

“For God So Loved the World”

Acts 10

Pastor Jarrett Stephens

This past week, I had the privilege of attending a fundraising dinner for a ministry in Dallas that I have the privilege of serving on the Board of. The name of the ministry is called *BridgeBuilders*. It is an urban ministry that is set up to help bring restoration and renewal...community transformation to an impoverished neighborhood in South Dallas.

I have remained on the Board even after leaving Dallas because of my connection with its founder Mike Fechner. His youngest son is currently serving as the Executive Director of the ministry and is like a little brother to me.

His dad, Mike was one of the top influences of my life. When I first started as an intern at my former church, I was his very first hire. And he took me under his wing. I was fresh out of college and knew absolutely nothing. Here I was from Bossier City, LA...I didn't even own a suit. And Mike was Dallas through and through...a former businessman and about as bougee as one could get!

He took me under his wing, bought me my first suit. Taught me how to eat at a fancy dinner...I didn't know which drink was mine or which fork to use! I was ROUGH around the ages FOR SURE!

He took me on his family vacations...his children are family to me. He invested so much time in my life. What he taught me the most though was what he modeled and that was having a passionate, personal relationship with Jesus.

Mike LOVED Jesus. I've only met one other person that was as generous and Kingdom-minded as him in my entire life.

He taught me the importance of prayer and fasting. And his passion was for the inner-city. He taught me in a big church like

this, that I needed a ministry that in his words “protected my heart”...a ministry that I did on the side that no one was aware of...that I didn’t get “paid for” so to speak. To him, we all needed a ministry that we participated in that we didn’t do for ourselves but instead was solely for others.

His heart ministry was the inner city. And he would go down on his day off from the church on Fridays and spend the entire day in a dilapidated community called Bonton walking the streets, praying with people, visiting with them about how he could meet needs.

He began his *BridgeBuilder* ministry after a young man he was discipling in the city was killed in a drive by shooting. It marked him...changed him forever. So much so, that he eventually resigned from the church and ran this organization full time.

Mike had a heart of gold. He helped people get their GED. Helped people with job training. Set up partnerships with business owners to give people from the inner city with records second chances in life. It was never just a hand-out only, but also a help-up!

And the dream of *BridgeBuilders* was simply that...it was to take people from North Dallas who seemingly had it all from a material perspective but had little to no faith (in Mike’s words) and build a bridge to people in South Dallas that had little from a material standpoint but were rich in faith.

He believed these two groups had much to offer one another and could love one another. The bridge was designed to build relationships and break down barriers to show a true picture of the gospel to that city. It was...it is a wonderful ministry.

Mike received a diagnosis in 2009 that he had non-smokers lung cancer. And he battled his cancer for five years. In fact, this is crazy and just how God arranges things. The very first time I ever stepped foot into Champion Forest Baptist Church, I was down here with Mike for some treatments he was doing at M.D. Anderson.

He wanted to work out and we were staying up this way and so we found this church to workout in. When I first walked into our family life center, I about passed out recalling that I had been here only one time before – and that was with a man that I consider one of the top three influences in my life.

I have thought a lot about Mike recently, NOT just because I went to a dinner this past weekend of the ministry he founded, but also because when I look at the text we are diving into today, this whole idea of breaking down barriers and building bridges... what Mike was MOST passionate about– it's found right here in this text.

I'm calling the message today: **For God So Loved The World.**

And here is the major point of the message. I'll give it to you up front and then we'll look at our passage of scripture. Here's the major point of the entire sermon today:

Jesus breaks barriers and builds bridges.

When you think about it, this was a constant practice for Jesus as he walked the earth. He lived and very intentionally broke down barriers and built bridges. Just reflect on his earthly ministry for a moment.

- He serves a Samaritan woman and gives her living water in John chapter four...
- He heals a Roman centurion's servant in Luke chapter seven...
- In Mark's gospel, we read about Jesus casting demons out of the daughter of a Canaanite, pagan woman...
- In John chapter twelve, he speaks to some Greeks who were on a spiritual search right before he was betrayed and arrested...

Ultimately, Jesus goes to the cross and dies for the sins of the whole world.

I want to highlight and emphasize at the start of this message today that Jesus came to break down barriers and build bridges. He LOVES the world and proves it in how he breaks barriers and builds bridges.

We just participated in the Lord's Supper. When his body was broken and his blood was poured out, the veil of the Temple was torn from top to bottom. It represents access to God. Jesus in his death and resurrection was breaking barriers and building bridges.

Study the life and ministry of Jesus and you will see that this is what he lived for...it's what he died for.

Jesus breaks barriers and builds bridges.

Our text clarifies this for us today AND shows that because Jesus lives in this way, he expects us to as well. Now, to set a little context most believe that by the time we get to Acts chapter ten the early church is probably five to six years old.

And up to this time, it has primarily been a Jewish church. The apostles were Jewish. Those that had received Christ at Pentecost that lived elsewhere...the mass majority of them were Jewish...that's why they were in Jerusalem in the first place. Worshipping God at the Temple as commanded.

And so, there had always been a natural barrier that existed between the Jewish people and those that were Gentiles. God had set it up this way as he set apart the Jewish people to himself.

However, God's intent was NEVER to leave the Gentile world out of his plans. He would bless the Gentile world THROUGH his plans.

Genesis 12:3 – “I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you (Abraham/Israel) all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

How was this going to happen? Abraham is the Father of the Jewish faith. Jesus comes from the lineage of Abraham. And it's through Jesus, the world can receive forgiveness of sin...his death wasn't just for Jews, but again for the world!

Jesus even taught this to his disciples in **John 10:14-16 – “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me,¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.¹⁶ And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”**

He was speaking of Gentiles here. He knew there was coming a day (and it's fulfilled here in Acts 10 – what we are going to read today) Jesus breaks barriers and builds bridges, and bring two people groups together in the gospel.

Acts is a BIG deal! A turning point in redemptive history. And to understand just how big a deal this is, you have to put yourself in the place of a Jewish man or woman living at this time.

As part of Israel, you were God's treasure possession (Gen. 12). There was a unique and special covenant relationship that existed between God and his people.

Jesus himself was a Jewish. All of his apostles, Jewish. God had a special plan for his chosen people and as the early church began to grow, this was the target – Jewish believers. That's why in nearly every sermon that was preached early in Acts, they are convincing people...making the argument that Jesus was the Messiah! Who was looking for the Messiah? The Jewish people!

Now, Jesus had told them to be his witnesses (Acts 1:8) in Jerusalem, Judea and the uttermost parts of the earth. Their assumption and understanding was that they were to be witnesses

to the Jewish people in Jerusalem, Judea and the uttermost parts of the earth.

The problem is Jesus didn't just die for the Jewish people – He died for John 3:16 - “For God so loved the world!” He came to break barriers and to build bridges to ALL people.

We saw it in the ministry of Jesus and now it was past time to implement it in his Church....and he's been unfolding it little by little!

This is why you see in Acts chapter 8, the gospel coming to a man from Ethiopia. It's why you see in Acts chapter 9, the gospel coming to a man (Saul) from the Middle East. It's why we are going to see today in Acts 10, the gospel come to a man from the European countries – this Roman centurion named Cornelius.

Jesus came to break barriers and build bridges and he expected his church to do the same. It's a BIG lesson to learn and we see it right here in our text, so let's get after it.

Acts 10:1 – “At Caesarea (Israel trip! We'll go here. It's called Caesarea Maritima. It was built by Herod the Great. It was a massive seaport. It had an amphitheater, hug palaces. It was the capital of the Roman occupation. It's where Pilate would have lived. And just keep in mind that it represented EVERYTHING a good Jewish person would have despised. It was the capital city of that which was unclean.) there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort.”

A cohort consisted of 600 men. A centurion was over 100 of those men. Cornelius because of his status would have been a bit more wealthy than the average soldier. He was influential because of his leadership role...and evidently he was searching because look at how (v. 2) describes him.

Acts 10:2 – “a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God.”

So, here you have a man that worshipped with the Jews... followed many of the Jewish laws and practices such as praying and giving alms, but he was not a full convert.

You had what was referred to as “righteous proselytes” which were Gentiles who converted to Judaism and went “all in” even being circumcised as an adult.

You also had what was called “gate proselytes”. This was Cornelius. He was sensitive to Judaism. He seemed to worship with the Jews and follow most of the customs of the Jews, but they were OUT on going “all in” on converting to Judaism if you know what I mean! And if you don’t catch Brent Dyer after the services and he’ll explain it to you!

Cornelius was a “God-fearer”...a “gate proselyte” and the scripture says he was praying.

Look at **Acts 10:3-8** – **“About the ninth hour (3pm) he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, “Cornelius.” And he stared at him in terror** (you know why? Because an angel had just said his name! If an angel shows up in your house and calls you by name...you know what, they don’t even have to call you by name. If an angel shows up in your house this afternoon, you’d stare at them in terror as well!) **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.”**

Now, Joppa where Peter is staying - most scholars point out is about 30 miles from where Cornelius is at Caesarea. But notice what Cornelius does – he jumps into action like the soldier he is!

He knows how to take orders and he sends them to do what the angel commanded – immediately! Meanwhile...

Acts 10:9 – “The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray (that’s high noon).”

Now, I just want to pause and bring out at this point that MUCH is taking place here as two people pray. Praying makes a difference! You are about to see redemptive history turn in a significant way and I believe the two people responsible for it were ready to receive it and walk in it because of their commitment to pray. I can’t prove that, but I believe it with all my heart. God can trust people who pray!

I’m not talking small “bless me/bless them” prayers! I’m talking God can trust...he can give...he can speak into people who he knows he can trust. And how does he know who he can trust except those that spend time with him in prayer?!

Peter and Cornelius were both praying men, and this is why I believe God uses them in such a significant way here in Acts 10.

This isn’t coincidence what’s going on here! God is directing and his hand is designing and he is working in conjunction with two men who are seeking him in prayer. Prayer makes a difference!

Acts 10:10-16 – “And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance ¹¹ and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. ¹² In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³ And there came a voice to him: “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.” ¹⁴ But Peter said, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.” ¹⁵ And the voice came to him again a second time, “What God has made clean, do not call common.” ¹⁶ This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.”

Now, this vision that Peter sees is not near as much about food as it is people. The food in the vision was actually associated with people. As you know, the Jewish people had strict religious laws regarding what they could eat...their diet had to be kosher!

There are entire chapters (Lev. 11 is one of them) that is dedicated to the dietary eating laws of the chosen people of God. And if you violated these dietary laws, you were excommunicated...you couldn't participate in Temple worship. You were considered unclean.

And yet here, God shows Peter this vision that what God has made common or clean, do not call unclean...or uncommon. And this happened THREE times!

God was getting his message across to Peter and what was it that he was showing him in this moment? He was showing him that:

Jesus breaks barriers and builds bridges.

He was showing him that he really does LOVE the world! Now, Peter is still having a hard time with this vision. The scripture says (v. 17) he was "inwardly perplexed". He was completely at a loss of what to do.

And look at what happens! I love that the salvation story of our life is a process! This shows the humanity of scripture. Peter is saved, but he doesn't have it all together...he doesn't have all the answers.

And God is patient with him! He is walking him each step of the way...more about that in a moment!

Acts 10:17-24 – “Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision that he had seen might mean, behold, the men who were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry for Simon's house, stood at the gate ¹⁸ and called out to ask whether Simon

who was called Peter was lodging there.¹⁹ And while Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Behold, three men are looking for you.²⁰ Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them.”²¹ And Peter went down to the men and said, “I am the one you are looking for. What is the reason for your coming?”²² And they said, “Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say.”²³ So he invited them in to be his guests. The next day he rose and went away with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa accompanied him.²⁴ And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends.”

I mentioned a moment ago about God walking Peter each step of the way...you know it's interesting? Cornelius has this vision - two things just come off the page to me!

One, is why didn't the angels just explain the gospel to Cornelius? They could have! But then when you think about it, maybe they couldn't...they are created beings...created to worship God, they don't know what it's like to be redeemed! Could they really explain it to him?

Secondly, why didn't God just send Cornelius to Phillip's house. You remember Philip, right? He led the Ethiopian Eunuch to Christ in Acts 8. Well, look at **Acts 8:40** – “**But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.**”

To me, it would make much more sense to just send Cornelius down the street to get this vision explained to him, instead of 30 miles to Peter! Philip is the evangelist.

He's even called that in **Acts 21:8** – “**On the next day we departed and came to Caesarea, and we entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him.**”

God could have used an angel...he could have used Philip to communicate and explain this vision...to clarify the gospel, but he didn't! You know why?

Because evidentially Peter is the one who needed to learn this lesson that Jesus is breaking barriers and building bridges. And so he baby-steps him all the way to the house of Cornelius.

Acts 10:25-29 – “When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. ²⁶ But Peter lifted him up, saying, “Stand up; I too am a man.” ²⁷ And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered. ²⁸ And he said to them, “You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. ²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me.”

Cornelius then takes the time to explain to Peter what has taken place and look at how Peter responds:

Acts 10:34 – “So Peter opened his mouth (We've got to underscore this...it's where all successful witnessing begins – by “opening our mouth!” Same thing was said of Philip with the Ethiopian Eunuch. Living a lifestyle in front of friends and family that points them to Jesus is awesome, but at some point a witness has to testify to what they have seen and what they have heard and that starts with opening your mouth!) **and said:** (here it is!) **“Truly I understand that God shows no partiality...”**

God has no favorites! Underscore that...underline that...get it in your heart. This is what God wanted in Peter's heart! Jesus coming breaks barriers!

Paul who we saw last week would eventually become the apostle to the Gentiles wrote a lot about Jesus breaking barriers. As he ministered, he made sure people knew that Jesus came NOT just

for the Jew, but for the Gentile as well – “For God So Loved the World!”

Listen to what Paul would write concerning Jesus breaking barriers! I’ll just give you two passages!

Rom. 10:10-13 – “For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. ¹¹ For the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.” ¹² For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. ¹³ For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Eph. 2:11-19 – “Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—¹² remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility¹⁵ (Jesus breaks barriers and builds bridges!) by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. ¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God...”

God was teaching Peter in this moment that he breaks barriers and talk about building bridges! The bridge Jesus builds is the cross! And that’s exactly what Peter preaches!

Acts 10:36-43 – “As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all),³⁷ you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed:³⁸ 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.³⁹ 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,⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear,⁴¹ 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.⁴² 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.⁴³ To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

He shows and shares with this “God-fearing” man the good news that he had been searching for! He showed him that God IN CHRIST had built a bridge to him and because of it, Cornelius could be made right with God.

Illus. The Bridge illus. – I couldn’t help but preach this and reflect on the old navigator bridge illustration. You know what I’m talking about? **(SHOW IMAGE)**

Peter explains the gospel to Cornelius and the Holy Spirit falls on him and all who heard him.

Acts 10:44-48 – “While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word.⁴⁵ And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles.⁴⁶ For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared,⁴⁷ “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”⁴⁸ And he

commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.”

This is a recurrence of what had happened in Acts 2 at Pentecost, only here it's happening with Gentiles in the home of a hated and despised Roman centurion, in a hated and despised place at the time – Caesarea. – “For God So Loved The World.”

And because he loves the world, he came breaking barriers and building bridges and we should too! And so, as a response to this message, allow me to share with you five points of action as to how we can begin breaking barriers and building bridges:

1. Check Ourselves

We need to check ourselves often – asking the Spirit of God to reveal it to us or our friends and those we know will speak the truth in love...we need to check ourselves and see if there is any prejudice in our heart toward any people.

There is no room for favoritism or prejudice in the Kingdom of God. There is no people group better than another people group. And if there is any hate in our heart toward any group of people – regarding their skin color, ethnicity, affluence level, political viewpoints, that's sin and it needs to be repented of. This leads to the second action step:

2. Confess Sin

Confession is agreement with God...it's seeing things as he sees them. Prejudice...racial discrimination...in any form is sin that needs to be confessed! This entire message is God gently pointing out to Peter that his viewpoint and perspective regarding Gentiles was wrong and that it needed to be repented of.

We need to check ourselves – is there any form of prejudice in our heart toward someone? If so, we need to confess it as sin. Thirdly:

3. Consider Others

This is the essence of the Christian life. That it's not about me...and it's not about you. Think about all the "one another" passages in the Bible (be a good sermon series sometime!)

There is so much tension in the world today regarding race and the differences among us are highlighted and exasperated by the media.

As Christians we need to be careful and wise. And when it comes to this very sensitive issue of prejudice and race, we don't begin with our rights and our opinions. We begin with humility and consider others...their feelings...their desires...their wishes...their struggles...we consider others more than we consider ourselves (Phil. 2).

How many barriers could we break and bridges could we build if we just started living by the great commandment and love our neighbors as ourselves...preferred others over ourselves.

4. Celebrate Differences

I learned this lesson concerning my marriage years ago. I learned that I don't need another me in my life! I need Debbie...and our differences aren't to bring separation, but instead they should bring celebration!

Our differences don't weaken us...they strengthen us...and as we are united in Christ, it makes the differences between us that much more beautiful. Don't allow the world and the Enemy to let what makes us different, divide. "In Christ", we have been brought together and that "oneness" as Jesus prayed in John 17 is something we should all fight, long for and love.

5. Challenge Prejudices

The greatest way I know to break barriers and build bridges is to make the ministry of reconciliation a priority. And often this will involve challenging prejudices in our society.

2 Cor. 5:16-19 – “From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer.

¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. ¹⁸ All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.”

It is our desire for the glory of God to be on display through all races and people groups...that they would be reconciled to him and part of being salt and light involves being in our society living out an Acts 10 life that says God has no favorites and neither do we!

We preach and live knowing that righteousness and justice are the foundation of this throne (Ps. 89:14). Justice is a part of God’s holy character. And if we see our neighbor being abused, cheated or taken advantage of, part of the work of reconciliation is to roll up our sleeves and get to work on their behalf.

So much more I could say on this, but time doesn’t allow.

For God So Loved the World...and because he does, Champion Forest, let’s me and you commit to keep showing this to the world by doing what Jesus did – break barriers and build bridges.

Would you pray with me?

Please Note: This document is not meant to be a published, cited, annotated research paper. It is simply a transcript of a spoken message, provided as a resource. Many commentaries, articles, and other sermon helps were likely studied and contributed to the forming of this message.