

The Godly Character of Cornelius

*"A devout man, and one that feared God, with all his house;
which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God alway."*

– Acts 10:2

Summary:

Cornelius shows that sincere religion unites qualities people often separate. His fear of God shaped both his personal life and his responsibility towards his household; his prayers were accompanied by generous care for others; and his genuine faith was pursued with unusual earnestness. Christians should avoid unfair judgements about entire professions or communities, recognise God's grace in faithful exceptions, and refuse to remain content with small spiritual attainments. True grace should seek growth, excellence, and the fullness of God.

Outline:

1. Beware of indiscriminate judgments

General accusations against communities and professions are injurious, unjust, and ungenerous.

2. Grace appears in unexpected places

The New Testament's faithful centurions show that God can produce excellence amid unusual difficulties.

3. Personal and household devotion

Cornelius feared God himself and faithfully influenced those placed under his care.

4. Piety united with morality

Prayer and fellowship with God must be joined with generosity, compassion, and practical obedience.

5. Reality growing into reputation

Believers should be thankful for true grace while earnestly seeking its greater fullness and excellence.

Text

We should be cautious about broad and unfocused criticisms of communities and professions. Such reflections can be **harmful**, as they reinforce stereotypes and maintain the common perceptions. Additionally, they are **unfair** because there are always exceptions.

And they are **ungenerous**; because the greater temptations men face to resist, the more evils they must overcome, and the more difficulties they encounter, the more praiseworthy is the individual who succeeds—or, in fact, the more the grace of God is magnified through him.

Can there be no excellency connected with arms?

In the New Testament, four centurions are mentioned, all praised for their character: the one who approached Jesus on behalf of his servant; the one present at the Cross; the one who showed kindness to Paul during his voyage; and Cornelius, who is described here. It is believed he was a proselyte, but he was not. Nonetheless, he worshipped God, likely learning about Him through his time with his troops in Judea.

He was a "devout man"; and three fine unions are mentioned in his character and conduct.

First, consider a union of personal and household duty: "He feared God, with all his house." This mirrors Joshua's declaration: "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord"—not just my house without me, nor me without my house, but both together. If we are truly godly individuals, our lives will reflect that through instructing, warning, and inspiring those under our care. All efforts to teach are futile if our actions contradict our words. We must align our conduct with our teachings.

Second, a combination of piety and morality: he donated alms and prayed. Piety exceeds just prayer, and morality goes beyond mere alms; however, alms and prayer are fundamental components of both, and they can never be separated. Some mention their love of the Gospel and communion with God while being hard-hearted and selfish. "But if anyone has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and closes his heart against him, how does God's love dwell in him?"

Some people are compassionate and generous towards others, yet they lack a relationship with the Father and His Son

Jesus Christ. They live without acknowledging God, pursue their sensual desires, and believe that charity can forgive many sins. But true religion that is pure and spotless before God the Father is to care for orphans and widows in their suffering and to remain unstained by the world.

Third, combining genuine piety with outward reputation: "He gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God always." Grace's true greatness can't exist without authenticity, though authenticity can exist without grandeur. We should appreciate even small blessings, but also strive for greater ones. Additionally, we should enhance the virtues of religion, not just possess its essentials but pursue excellence. We ought to embrace a richer life, not merely seek survival. Regarding our worldly condition, contentment with what we have is appropriate, but in divine matters, contentment isn't fitting. Instead, we should be ambitious and eager for more, since more is within reach and desirable.

Therefore, let us expand our desires and hopes, aiming to be filled with all the fullness of God.

This sermon is taken from William Jay's devotional, *Morning and Evening Exercises* (January 10, Morning), first published in 1854.