

## Who Are Our Unclean?

*Seeing people not as problems but as ministry opportunities.*

Acts 9:43-10:48

*This study focuses on Peter's vision and his ministry to Gentiles. Each member of the group first studies the passage and draws individual conclusions. Then we gather as a group to make applications to our congregation.*

**Prepare** Prior to the study, each person receives scissors and a couple of magazines. Each person clips pictures of things and people who represent problems in our society. The clippings are placed in a shoebox. You may want to do this yourself before the Bible study so the group won't suspect what's coming. When no one is looking, pin the clippings to a small bed sheet (infant size will do). Fold it and set it aside for later use.

**Read** Ask for volunteers to read the words of Peter, Cornelius and the men, and the Lord/Spirit/angel. Then work in pairs to answer the following questions. Provide a worksheet.

- ♦ Why is it significant that Peter stayed at the home of Simon the tanner?
- ♦ Describe Peter's attitude toward non-Jewish things prior to his vision. What were his reasons for this?
- ♦ Trace the steps in Peter's change of heart. List each change and the verse that demonstrates it.
- ♦ What is God's attitude toward those Peter considered "unclean"? How did God feel about non-Jews in the Old Testament? In the Gospels? Cite some examples.
- ♦ Why would God choose the bed-sheet menu to make his point?
- ♦ In this passage, does God place any conditions on his relationship with human beings? Can we assume that God's stipulations should be ours?
- ♦ What is the evidence of God's acceptance of Peter's Gentile visitors?
- ♦ How does Peter respond to God's action?
- ♦ Was Peter's change of heart permanent? (See Gal. 2:11-14.)

**Discuss** Reassemble the group and discuss their answers. Then draw a chart that represents Peter's change-of-heart cycle, and place the steps the group devised in proper order. You might place them at points around a heart-shaped line drawing. Or you could write them on footprint-shaped pieces of paper and place them in order, moving from "Peter's attitude" to "God's attitude."

**Apply** Bring out the bed sheet with the clippings attached and lay it on the floor. Have the group sit around it. Ask individuals to point out their clippings. Then ask about each:

- ♦ What is society's attitude toward these people? For clippings of things such as pills or weapons, ask, Who are the people behind this problem? Who are the people affected?
- ♦ If we were to think of these as ministry opportunities rather than problems, what would that ministry look like? Pick one and describe it for us.
- ♦ What changes would be required of us individually and corporately to make that ministry happen?"

—ERIC REED





## A Healthy Heart for Outreach

5 vital signs.

John 11:1-44

*To reach out to others, your own heart and soul should be healthy. Consider 5 key indicators.*

**You feel deep emotion.** A healthy heart feels emotions deeply. It can be touched by joy, pain, anger, gratitude, and love. This past Easter we prepared an original musical, "Jairus." There were 11 performances, and believers in our congregation invited scores of their seeking friends. The musical exceeded our expectations, but the process was hard on many of us. It had many incredible moments, but I had trouble feeling them. My heart was numb.

*How is your capacity to feel deep emotion these days?* ☐ High ☐ Medium ☐ Low

**You're mindful of moments.** The leading cause of regret is failure to seize the day. So many of us miss out on the wonder and potential of simple, everyday moments. This is especially true in relationships. When our hearts are working right, we look into one another's eyes. We don't find ourselves in such destructive hurry that we are unable to be fully present. We cultivate the ability to truly listen to people we minister to. *Right now, can you be "all there when you are there" for others, or are you skimming? How mindful of moments have you been in recent days?*

☐ High ☐ Medium ☐ Low

**You enjoy spontaneity.** A healthy heart has the capacity to laugh, to welcome the unexpected, the out-of-the-ordinary. A really healthy heart initiates spontaneous fun moments, spreading joy to others. Jesus described the kingdom life as one of joy and abundance, not as a burden that weighs us down. We are in bad shape when we cannot laugh from the gut, play like a child, and simply let go.

*So how's the joy factor for you these days?* ☐ High ☐ Medium ☐ Low

**You're open to the lost and hurting.** Over time, our hearts, which once burned with passion for the seekers and the poor and the suffering, can become hardened and impenetrable. St. John of the Cross says that "at the evening of our day we shall be judged by our loving." A healthy heart can weep for those who do not yet know God's love. A healthy heart can be empathetic and gracious to those who are suffering.

*How loving is your heart these days?* ☐ High ☐ Medium ☐ Low

**You hear God's promptings.** There is one thing I hope I never get over as long as I live: the truth that the awesome Creator of the universe is choosing to speak to me—not just once in a blue moon, but most of the time! Sometimes he needs to convict me about a sin I've committed and to guide me to confess. Sometimes he wants to give me an idea. Sometimes he just wants me to remember I am treasured. I shudder to think how many messages I have missed by not listening.

*How mindful is your heart these days of the presence of God—are you quick to listen? How is your hearing?*

☐ High ☐ Medium ☐ Low

—NANCY BEACH

### Discuss

1. Which of your answers surprised you? Why?
2. What adjustments can you make to become more open to the lost and hurting?
3. What are some ways we can help each other find joy in our outreach to people?





## Who Owns the Church?

*The real owner wants to do something with it.*

1 Corinthians 12:27; 1 Peter 2:9; 2 Corinthians 6:16

### Read

*"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." (1 Peter 2:9).*

### Comprehend

You sometimes hear people discussing a local church as if it were someone's private enterprise. Just as they refer to "Duffy's Pre-Owned Garment Outlet" or to "Crazy Eddie's Bank and Trust," so people refer to a church by the name of its minister. Thus a church in which the Right Reverend Allis Chalmers is senior pastor gets to be known as "Chalmers's Church."

There may be good reason for the name. Perhaps Mr. Chalmers is the captain. The church is the ship. So it's "Chalmers's Church."

The New Testament talks another way. Many of its descriptions of the church impress upon us that we are not our own. Nor do we belong to any preacher. The church is rather the body of Christ, the temple of God, the bride of Christ, God's people. Out of the whole human race, Christ gathers for himself a community. Even the word *church* reflects this fact. The English word church (like the German *kirche* and the Dutch *kerk*) derives from a Greek word that means "belonging to the Lord." The church belongs to the Lord of the church.

What follows from this? A great deal. The institutional church is not a club to be rigged and outfitted merely to suit ourselves and to meet our own religious needs. The church is rather a living, pulsing instrument of Jesus Christ, equipped to do his work in the world and set up to serve not only ourselves but those outside our gathering. We do not form ourselves into a church by voluntary cooperation. We are rather called as a people to praise God, to serve his children, and to sacrifice ourselves for others—even as a church—in the same way that Christ sacrificed himself for us.

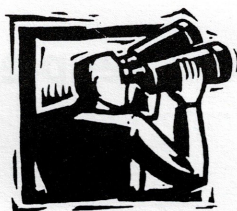
A church that is turned in on itself is like a person who shuts herself in a closet and tries to live by breathing her own carbon dioxide. It doesn't work.

—CORNELIUS PLANTINGA, JR. *Adapted from BEYOND DOUBT (Eerdmans, Fall 2001). Used with permission.*

### Discuss

1. Have you ever been a member of a club? What do you expect of a club that you don't expect of a church? What does each expect of you?
2. Describe some ways that a church can "turn in on itself."
3. How is our church following Christ's mandate to serve those outside the church?





## Treating Visitors as Guests

*Two strategies for making a new person feel welcome.*

2 Corinthians 2:14-15

*What do people see when they come to our church for the first time? Creating an atmosphere that is both warm and inviting without overwhelming the newcomer takes forethought. Two church leaders discuss how their churches welcome first-time visitors.*

### Seeing for the First Time

*Welcome without embarrassment.* We welcome people publicly but do not introduce visitors. We call newcomers "guests," not "visitors." We encourage everyone to wear a name tag given out by ushers and ask guests to wear a temporary name tag. Dress is casual, which means no coats or ties, even for the staff.

*Help people greet each other.* During the time of greeting one another at the service, we give people instructions on what to say after they've said hello. For example, a recent theme dealt with evangelism, and we suggested people ask each other, "Can you recall some good news you've heard recently?"

*Let guests tell you how to contact them.* Our worship bulletins have a tear-off section that people may use to request information, share prayer concerns, request a sermon tape, and so on. We have a handout that offers parking suggestions (this is a problem in our church) and nearby restaurants.

*Encourage guests to enjoy the service as our gift to them.* At offering time we ask them to pass the offering plate without giving any money, and we watch our terminology. We are careful not to say, "We are now going to take the offering," or "As our guests, please don't feel obligated to give" (as if everyone else is obligated).

—WAYNE OGIMACHI

### All-Encompassing Strategy

Our welcoming strategy begins before a person ever attends a service and extends well after he or she has left the church campus.

We provide *special parking* for guests, single parents, and the physically disadvantaged. Signs strategically located at the entrance of the parking lot instruct guests to turn on their emergency lights so they can be directed to parking near the church building. Parking attendants help people find a parking space.

When guests enter the building, they find a *Welcome Center* staffed by friendly volunteers who answer questions and give directions. Guests are invited to take literature explaining each of the church's ministries. The church provides complimentary cappuccino, latté, and donuts for guests.

The pastor offers a *complimentary cassette tape* of the weekend message to any guest who wants one.

The church delivers *freshly baked bread* to the home of guests who filled out a guest card. Guests are contacted by Welcome Callers, thanking them for attending and offering to answer any questions.

We invite guests to a *Newcomers' Dessert* to meet the pastoral staff and their spouses. We also offer a Discovery Class, in which people interested in the church can get their questions answered.

We have created a *Web page* to provide information about the church's service times, programs, and staff. The Web address is on all the church's brochures.

—JIM TOMBERLIN

### Discuss

1. Which of these ideas do you like best? Why?
2. Currently, how are guests greeted and connected to people in our church? What works well, and what else could we do?
3. How do we bring the aroma of Christ (2 Cor. 2:14-15) to strangers in our midst?