

THE PROBLEM OF PREJUDICE

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on August 4, 1968 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P. M.

We are told that there are some 150 nations on the face of the earth today. If we compare our nation with any of these "foreign nations", I am quick to feel that our nation is the better of the two. In fact, there is no nation on earth whose citizenship I would prize as highly as that of the United States. I feel that our land is the best. If we compare our state of Tennessee with the other forty-nine states of our union, I am inclined to feel that our state is the best. There is nothing especially wrong with Arkansas, Alabama, Kentucky, and the other surrounding states, yet somehow I feel that Tennessee is a little superior to any of them. If we compare Nashville with the other cities of Tennessee, again, I am inclined to feel that my home town is the best. Memphis is outstanding in many ways, as also are Knoxville and Chattanooga, yet no one of the other cities quite compares with my own city. If we examine the various sections of the city of Nashville, it is not East Nashville that I especially esteem. Rather, it is my own area of South Nashville. If we look at all of the streets in our city, there is something a little different about Mayfair. It is my street and in an indefinable way I feel that it is somewhat special. Then, though I would be embarrassed to speak of it, if you examine the families on my street, there is not another family quite like my own.

I think you can see what I am trying to convey. There is something about that which is near to us, that which belongs to us, that which is our own, that is a little better, a little nicer, than anything else. In some ways this is good. It is good to like one's own family, neighborhood, home town, and country. It is good to be happy in one's situation and to be patriotic. Yet, there is another element in this that is not good. It is easy for us to look down just a little bit at others and to esteem what is ours a bit more highly. This, we call prejudice, and it is not good at all.

Ours is not the first generation in the history of the world in which men have looked down upon each other. Through the centuries the poor have distrusted the wealthy and the wealthy have been unable to appreciate the problems of the poor. The uneducated have spoken disparagingly of the highly trained, and the highly educated have looked down upon the uneducated. Youth has felt that those of age are fossilized and out of touch with the times, while the older ones have thought youth to be wild and irresponsible. The races have looked at each other with suspicion and sometimes with outright hatred.

No Dealings With Samaritans

If we can turn the calendar back 1900 years and go back to the time of Christ, we discover that the Jews had no dealings with Samaritans. The Jew looked down upon the Samaritan, thinking of him as the product of a mixed race and, therefore unworthy. On one occasion Jesus was sitting beside the well of Jacob in Samaria at noon time, while his disciples had gone into the nearby city to buy food. While waiting there he asked drink of a woman who came to the well to draw water. She was shocked, because he was a Jew and she a Samaritan. John 4:9 reads, "The Samaritan woman therefore saith unto him, How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me, who am a Samaritan woman?" At that point the apostle John put in the explanatory note, "For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. Christ did, and it was a shocking breach of normal etiquette."

Luke tells a story about an occasion when Jesus was passing through Samaria on his way to Jerusalem. Instead of following the practice of the orthodox Galilean Jews--crossing the Jordan, going down east of the river to Jericho, then crossing back into Judaea--thus avoiding Samaria on their journey to Jerusalem, our Lord walked directly through Samaria. While in Samaria night was coming on and Jesus desired a place to stay. He sent two of his disciples to a Samaritan village to find lodging. Luke 9:53 reads, "And they did not receive him, because his face was as though he were going to Jerusalem." When the Samaritan village recognized that the men who sought lodging were Jews on their way to Jerusalem that was enough to cause them to close their gates. This is especially interesting, because it places in bold outline the fact that the Jewish hatred of the Samaritans was returned in kind. The Jews looked down upon Samaritans and there was a Samaritan backlash that resented the Jews. Christ found himself in the middle of this hatred.

In the following chapter of Luke Jesus tells one of his most famous parables. It is the story of a man who was on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho when he fell among robbers, was stripped, beaten, and left dying in the road. As you recall the story you will remember that a priest and a Levite passed by on the other side of the road, ignoring the poor man's needs. Then, a Samaritan came, was moved with compassion, bound up the man's wounds, pouring on them oil and wine, and brought him on his own beast to an inn where he took care of him. Although we are nineteen centuries too late to feel the full impact, I think we can feel something of what Jesus was saying when he choose as the hero of the story a lowly Samaritan, rather than the exalted Jewish leaders. Jesus was trying to do something about the unholy fact that "the Jews had no dealing with Samaritans."

Little Use For Gentiles

In the course of time it was God's will that the Gentiles (all of those outside the bounds of the Jewish race) should be brought into the kingdom and saved. Acts 10 tells the story of the conversion of the first Gentile, a devout Roman soldier by the name of Cornelius. The Lord's angel instructed Cornelius to send for Simon Peter who would tell him what to do to be saved. Then, knowing how deeply the Jewish prejudice against Gentiles was imbedded in the heart of even so great a man as Peter, the Lord began to do something to remove that prejudice. Peter was on the housetop at noon engaging in prayer when he saw a large vessel like a sheet descending out of heaven and containing all manner of four footed beasts and creeping things and birds of the air. Then Peter heard a voice from heaven saying, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat. But Peter said, Not So, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common and unclean. And a voice came unto him a second time, What God hath cleansed, make not thou common. And this was done thrice: and straightway the vessel was received up into heaven." (Acts 10:12-16).

God was telling Peter something, though as yet Peter did not understand. The scripture says, "Now while Peter was much perplexed in himself what the vision which he had seen might mean, behold, the men that were sent by Cornelius...stood before the gate... And while Peter thought on the vision, the Spirit said unto him, Behold, three men seek thee. But arise, and get thee down, and go with them, nothing doubting: for I have sent them." (Acts 19:17-20). Now, Peter had his answer. God was showing him that the Gentiles were not unclean, but that they were to receive the gospel as well as the Jews.

When Peter got to the gathering of the people at the household of Cornelius he began his Holy Spirit-guided sermon with the words, "Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him and worketh righteousness, is acceptable to him." (Acts 10:34-35). The gospel was preached. The people believed and were baptized, with a miraculous manifestation of the Holy Spirit showing God's approval of the whole event. All that remained now was for the Jews in Jerusalem to be told about this unexpected event.

Immediately we read, "Now the apostles and the brethren that were in Judaea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. And when Peter was come up to Jerusalem, they that were of the circumcision contended with him, saying, Thou wentest in to men uncircumcized and didst eat with them. But Peter began, and expounded the matter unto them in order, saying...And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them, even as on us at the beginning...If then God gave unto them the like gift as he did also unto us, when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I, that I could withstand God? And when they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then to the Gentiles also hath God granted repentance unto life." (Acts 11:1-4, 15, 17-18).

It was quite clear that the Gentiles were now a part of God's kingdom. However, the distrust between Jews and Gentiles was so deep that it took years to remove it entirely. Many years later we find the apostle Paul writing to the largely Gentile church in Ephesus, "Wherefore remember, that once ye, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called uncircumcision by that which is called circumcision, in the flesh, made by hands; that ye were at that time separate from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of the promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus ye that once were far off are made nigh in the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who made both one, and brake down the middle wall of partition, having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; that he might create in himself of the two one new man, so making peace; and that reconciled them both in one body unto God through the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: and he came and preached peace to you that were far off, and peace to them that were nigh, for through him we both have our access in one Spirit unto the Father." (Eph. 2:11-18). In effect, Paul was saying, "You Gentiles must not dislike the Jews, because Christ loved them enough to die for them. You, Jews, must not dislike the Gentiles, because Christ loved them enough to die for them." How is it possible for one group to dislike another group when Christ loved the other group enough to give his life to save them?

Christ's Purpose: Reconciliation

When Christ came into the world, he had as his chief purpose reconciliation of sinful man to God the Creator. His second purpose was the reconciliation of man with man. This is clearly declared in Mark 12:28-31 where we read, "And one of the scribes came, and heard them questioning together, and knowing that he had answered them well asked him, What commandment is the first of all? Jesus answered, The first is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God, the Lord is one: and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength." This emphasizes the matter of bringing man back into the right relationship with God through loving obedience to God's commands. Christ, however, did not stop at this point, but continued with the words, "The second is this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." In order to please God man must be reconciled to and at peace with his fellowman.

Notice the recurring emphasis throughout the teachings of Christ and his apostles on unity and oneness. Romans 1:16: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek." Gal. 3:26-29: "For ye are all sons of God, through faith, in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ did put on Christ. There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither bond nor free, there can be no male and female; for ye are all one man in Christ Jesus." Col. 3:11: "There cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bondmen, freemen; but Christ is all, and in all."

In the night of his betrayal, Jesus prayed for his apostles and then for all others as follows, "Neither for these only do I pray, but for them also that believe on me through their word; that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us: that the world may believe that thou didst send me." (John 17:20-21). A very strong emphasis on unity is found in I Cor. 10:13, "Now I beseech you, brethren, through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfected together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it hath been signified unto me concerning you, my brethren, by them that are of the household of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. Now this I mean, that each one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and O of Christ. Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you?" In this passage the division seems to be over personalities, or perhaps over different beliefs and doctrines. In any case, it was unity that the Holy Spirit guided Paul to command of the people.

In James 2:1-9, the division is over another issue--special treatment for the rich--but the same emphasis on unity is to be found: "My brethren, hold not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons. For if there come into your synagogue a man with a gold ring, in fine clothing, and there come in also a poor man in vile clothing; and ye have regard to him that weareth the fine clothing, and say, Sit thou here in a good place; and you say to the poor man, Stand thou there, or sit under my footstool; do ye not make distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?... Howbeit if ye fulfill the royal law, according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself, ye do well: but if ye have respect of persons, ye commit sin, being convicted by the law as transgressors." Whether one looks down upon others and disregards them for personal reasons, for financial reasons, because of racial prejudice, or because of some other issue, this disregard for others is sinful in God's sight. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of the body being many, are one body; so also is Christ. For in one Spirit were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether bond or free; and were all made to drink of one Spirit." (I Cor. 12:12-13).

Conclusion

When I was a small child someone taught me the sentence, "Man's inhumanity to man makes countless millions mourn." The disregard of one group for another has been one of the major problems of our world since the beginning of recorded history. Estrangement between brothers began in the Garden of Eden. It has continued until the present time among nations, among races, among families and among many other groups. One of Christ's greatest concerns is to lead men to love each other and to treat each other as brethren. Let each of us examine himself and pledge anew to follow our Lord in loving all men without prejudice. This includes the Negro, the Mexican, the Indian, the "foreigner" of any national or racial background. It also includes a love for the rich, the poor, the educated, the uneducated, the young, the old, and every other type and grouping of mankind. The battle against prejudice in each of our hearts is not won easily and quickly. However, if we walk in the steps of our Lord, little by little we can love all men as we come closer and closer to the attitude of heart exemplified in our Lord when he died for all mankind. Christ's invitation is not for some men, but for all men. "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Rom. 10:13).
