When you see something repeated in the Bible, it is important. The author is trying to get your attention. This speech that Peter gives is repeated four times. The only other thing that is repeated four times in the Book of Acts is the story of Saul's conversion.

This is an earth-shaking event for the first church. "In the seaside town of Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing." This is where Rodney Stark, the historian, gets the phrase *God-fearers*. These people were not Jews, but they hang around the Jews. They are Gentiles, hanging around the Jews because they have started to believe that there is one God and that this God of the Jews might be that God. They are learning who this God is but the Jews won't let them become Jews. Cornelius is a God-fearer, "giving generously to any in need and praying to God regularly. One day about three in the afternoon, he saw an angel calling out, 'Cornelius! Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as an offering before God. Send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon, also called Peter. He is staying with another Simon, Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea.'

"When the angel had left, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier, told them everything that had happened, and sent them on to the town of Joppa. About noon the next day," that was about a day-long trip, "as the men were approaching Joppa, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He got hungry and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance and had a vision. He saw heaven open up and something like a large sheet come down to earth, let down by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air." Now that was important for the Jews, not for you and me, but for the Jews. These were creatures that the Jews were forbidden to eat.

"Then a voice called out, 'Get up, Peter. Kill them and eat.' 'Surely not, God! I have never eaten anything impure.' Then the voice spoke out a second time. 'Don't call anything impure that God has made clean.' This happened three more times in the vision, and then the sheet was taken away. While Peter was trying to figure out what the vision meant, the men sent by Cornelius found Simon's house and stopped at the gate, asking if someone named Peter was staying there.

"While Peter was still thinking about what had just happened, the Holy Spirit said, 'Simon, three men are looking for you.'" Who needs MapQuest when you've got the Holy Spirit! "Three men are looking for you. Go with them. I've sent them.' Peter went downstairs and said, 'I'm the one you are looking for,'" not easy to say to a Roman soldier, "I'm the one." "Why have you come?"

‘Well, we have come from Cornelius the Centurion, a righteous, God-fearing man, respected by all you Jews. An angel told him to have you come to his house to hear what you have to say.’ So Peter invited the men into the house.” This is a huge deal! We don’t understand this, but in Jewish and Arab, Middle Eastern culture, inviting somebody into your house is a huge deal, especially if they are not part of your religion.

“And the next day they all went back to Joppa. He arrived in Caesarea the following day and when he was there, Cornelius was expecting him. He had called together his relatives and friends and as Peter entered the house, Cornelius fell at his feet, but Peter dragged Cornelius up and said, ‘Come on. I’m just a man, too.’

“Peter went inside and found a large crowd and spoke to them. ‘You know, it’s against Jewish law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean, so I came without objection.’ ‘What did you want?’ Cornelius tells this story. ‘Three days ago I was in my house praying. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me and said, ‘Cornelius, God has heard your prayer. Send to Joppa for Simon, who is called Peter, a guest in the house of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.’ So I sent for you. It was good of you to come. Now we are all here in God’s presence. What did God tell you to tell us?’

“Then Peter said this. ‘Now I get it. God doesn’t show favoritism. God accepts those from every nation who fear and do right. You know the message God sent the people of Israel about the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, the Lord of all. And you know what happened. God anointed Jesus through the Spirit and power. He went around doing good and healing everybody under the power of the devil because God was with Him.’

“‘We are witnesses of everything He did. Then you know what? Then they killed Him, hanging Him on a tree, but God raised Him from the dead on the third day, and a bunch of us saw Him. Not everyone, but the witnesses God chose, those of us who ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead. Jesus commanded us to preach that He is the One whom God appointed Judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testified that everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name.’

“Peter had no sooner finished talking when the Holy Spirit came on everybody in the house, and everybody was astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles far from God so Peter ordered them to be baptized immediately in the Name of Jesus Christ.”

So what is the point of the story? Well, my friend at the party would have said, “Well, it’s obvious. Cornelius is a good man. God loves good men and women everywhere. We are all in.” I don’t think so. I think there is another message. I think there are probably nine or ten major religions or philosophies in our world, whether Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, whatever -ism you take, and out of those ten religions, nine of them would say, “That’s right. God rewards the good and punishes the bad. If you are good, you get in. If you are bad, the door is slammed.” That’s radically different than the Christian message.

Remember, God is trying to get everybody in, not keep anybody out. God wants everybody in. He is not willing that any should perish but that all should have eternal life. It’s not about who gets in and who is shut out. In that sense, God wants everybody in. As a matter of fact, this is

Jesus' point. "All who seek Me, find Me." "The ones who knock on the door get it opened." "If you ask, you receive."

This story shows that God reaches out to everybody, but it bugs the Jews because they think they are the good people and everybody else is bad. This story, if properly understood, bugs the Christians because we think we are the good people, and then there are all the people who aren't quite as good. What good is it to be on the inside if everybody else gets to be on the inside, too, right? Properly understood, this shows that God reaches out to everybody, and sometimes this will bug you, but it does not say, all the good people get in. It does not say that.

I have two problems with letting in all the good people. The first one is that you don't get in because of your good works, the amount of good works that you have done. It says Cornelius is a good man. Cornelius is described as a good man, but with that, immediately comes how good is good enough?

I have a very generous friend who came up to me on the way into church and said, "I hope the gift helped us get our budget over, and I hope you don't spend all of the gift. Save it." How much is his gift? Is it good enough? Is it big enough? How good is *good enough*? It's like the story that you tell in the north woods. If you are sleeping overnight and a bear comes upon you and a bunch of your friends, how fast do you have to be to get away from the bear? Just faster than one of your friends? How good do you have to be? Just a little bit better than the one who is not good enough? And that's what happens when you start to say all the good people get in and all the naughty people don't. Who is good enough?

I thought that maybe I could ask some of the middle schoolers and the kids who are often in Sunday School if they could help the adults here. Can you help the adults here? Thumbs up; thumbs down. We can do that, can't we? We'll have all the adults help, too. Thumbs up; thumbs down. So put your thumbs like this. Okay, good enough. Are you good enough?

Billy Graham. Good enough? Yeah, you start with the easy ones, you know. Saddam Hussein, good enough? Okay. John Wooden, good enough? Absolutely. The Wicked Witch of the West, good enough? Okay. Martin Luther King, good enough? Okay. How about a name some of you kids might not know, Imelda Marcos. Over 2,000 shoes while people in her country starved to death. This is not a fashion statement, folks. Come on. Okay. A couple more here like Florence Nightingale, first American nurse, right? Thumbs up. Okay. How about Cruella de Ville? Okay. Good. I think you are getting the idea.

It is easy to get the extremes, right? But sometimes it gets harder. How about this guy? He has given away several million dollars, has been a great role model for youth, but all of a sudden is unfaithful to his wife. What happens there? Or what about somebody who stands at the door of a school and says, "No black people allowed," but then later in his life says, "I was wrong, but was I wrong enough?" It begins to get a little murkier, doesn't it? Somebody who, like Malcolm X, was a drug dealer, runs around with prostitutes, but then gets turned around by God. Then he says God tells him that white people are bad from the devil and black people are good. He starts to turn away, but then all of a sudden he goes to Mecca and says, "No, God loves all people." Up or down? You! You look nice. You say a lot of nice things. God knows your heart. The person next to you knows a lot of your heart. Up or down? If it's good works that get us in, are you good enough? Who makes the cut line? Who gets eaten by the bear?

I think the problem with this is that often, as people get better on the outside, they react one of two ways. They might react like Billy Graham. He gets better and better as he gets older and older, and he says, "The thing I'm more and more convinced of is that I'm a great sinner, and I will get pulled into heaven rather than walk in." You wish that that's the way good people usually are, but I think a lot of good people tend to be like, "The better I get," there is almost an unconscious arrogance, not that I'm so good, but that I'm better than *you*."

That was the problem with the Pharisees, wasn't it? They thought they were good enough. They obeyed enough of the rules all of the time. Anybody who didn't obey their amount of rules was out. Luke knows all about the game, "Are you good enough?" That's why he wrote all those stories about Jesus. Remember he told the story about a man who had two sons, and one of the sons was not good enough and ran away from home.

The other son was *more* than good enough. He stayed home and did all the good stuff, and when they had the banquet at the end, who goes in? Well, it's the *bad one* who goes in. Who stays out? It's the good one who stays out. I'm not going into any banquet where you let *him* in. So at the end he may have *looked* good enough, but he stayed away from the feast. The problem is not, the good people go to heaven if you are good enough or if you are better than others. The problem is do you realize how much you need help to get in?

I would like to have said, I don't think it's about being good enough because what about the people who aren't quite good enough? And you are not good enough either. The other thing I would have said was, I don't think in the end, it's about *good enough*. Peter says, "I get it now. This is about the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, the Lord of all." It's not a contest about *good enough*. It's about a rescue operation. Jesus Christ comes to rescue us and bring us peace. It's not about, are you better than she is? Is she worse than you so you can stand on her shoulders? Nobody, nobody is good enough.

The two people I didn't use in our little thumbs up/thumbs down are Mother Teresa, thumbs up; thumbs down? Thumbs up. Double thumbs up. You know if we went over here, I'd probably say, if this is a scale, you know, best to worse, Mother Teresa is right at the top. Right? Okay. Mother Teresa. Good. Good. Good enough. And Adolph Hitler? Bad. Bad.

So most of us would say we are somewhere between Mother Teresa and Adolph Hitler, right? We are not as good as, but we are good enough. God, though, says this: Mother Teresa ain't good enough. You want to know how good you have to be to get into heaven based on being good enough? That good. That's it. I could stand on your shoulders and still not be tall enough. I could jump as high as I want and still not be close enough. It's not about being *good enough*. It's about somebody from the outside coming down and picking us up, lifting us up to that red line that I could never jump to, and all the good works that I ever did would only get me to the Mother Teresa level, and I'm still not even a third of the way there. I could never be *good enough*.

It's not because I'm bad. That's the other part that I want you to get. God doesn't divide us up into good people and bad people. God says, "You are all my beloved children. I don't have good kids and bad kids. I have *my* kids," but He says to us, "and because I love you, I'm going to tell you this. You are not bad, but you ain't good." We are broken. The word the Bible uses for this is *bent*. Or broken. We are sinful. That means we *fall short*, and as hard as we try, sooner or later

we run up into our brokenness. The apostle Paul says, “I don’t understand it. It’s like there is a law inside me. The more I want to do the good thing, the more I ended up doing the bad thing. The more I want to run away from the bad thing, the more I find myself—darn it—doing it again! Who will deliver me? It is like I’m a slave to sin. I need help.”

It’s not whether you are good or bad, it’s not whether you are better than others, Peter’s message is that Jesus Christ has come to bring us peace and judgment. What is good enough? *This* is good enough, that everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins. This is the only thing that counts. Everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins. All the bad things that Hitler ever did, all the bad things that Mother Teresa ever did, they, you, and me, forgiven! Washed away! We don’t float up to that red thing. We are pulled up there by Jesus Christ. The text says that Jesus is the One that God appointed Judge of the living and the dead. Being good enough—“I am good enough,” says the older brother—being *good enough* is salvation *my way* because I’m good enough. I have earned it. “You saw all the good stuff I did. It’s salvation *my way*,” and God says in the end, “You can’t get to heaven *your way*.” It’s got to be God’s way or it’s no way. It’s not about being good enough. It’s about going God’s way or going no way.

C. S. Lewis actually says that straight out. He says, “In the end there are only two kinds of people. There are the ones who turn to God and say, ‘Thy will be done,’ and He draws them into heaven. And there are the ones who in the end God turns to and says, ‘Okay, *thy* will be done,’ and they walk away far from God.” We are all saved, not by being good enough, we are saved by grace, God’s mercy through faith, that is, by trusting that He is the One. We are all saved by grace through faith so that no one can boast, so that no one can compare, so that no one can complain.

God is not fair. I worked a lot harder than my sister did. God is not fair. “Thank God, God is not fair!” The other *thank God* I do is, “Thank God, Jesus is the judge,” and you ain’t because if you knew who I was, who I *really* was, you would run away, and that’s okay because if I knew who you really were, I wouldn’t talk to you. We are saved by grace through faith because of a more than fair God. That’s what the parables and stories of Jesus are all about. That’s why the thief hanging next to Jesus on the cross says, “Help me, God. Help me,” and Jesus says, “Today, you and I, Paradise.” That’s why the workers who worked in the vineyard just one hour get the great reward that they never expected, and the people who worked all day to be good church people said, “How come you are letting them in?” Because it’s not about being good enough.

I think we are to be the people who do the good thing. I think we are to be the people of good works, but I think doing the good thing is the *response of faith* that Jody talked about. I have been loved so I can love. God gives us joy in helping to bring the Kingdom the way He said in Luke 4: “I have come,” Jesus says, not that *you* have come, Jesus says, “*I* have come to preach good news to the poor and release to the captive and sight to the blind, and I am going to use *you* to do it,” to pack 1.7 million meals in 24 hours so that people will know that there is a God of love and mercy.

We get to send people today to clean up the Gulf Coast, not because they are good enough, but because our God loves us that much. Good works are a great response of faith, but they are a terrible way to try to get into Heaven. Grace cleans up your good works. I want you to do good works. I want you to be good people, but Jesus didn’t die so that people could be Minnesota

nice. Jesus died so you could have grace. You work hard after you get grace, and you know what God does? It's like a three-year old who comes and has this terrible, scrawled-up little picture and says, "Dad, Dad, this is for you. Do you think we could sell this? Do you think we could sell this and keep the house?" You look at this terrible, scrawled little thing, and you look at your child, and you put it right on the refrigerator. "Look what my kid did!" That's what grace-filled work is. It will never buy the house, but it means everything. It means everything to the owner of the house.

So do you think people who live good lives will get into heaven? Next time say to them, "Well, how good is *good enough*?" Then say, "I don't think anybody earns their way in, but I think *everybody* can ask for grace. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, Your Words are powerful, but they are disturbing. They are disturbing because we want people to think that we have gotten better. We want them to notice that we are changing. We want them to see our good works. We are like little children. Remind us that You love our scrawled little pictures because You love us. You love the way that when we help others, people trust in You, but remind us that all we ever had to do to be loved by You is to turn to You and say, "God, I am not good enough. I will never be good enough." Jesus, Jesus, please, forgive me and bring me into Your Kingdom." Some of you have been coming to church for decades and you think you are good enough. Maybe today in a fresh way, you need to say, "Jesus, I am trying, but I am so tired of trying to be good enough. Remind me of Your grace." Some of you have always thought it was about being good enough, about going on the mission trip, but you never believed in your heart that He loves you. He loves you just as you are. Lord God, help us to turn our hearts to You, that You might wash those hearts clean and embrace us with Your love and give us joy, joy to share in Your Name. Amen.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*