Acts 11:1-18, “Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, ‘You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.’ But Peter began and explained it to them in order: ‘I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me. Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. And I heard a voice saying to me, “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.” But I said, “By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ But the voice answered a second time from heaven, “What God has made clean, do not call common.” This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, “Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.” As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, “John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?’ When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, ‘Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.’"

Proposition: God Has a Spiritual Breakout Strategy for YOU!

Pastor Greg Laurie of Harvest Ministries sends me and others a daily digital devotional. Here is what he said on July 10, 2018: “I feel that in some ways, the church today is a sleeping giant. The devil has declared war on our country. He has declared war on our culture. He has declared war on our young people. He has declared war on the church, and it seems as though the church is collectively taking a nice, long nap....” Pastor Greg Laurie, Devotional: “It’s Time to Fight Back” July 10, 2018.

- In a sense many professing Christians (at least in the Western world) are in a cocoon-like slumber.
- The best way to combat evil attacks is the sharing of a flood of God’s love with people the Lord puts in our path!

Question: How many of you have ever been present in a delivery room when a baby was born? Pretty incredible, right?

- It is estimated that 95% of American Christians have never had the wonderful spiritual delivery room experience of leading another person to what Jesus calls the “new birth.”
Have you ever led another person to Christ? If the opportunity presented itself, what would you say?

- Perhaps you are here this morning and could honestly say, “Yes, I would like to learn how to lead a person to Christ?” {Please ask/contact me.}

For these last several months, Pastor Doug has skillfully led us through the beginning of the *Book of Acts*. We have seen during these last several months how the Church was born on Pentecost, and how the disciples began to trust the power of the Holy Spirit to bring healing, deliverance and explosive “new- birth” growth in Jerusalem and its environs. The Early Church, prior to the martyrdom of Stephen, concentrated its evangelism efforts primarily within the Jewish community. But after Stephen’s death the believers dispersed far and wide! (God had his reasons for this scattering!)

But before the *Book of Acts* was written, He commissioned His disciples (in *Matthew 28:18-20*) to break out of their cocoon-like faith, and move into the far reaches of the known world. By the way, do you know that there is no Plan B for reaching our world for Christ?

**Do you remember what this Great Commission says?**

**Illustration:** On May 6, 2018, the Rev. Dr. Lee Spitzer, a Messianic Jew and the General Secretary of the American Baptist Churches, preached from this pulpit. His text was *Matthew 28: 18-20*, Jesus’ Great Commission. His sermon title was called “A Glorious Witness.” In the first six minutes of his sermon, Dr. Spitzer cited a study from the highly reputable Barna Research Council that asked American church-goers what they felt about the Great Commission of Jesus. The results were shocking! Boiled down, a stunning 82% of people polled (in American churches) either had never heard of the Great Commission or could not recall its meaning!

Dr. Spitzer then asked us at BBC: “How is it possible that a person can go to church for more than a week and not understand that (ALL) Christians have been called to share the Great Commission of Jesus to our world?” Follow my logic, if in the sampling group 82% of these American church-goers had never heard of the Great Commission nor knew what it meant, doesn’t it follow that the joys of personally leading another person to Jesus as Savior are probably unknown to them?

**What does this Barna Poll mean to you?**

**Illustration:** The Reconstruction period just after the Civil War in the South was a particularly challenging time. Some Southern families were forced by circumstances to live immediately adjacent to their former slaves. It was in one of these living arrangements that a great lesson of spiritual life took place.

An elderly former slave, taken from Africa many years before, now lived in a small house next to the woman for whom she had toiled for years, an old white woman widowed by the war. Their properties adjoined, and the sole path to the little spring that gave water to both...
women ran exactly down the property line. Consequently, both women walked the path to fetch their buckets of water. One day, though, both women found themselves at the spring. “Ma’am,” said the former slave, “The walk to this spring sure looks empty!” “What we need are some flowers!” The white woman countered, “Absolutely not! You can do what you want with your property but stay off mine!” “Alright, Ma’am,” said the former slave. “I won’t touch your side.”

Later in the year, the women once again found themselves down at the spring at the same time. “Mammy,” said the white woman, “Have you been planting flowers in my yard?” “No, Ma’am,” answered the woman, “I haven’t touched your place.” “Then, Mammy,” continued the white woman, “Where did the flowers on my side of the path come from?” “Well, Ma’am, you know that is a funny thing. You see, I just planted some flower seeds I liked on my side of the path whenever I went down to the spring to fetch a pail of water. I dipped my bucket in the spring and then walked back to the house. I guess my bucket ran over on my side and watered those seeds till they grew like you see them. And, you know how those flowers are — they just grow up where they are watered. The wind just blew new seeds over on your side! I guess that’s where your flowers came from!”

In our text, Peter was given an amazing opportunity to spread some Gospel seeds and see God water them with His life-giving Holy Spirit.

- But like this bitter woman imprisoned in her prejudice, Peter initially prejudged this pagan Roman Centurion. He was appalled at the not so subtle heavenly vision of the sheet filled with “unclean, profane and detestable to the Lord” non-kosher animals! He was horrified at God’s command to “kill and eat them!” (Leviticus 11)

- Peter had no fondness for pagan Romans even though they were “God-fearers.” From an orthodox Jewish perspective, Cornelius was just like these ritually unclean animals. Luke tells us that he was a “God-fearer” and probably worshipped God in the Court of the Gentiles in the Jewish Temple! “But this description by itself does not prove his spiritual condition with God.” (Luke 2:25; Acts 2:5; 8:2; 22:12) Source: www.letgodbetrue.com/sermons/salvation/when-was-cornelius-saved, accessed 8/9/18

- Definition of a “God-fearer:” Quote: “God-fearers is a term used of those pagans (including soldiers) who attached themselves in varying degrees to Judaism without becoming total converts, and are referred to in the Acts of the Apostles…. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God-fearer, accessed 7/15/18

Here is where I’m leading you this morning. “God wants ALL people to be saved and come to knowledge of the truth.” (I Timothy 2:4) In order to accomplish this command many of us need to move beyond our comfort zones. How?

1. Adopt Jesus’ Passion for Lost People

2. Be Committed to Bridge (with the Holy Spirit’s help) Significant Barriers to Reach People with the Gospel of “Grace”

3. Carefully Listen to the Holy Spirit as He Arranges Divine Appointments for YOU.
Question: When was the last time you moved out of your comfort zone for God?

Quote: “Whenever we first break through a comfort zone, we will probably feel uncomfortable at first. But not long after we make the change, we experience a new-found freedom on the other side. Then we wonder why we didn't break through sooner….“ (Kent Crockett, The 911 Handbook, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003, 73)

I. Adopt Jesus' Passion for “Lost People:” What was His attitude?

*Luke 19:10,* “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

*John 3:16-18,* “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.”

*Romans 9:2-3,* “My heart is filled with bitter sorrow and unending grief for my people, my Jewish brothers and sisters. I would be willing to be forever cursed—cut off from Christ! —if that would save them.” Do you feel grief and sorrow for your unsaved family, friends and co-workers? (People in an airport, etc.)

II. Rhetorical Questions:

- Are people who do not yet believe that Jesus died for their sins lost?
- Are people who refuse to put their faith in Jesus Christ eternally lost?

A. Peter Knew the Great Commission of Jesus!

*Matthew 28:18-20,* “And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'”

1. He was there when this Commission was given!
2. The literal Greek translation reads, “Having gone, therefore make disciples...”
3. The word translated “Go” is actually a participle conveying a continuous action (i.e. in the midst of life).
4. Peter clearly heard that “as he and others went about their daily lives,” they were under divine command to proclaim (through words and deeds) the “Good News” of the Gospel to ALL people groups.

B. Peter Wanted to Obey Jesus’ Great Commission but…

1. Certain fears, social/religious barriers, and a concern about the “right” thing to say sometimes paralyzed him. Maybe you too!
2. Even though he did obey the Holy Spirit’s vision to visit Cornelius, we know he still harbored second thoughts about mingling and eating with Gentiles.

3. In *Galatians 2*, the Apostle Paul records Peter’s hypocritical behavior as he sat down at first to eat with Gentiles and then when fellow Jewish believers arrived Peter shrunk into the shadows.

   “For before certain men came from James, he (Peter) used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, Peter began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.” *Galatians 2:12-13*

C. Peter had reservations about sharing Christ with “Pagans”

1. Paul’s argument after 14 years of successful Gentile ministry with Peter was very sharp!

2. Paul took severe issue with Peter about his spiritual prejudice and hypocrisy.

D. Jesus knew all about this and had a surprise for Peter!

1. Peter saw with his own eyes that God is no respecter of persons.

2. Did you know that God loves surprises?! (i.e. unexpected)

   Peter said, “These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered (Cornelius’) house. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’ And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’” So…

   - Adopt Jesus’ passion for lost people (recall the Samaritan woman?)
   - Be committed to bridge significant barriers

Quote: “Jesus went and met the woman at the well in Samaria because she had an appointment with God.” In Jesus’ detour into enemy territory, we see two important concerns as we bring the message of the Gospel today. First, we have to go to where people are. Jesus did not say that the whole world should go to church; He said the church should go into the whole world.

Illustration: Talk to non-Christians with tact. “Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.” *Colossians 4:5-6*

Tact has been defined as diplomacy, sensitivity. One definition of it is skill and grace in dealing with others. Isaac Newton defined tact as “the art of making a point without making an enemy.” “There is a built-in offense to the essential message of
the Gospel, but we don’t have to make it worse by being insensitive to people. That is not the way to build a bridge.” (Source: *An Essential for Evangelism*, a devotional by Pastor Greg Laurie).

III. Be Committed to Bridge Significant Barriers to Reach People with the Gospel of “Grace”

A. Too Many Christians Hardly Have Any Non-Christian Friends

B. IF We Have Adopted a Passion for “Lost” People We Must Socialize & Sincerely Befriend Them (What Is Grace??)
   1. Not with ulterior motives of “converting them.”
   2. This doesn’t mean we should throw our values to the wind.
   3. Nor does it mean we should be moral prudes!

C. Jesus Gave Us an Example in Meeting with the Samaritan Woman
   1. Start from where people are. We in the church expect people to come to us, when Jesus commanded us to “go” to them.
      a. Humble yourself – Jesus asked for a drink. Human nature wants to exalt its self-image and look down on others. “We are only beggars telling other beggars where we found bread.”
      Sensing her discomfort, Jesus asked her for water. But she was too streetwise to think that all He wanted was a drink. She wanted to know what He really had in mind. Her intuition was partly correct. He was interested in more than water. He was interested in her heart.
      b. Push the right buttons.
         i. Water – immediate interest
         ii. Listen to the Spirit in raising the right issue: her husband, deep-hearted interest, and her loneliness. (This listening takes practice.)
         Soul thirst: She was looking for something real and meaningful, fulfilling, enriching. (Source: "Taking the Gospel to the World" a devotional by Pastor Greg Laurie).

D. Be Committed to Bridge Significant Barriers
   Quote: “We don’t meet people by accident. They are meant (by God) to cross our path for a reason.” Just like God arranged the divine encounter between Philip the Deacon & the Ethiopian Eunuch. God masterfully arranged the spiritual encounter between Cornelius and Peter.

IV. Carefully Listen to the Holy Spirit As He Arranges Divine Appointments for You

Illustration: Roger Simms, hitchhiking his way home, would never forget the date, May 7th. His heavy suitcase made Roger tired. He was anxious to take off his Army uniform once and for all. Flashing the hitchhiking sign to the oncoming car, he lost hope when he saw it
was a black, sleek, new Cadillac. To his surprise the car stopped. He ran toward the open door, tossed his suitcase in the back, and thanked the handsome, well-dressed man as he slid into the front seat. "Going home for keeps?" "Sure am," Roger responded. "Well, you're in luck if you're going to Chicago." "Not quite that far. Do you live in Chicago?" "I have a business there. My name is Hanover."

After talking about many things, Roger, a Christian, felt a compulsion to witness to this fiftyish, apparently successful businessman about Christ. But he kept putting it off, until he realized he was just thirty minutes from his home. It was now or never. So, Roger cleared his throat, "Mr. Hanover, I would like to talk to you about something very important." He then proceeded to explain the way of salvation, ultimately asking Mr. Hanover if he would like to receive Christ as his Savior. To Roger's astonishment the Cadillac pulled over to the side of the road. Roger thought he was going to be ejected from the car. But the businessman bowed his head and received Christ, then thanked Roger. "This is the greatest thing that has ever happened to me."

Five years went by, Roger married, had a two-year-old boy, and a business of his own. Packing his suitcase for a business trip to Chicago, he found the small, white business card Hanover had given him five years before. In Chicago, he looked up Hanover Enterprises. A receptionist told him it was impossible to see Mr. Hanover, but he could see Mrs. Hanover.

A little confused as to what was going on, he was ushered into a lovely office and found himself facing a keen-eyed woman in her fifties. She extended her hand. "You knew my husband?" Roger told how her husband had given him a ride when hitchhiking home after the war. "Can you tell me when that was?" "It was May 7, five years ago, the day I was discharged from the Army." "Anything special about that day?"

Roger hesitated, "Mrs. Hanover, I explained the Gospel. He pulled over to the side of the road and wept against the steering wheel. He gave his life to Christ that day."

Explosive sobs shook her body. Getting a grip on herself, she sobbed, "I had prayed for my husband's salvation for years. I believed God would save him."

"Where is your husband, Mrs. Hanover?"

"He's dead," she wept, struggling with words. "He was in a car crash after he let you out of the car. He never got home. You see, I thought God had not kept His promise." Sobbing uncontrollably, she added, "I stopped living for God five years ago because I thought He had not kept His word!" (Source:https://www.sermonsearch.com/sermon-illustrations/4807/divine-appointment, accessed 8/10/18).

Carefully listen to the Holy Spirit as He Arranges Divine Appointments for YOU. God does this almost every day!

You are the key to someone's hope!
Application: God Has a (Spiritual) Breakout Strategy for you! But do you want to break out?

Adopt Jesus’ Passion for Lost People.

Be Committed to Bridge (with the Holy Spirit’s help) Significant Barriers to Reach People with the Gospel of “Grace”

Carefully listen to the Holy Spirit as He Arranges Divine Appointments for you.

- Pay attention as the Holy Spirit brings people to your mind.
- Ask God to make divine appointments for you each day.
- Ask Him to increase your observation and discernment.
- Pray fervently and regularly for those you have a burden to receive Jesus.
- Be bold not offensive in explaining the hope that is within you.

Amen

Questions for Discussion & Reflection:

1. Why was Peter so conflicted when he saw the heavenly sheet and heard God’s command to “Kill and Eat?” The key is found in Leviticus 11.

2. Why are many Jews bound by the laws of kosher? How does this separate them from Gentiles? What separates you from others?

3. What other “issues” did Peter have that made him reluctant to enter the home of Cornelius? How do we sometimes prejudge different people (from us) concerning their willingness to hear the Gospel?

4. God arranged a divine appointment between Cornelius and Peter. Describe any divine appointments in your life. Why are these important to ask God for and heed?

5. How do you react that 82% of American Christians do not know what the Great Commission is nor understand what it mandates?

6. Discuss the Biblical concept of spiritual “lostness.” Specifically, how do you feel about these verses: Luke 19:10; John 3:17-18; Romans 9:2-3. Honestly, do you grieve or have a burden for “lost” people?

7. When Jesus uses the word “GO” in John 3:16, how is it translated in Greek? What does this grammatical point and the Southern white woman and former black slave illustration mean to you?

8. What makes you emotionally or spiritually comfortable? What would God have to do in YOU to move beyond these comfort zones and encounter lost people?

9. React to the sermon’s last illustration about the Army vet and the businessman. Would you have been so bold in sharing the Gospel with a perfect stranger? Why or why not?