

Sermon: The Impartial God
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Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor

GOD IS IMPARTIAL

There are only two important questions that we are charged to answer in the church. The first question is this, "Who is God?" And the second question is "What does this God want us to do?" How we answer that first question influences how we answer the second question. How we describe God will greatly influence our actions.

Therefore, theology, the study of God is the most important task in the world for Christians. We have to "get it right" when it comes to what we say about God. Those who have gotten it wrong down through the years have done some terrible things in the name of God, and unfortunately that is true even today.

So what is God like? If you could only say one thing about God, what would you say? Today I would like us to suggest that this statement might be a good summary of the character of God. God is impartial.

RULES TO MAINTAIN PURITY

Now certainly this has not always been the predominant view, in our age or in the early church in which Peter lived. The apostle's views about God were influenced by his Jewish heritage. And one stream of thought dominated the Jewish theology of Peter's day. They believed that God was prejudiced in favor of Israel. They believed God was partial, partial to their country and their way of life.

The Jews believed they were God's "chosen people" and as such they were charged to separate themselves from the polluting influences of the outside world. They were to be set apart from all the other peoples of the world. They were to be different. And under no circumstances were they to fraternize with non-Jews or Gentiles.

Jewish theologians, as they looked back on the history of their nation, suggested that the reason God punished Israel from time to time was because they forgot this rule. God's people foolishly got too "chummy" with those pagan outsiders, and this tainted their practice of religion. There are many passages of Scripture in the Old Testament that echo this line of reasoning.

And so rule number one for the Jews of Peter's day was that they should not allow themselves to be "contaminated" by associating with non-Jews. Toward that end they had many rules. They would not enter a Gentile's home. They certainly would not eat with a Gentile. To put it another way, they would avoid those outside of their faith as they would avoid the plague.

We can't blame the Jews for thinking this way. Their experience with Gentiles had not been pleasant. The Romans had invaded their country, taxed them heavily, and persecuted them in many ways. If I were a Jew in Peter's day, I too would have avoided these conquering outsiders. I too would have prayed for a military Messiah who would drive this unholy influence from my land. I too would have been suspicious of anyone who was not a native of my homeland.

THE VISION

And that's why it was so hard for Peter to accept the vision that God gave him. It ran counter to all he had heard from his youth.

I'm sure many of you remember that story. The apostle went up on the roof to pray at noon. The roof was relatively flat affair, and was often a popular retreat for prayer or relaxation.

But, noontime was not the usual time for prayer. As it is for us, noontime was the usual time for lunch. So, as Peter began to pray, his stomach began to growl. And that's when it happened. A strange vision came to this hungry man.

The Bible tells us that the "heaven opened and something like a large sheet" came down to earth filled with "four-footed animals, reptiles and birds." A voice told Peter, "The lunch you have been praying for has arrived." Unfortunately, the lunch wasn't kosher! Peter was horrified at the thought of eating non-kosher food, but a voice told him, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

Peter had to see this vision three times before he realized that it really wasn't about what he should or shouldn't eat for lunch. Instead, it was about what God was like and whom God was willing to accept. It seems that God had a much broader plan of salvation than anyone had ever imagined that the gospel really was for the whole world, even that part of the world that Peter didn't particularly like.

SOMEBODY AT THE DOOR

Immediately after having this vision Peter learned that there were messengers at the door. They were Gentiles so they didn't come in the house. Instead, they called for Peter from the outside.

Peter went down from the roof to greet them. It seems that the Holy Spirit told him that they were indeed kosher, even though they were Gentiles. And so Peter did what he didn't really want to do. He went downstairs and talked to these Gentile strangers.

Their story was compelling. It seems that someone else had experienced a vision as well. He was a Roman centurion by the name of Cornelius. God told Cornelius to send his messengers to Peter.

For the orthodox, what Peter did next was unthinkable. He invited these Gentile strangers into the house, and the next day he went to visit Cornelius, the Roman centurion at his home. Not only did he visit with Cornelius, this enemy of the Jewish people. He also ate with him and baptized him as a Christian!

But, what's a person to do when a voice from heaven declares someone kosher? Peter felt that he had no other option than to do what God had called him to do. And he was right.

A GOD FOR THE WHOLE WORLD

But, how could Peter explain such behavior to the church? Apparently the early church had gotten it all wrong when it came to the most important questions about God. They felt like Christianity was a sect of Judaism. But, now they were to learn that this was not true. The hope was bigger than they had first imagined.

Who is God? According to Peter's vision, God is not the exclusive property of one nation as they had once thought. Instead, God reaches out in compassion to all people, the whole world.

Peter should have guessed that would be the case. After all, that's what Jesus did. He reached out in compassion to anyone who had a need, and that included women, children, sinners and many others that society rejected or thought were unimportant. The ministry of Jesus was shocking to polite society.

Could the ministry of Jesus' disciples be any different?

Peter might have remembered that Jesus had charged them to go even farther. Before He ascended into heaven Jesus commissioned his disciples go from "Judea, to Samaria, into all the world" with the good news of God's salvation as revealed in Him.

As always, the disciples took a while to get the message. But, now, after a resurrection and three visions, Peter was finally getting it through his thick skull.

Different translations of the phrase in verse 34 give us an appreciation of the scope of God's acceptance. The King James tells us that God is "no respecter of persons." (KJV) The New Revised Version suggests that God shows no "partiality." (NRS) And my favorite, the Message suggests that God doesn't "play favorites." (Msg.) And then continuing with the dynamic translation, The Message, we read in verse 35, "It makes no difference who you are or where you're from—if you want God and are ready to do as he says, the door is open." (Acts 10:35, Msg.)

DO WE HAVE AN OPEN DOOR?

Friends, that's the message I want all of us to hear today. The door is open. If you want God and are ready to do what he says, the door is open.

We might think of the disciples as slow to learn and hard headed on this point, but sometimes we are even worse. Down through the years, many have tried to define the Christian faith in a narrow and sectarian way. "God is on our side," we said. "We are God's chosen people," we said. "We are the new Israel," we said.

Sometimes we began to think that our way was the only way. Sometimes we decided not to even associate with anyone who thought differently from us.

Unfortunately, some of the most contentious and unforgiving people in the world can also be very "religious" people. Indeed, many people think that the sole function of religion is to determine who is right and who is wrong, who is in and who is out.

But, that's not our job. That's God's job.

And I have a sneaking suspicion that God is quite a bit more inclusive and gracious than any of us could ever be. Just when we think that we have this religion thing figured out, God lets down another sheet filled with taboos and we have to rethink our position. Just when we think that we are about as open and accepting as a person can be, God in Christ stretches our mind and our heart just a little bit farther.

This passage teaches us that even among our so-called enemies there are those who are righteous and truly seek after God. Even among those whom we have written off as being beyond redemption, the power of the Holy Spirit is at work, communicating exciting new messages of truth and hope.

A LESSON NEVER LEARNED

You might think that Peter finally learned his lesson on this point. After all, the apostle had seen the compassion of Jesus, he had seen the vision of inclusiveness from heaven, and now he had seen first hand what God was doing to change even his enemies.

But, Peter, like us, was never able to fully grasp the scope of God's grace in Jesus Christ. Like us Peter was always worried about what others would think.

In Paul's letter to the Galatians we learn that Peter continued to struggle with this need to be a "kosher" Christian. It seems that Peter was staying with and eating with Gentiles in Galatia. But, then some strict Jewish Christians came to town and Peter decided to withdraw from his fellowship with the non-Jews to keep up appearances. Paul, never one to mince words, rebuked Peter for his hypocrisy. (See Galatians 2:11-16)

We don't know how Peter responded to that particular rebuke, but we do know that the church finally decided to take it to heart. In their first world-wide conference, the church realized that the grace of God was greater than any religion. The grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ was about more than being a Jew or a Gentile. It was about God's love and salvation for the whole world. (See Acts 15:1-35)

We still have a hard time wrapping our minds around a salvation so deep and wide. And so, no matter how hard we try to be open to the leading of the Spirit, sometimes, like Peter, we probably need to be rebuked for our hypocrisy as well.

You see, like Peter, I believe that the church has to learn and relearn this great truth of the gospel, that "God shows no partiality." God doesn't play favorites. We are all in the same boat when it comes to salvation. It's the boat of God's forgiveness launched on the sea of grace.

ALL ABOUT FORGIVENESS

In October my theology professor, Shirley Guthrie died. Shirley was always a gracious person, and he graciously allowed students and faculty to visit during his last days even though he was very ill. The president of the seminary, Dr. Laura Mendenhall talked with him about the fact that he would soon die and asked about his feelings.

He said that he was at peace with it, even more so than he had imagined. He said that the overwhelming feeling was a feeling of grace and forgiveness. At the end of a life studying the Scriptures he now understood that it could all be summarized in that one word, forgiveness. It was all about forgiveness.

I believe my theology professor once again got it right. It is all about forgiveness, forgiveness and acceptance. If God has forgiven us with no strings attached, then perhaps we are required to accept others in the same way. Perhaps there needs to be a softness in our personality that helps us accept even those that the world tells us are unacceptable.

Contemporary Christian singer, Ken Medema during a concert said, "My little Baptist church in San Francisco is in big trouble. We're Baptists so we get excited about baptizing anybody we can get our hands on.

Well, these people showed up for baptism. We were so excited to receive them. They may have mentioned that they were different from most of the others of us. They may have said that they a different 'orientation' than ours. I don't remember.

So anyway, we did what Baptist do: we baptized them.

Well, some other Baptists from other congregations asked, 'What are you doing baptizing them? Don't you know that they are sinners? Don't you know that our church doesn't approve of their lifestyles?'

We replied that all of us are sinners too and that the church doesn't approve of our lifestyles either! We're Baptists. We baptize everybody that Jesus gets his hands on."

THE CONVERSION OF PETER

We often talk about conversion in terms of those who become believers and are baptized. But, today's story from Scripture is about a different kind of conversion. It is about the conversion of the apostle Peter as he learned to accept what he previously thought was unacceptable.

William Willimon puts it this way, "... we stand at the baptismal font and marvel, not only at the washing away of the sin of those who are being baptized, but also at the washing away of the old, sinful distinctions made by those of us who have been baptized and should have known better.

I have watched the church receive people of all ages, nations, races, sexual orientations, languages, colors, psychological dispositions. How long is this great table of the Lord, how broad is this great sea of grace called the baptismal font, how bright is this light that shines into every corner of the world, how impartial is the love of God in Christ?"

We might find it shocking, just as the early church found it shocking. The Lord's table is always longer and wider than any of us can imagine.

GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER?

Remember that old movie, "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?"

It was about a black man and a white woman who loved each other and wanted to get married. Both families, though they considered themselves to be liberal and open, had a hard time being that open to this shocking breach of social protocol.

In a way, the kingdom of the impartial God is sort of like that movie. He asks us the question, "Guess who's coming to dinner? Guess who I'm sending into your life to teach you about the depth of grace?"

It is always an awkward evening when that happens, but when the Spirit nudges us in that direction, we never see the world the same way again.

REWRITING THE SCRIPT

Robert Fulghum told a story about a boy named Norman. It seems that the elementary school was doing a spring play, Cinderella. As is often the case, the students competed for the best roles. They waved their hands wildly in the air. "I want to be Cinderella," the girls yelled. "I want to be the handsome prince," the boys yelled.

Realizing that everyone could not have the lead parts the students soon erupted into urgent requests for other parts. "I want to be an ugly stepsister." Somehow the teacher was able to wade through all the requests, and soon everyone was assigned a part.

Except for Norman. Norman was a quiet young man. It wasn't that he was shy or bashful; he just didn't feel like talking a lot of the time. Norman had a mind of his own and was perfectly comfortable just being himself.

Concerned because there weren't any characters left the teacher said, "Norman, I'm afraid all the main parts have been taken. I'm sure we can find an extra part for you. What character would you like to be?"

Norman didn't hesitate. "I would like to be the pig," he declared. "Pig?" the teacher asked. "But, there's no pig in Cinderella?" Norman smiled and said, "There is now."

Norman designed his own costume with a paper cup for a nose and pink long underwear with a pipe cleaner for a tail. Norman's pig followed Cinderella wherever she went and became a mirror of the action on stage.

If Cinderella was happy, the pig was happy; if Cinderella was sad, the pig was sad. One look at Norman, and you knew the emotions of the moment. At the end of the play when the handsome prince placed the glass slipper on Cinderella's foot, the couple hugged and ran off together.

Norman went wild with joy, danced around on his hind legs, and broke his silence by barking. In rehearsal, the teacher had tried explaining to Norman that even if there was a pig in Cinderella, pigs don't bark. But, as she expected, Norman explained that this pig barked. And she had to admit that the barking was well done.

The presentation at the teacher's conference was a smash hit. And at the curtain call, guess who received a standing ovation? Norman, the barking pig, who was after all the real Cinderella story.

Norman refused to be bound by the limitations of a script. He found a way to change things and in so doing enhanced the script with life, laughter and surprise.

In a way, that describes what Jesus did as well. Before Jesus the world's script was written by the religions of the world. These people are good. These people are bad. These people can be saved. These people are beyond saving.

The religious leaders of the day had already written the script for the play called Messiah. He would come to destroy their enemies. And so when Jesus came and announced that he was the Messiah, the religious leaders were upset.

He had totally rewritten the script. In his version of the play even enemies could be baptized with water and the power of God's Spirit.

Sometimes we religious leaders are still upset by the depth of God's grace in Christ Jesus. But, God loves us anyway and continues to remind us that the God we serve is impartial, that He doesn't play favorites.

He even loves people like you and me.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN