

“God Shows No Partiality”

One of the most dangerous and damaging inclinations of our sinful nature is our propensity for division. From our earliest social interactions, we see the destructive seeds of partiality and prejudice. As we get older, the stratified cliques of the school playground and lunch room morph into the search for the “right” college or a “good” neighborhood or the “perfect” job. But, at the heart of all of it, is our selfish desire for a place of prominence and the cycle of separation continues.

Over the last six months, some of our largest cities have experienced violence and unrest stemming from racial tension, and, throughout the world, religious, ethnic, and economic division seem to be a constant source of strife and suffering. As we consider these examples, it’s easy to simply shrug our shoulders and concede the point that this is just the way things are in world, but today, we need to be very clear that *this is not God’s way*.

We have an abundance of examples from Scripture that God’s perspective is not one of prejudice or partiality. With bold language we are told that, with God, there is no division and there is no difference; that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23); and more importantly, that, “in Christ Jesus (we) are all sons of God, through faith.”²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:26-28). These words from Scripture, remove any doubt as to the view God takes of humanity. Together we stand condemned in our sin, and, together, we have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus shed on the cross, once and for all! *But this message wasn’t always so clear.*

Today’s text from Acts 10 is a word from God that reveals a radical truth about the love and promises of God. We hear this message from the mouth of Peter, and, in his impromptu sermon, Peter begins with the statement that, “God shows no partiality” (Acts 10:34) and later, that, “everyone who believes in (Jesus) receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43). Now, this may not seem like a revolutionary teaching to you; we hear this message every time we gather; it is the essence of the Gospel and the core of everything we believe and teach and confess...but for Peter’s audience, this message was earthshattering.

Today’s text is the climax of an account that starts at the beginning of chapter 10. It is the story of Cornelius and it is one of the most important stories in the entire New Testament. As chapter 10 begins we are told that this man, Cornelius, was a Roman centurion. From this description, we know that he was a man of power and influence who was in charge of anywhere from 100-600 Roman soldiers (Acts 10:1). We are also told in the opening verses of this chapter that Cornelius was, “a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God” (Acts 10:2). This Roman commander had heard the promises of God from the Old Testament Scriptures; he understood that a Messiah was coming and, somewhere in the heart of this Gentile soldier, God was at work, and this fact is clearly evident because, as the story continues, God sent an angel to Cornelius and told him to send for Peter (Acts 10:3-6).

At about that same time, God also came to Peter in a vision and showed him a sheet covering the earth and it was full of animals that the Jews regarded as unclean because of the ceremonial law of the Old Testament. Then, in the midst of this vision, God said to Peter, “Rise and eat.” When Peter heard this command, he immediately resisted and said, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean” (Acts 10:14). And the voice of the Lord answered Peter’s objection with these decisive words in verse 15: “What God has made clean, do not call common.”

In other words, with the coming of Jesus into the world, and with the final cleansing sacrifice of Christ now offered, and with the command to take the gospel to all nations now given, the old ceremonial laws about

festivals and foods were now obsolete (Colossians 2:16), and the separation between the Jew and Gentile world was gone. The ceremonial laws of Moses were now fulfilled and ended in Jesus (Mark 7:19), and no one was to be considered unclean or common.

God made this clear to Peter right away, because while he was still considering the meaning of the vision, the three Gentiles sent from Cornelius knocked at his door, and when Peter goes with them he finds Cornelius and his whole household ready to hear the gospel. And this is where today's text begins. Here, Peter preaches an incredible sermon that begins with these words: "Truly I understand that God show no partiality" (Acts 10:34). He goes on to proclaim that God had kept His promise; that the Messiah had come; that in the death of Jesus on the cross, the final sacrifice for sin had been made; that God had "raised him on the third day" and that in Jesus, they all had life. And the result of this message about Jesus is that these Gentiles believed and were baptized. *And the Jewish believers who had come with Peter were amazed!*

You see, this was a completely new idea to them! The entire ceremonial law, given by Moses, was designed to keep God's people separate from the nations, and their entire lives had been focused on division. But what they couldn't see was that the separation called for by the law was not for the sake of prejudice or ethnic discrimination, it was for the purpose of preserving the line of the Messiah – in order to deliver Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And now, in Jesus, the law had been fulfilled! In Jesus, sin had been punished! In Jesus, forgiveness and life and salvation had been given – and not only to the Jews, *but to all people!* And this is exactly the message we preach today! That God has kept His promise; that God has sent his Son to save us from the punishment we deserve; that God has prepared a place for us; that God will give us eternal life...and that this good news *is for everyone!*

This story of the Gospel coming to Cornelius is a turning point in the book of Acts. From this moment on, the commission of Christ is confirmed, the Church is open to the Gentiles, and the message of the Gospel begins to be spread to all people. *So what's the point for us?* Well, the first thing we need to receive from this text is a word of conviction, because as much lip service as we may give to the Great Commission we all struggle with the inclination of our Old Adam to be separated – first from God and then from one another – and so did Peter.

One of the amazing side notes to this story is that later, in Galatians, Paul talks about having to confront Peter, of all people, for showing preference to the Jewish Christians over the Gentile Christians at the dinner table. And we do the same thing. Even within our own congregation, we avoid those who look or think or act in ways that are different from our own. We gravitate toward those with a status or standing that we deem desirable, we silently shun those who are different, and we find ourselves right back in the destructive cliques of the school lunchroom or playground.

Today, we need to hear again the words of Paul who wrote, "There is no difference. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..." (Romans 3:23). And when we have heard those words...and when we have taken to our heart our complete and utter helplessness...and we have understood our desperate standing before God, it is there in that moment of need, that the message of Christ saves us.

And so today, I come to you with the message of God that we are justified freely by his grace, that with God there is no prejudice, that in Christ all are valued equally, that in our Baptism we were all buried with Christ into His death and that "just as Christ was from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too (will) walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:3-4); that in Christ there is "neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for in Christ Jesus you are all one." In Jesus Christ, God shows no partiality. Today, this message is for you and, because of Jesus, this is also the message that you can share with the world, and, by this message of God's perfect love in Christ, the world will be saved. Amen.

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