

## “An Impartial God?”—Acts 10:34-35

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, “An Impartial God?”, is Acts 10:34-35. *So Peter opened his mouth and said: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him.* This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

Impartiality seems to be the name of the game in our American culture. While we lay claim to a principle of the equality of all people we still experience confusion as to the nature of discrimination and what that means as we live and function together. We are constantly lambasted with the cries of people in various venues striving to call our attention to equality in the midst of discrimination, prejudice, stereotyping and partiality. Yet in the midst of these cries . . . to do what I want to whom I want when I want . . . we know there must be a standard which keeps order for the proper living of our lives in peace and trust. Impartiality must be governed by a standard of conduct outside of oneself, to which a person binds himself so his life does not spin out of control.

The Christians of the early Church had struggles with the concept

of partiality in relationship with Yahweh. Our text records what Peter had learned as the Holy Spirit guided him through a discovery process: *Peter . . . said: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality.”* (verse 34) Interesting statement about Yahweh Who describes Himself as *a jealous God* Who will not put up with the worship of other gods or those who worship other gods which are simply gods of their own making (cf. Exodus 34:11-16). Interesting statement about Yahweh Who demands holiness and perfect obedience to His laws (cf. Numbers 15:40). It even appears throughout the Old Testament that God was partial to a particular nation—the Jews—a perception which still exists in the minds of many people today. This is precisely why the early Christian church needed to be taught the lesson that God is impartial **when it comes to His saving grace in Jesus, the Christ.**

Many of the first Christians, most of whom were Jewish, thought that a person needed to be a descendant of Abraham in order to receive the benefits of Christ’s Person & Work. This would have been a very natural conclusion since the revealed knowledge of the LORD had been given to them in the Old Testament Scriptures. God chose them out of all the peoples on the earth to be His people and the Savior was to come through their family line. The belief that this promised Savior—the Christ—was for the Jews meant that a person

of another nationality would have to become a Jew to receive the benefits of the Savior of all mankind. It led to the misconception that nationality, or taking on the religious customs of a nationality, was a prerequisite for salvation also in Christ.

Actually, God never preferred one nation over another because of their nationality, customs, looks, abilities and so forth. He simply chose one nation through whom His Son—the Savior of all mankind—would be revealed. However, nationality reveals differences in people which can naturally lead to sinful stereotypes and judgments. Thus, lessons dealing with nationality and partiality are always hard lessons to learn in all cultures. Fortunately, Peter and the other apostles were willing to be teachable.

Peter's lessons began with a vision from Jesus while praying. Acts 10:10-16 says *he fell into a trance and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descended in front of him, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has made clean, do not call common." This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.*

The lesson? Just as Jesus fulfilled the ceremonial laws, taking away the distinctions of what was clean or acceptable in God's sight, so such distinctions by virtue of nationality have also been removed by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Both Jews and Gentiles alike needed to learn this lesson and only the Holy Spirit could teach it to them because sinners are simply too partial.

To be partial toward other people is a result of looking at God's will from your own personal sinful human perspectives, stereotypes and ideas. In a sense, its kind of like a "spiritual prejudice" which happens when Christians fail to be faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ and what **He has done to define their identity as His Church**. It can happen on all levels in the Christian Church as well. This showing of partiality was a problem which plagued the early Christian Church as much as it does the Christian Church today. The apostles had learned the lesson that receiving the benefits of forgiveness of sins, new life in the Holy Spirit and eternal salvation come to anyone who trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of sin, in spite of nationality, vocation and gender. It is expressed in Galatians 3:28 → *There is neither Jew nor Greek (i.e. nationality), there is neither slave nor free (i.e. vocation), there is no male and female (i.e. gender), for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

However, years later the sin of partiality still plagued Christian congregations. James 2:1-4 addressed this sin: *My brothers, show no*

*partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. And then James gave an example of such partiality: For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “You sit here in a good place,” while you say to the poor man, “You stand over there,” or, “Sit down at my feet,” have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges **with evil thoughts**?*

Absolutely! The sin of partiality happens when the church places acceptance, identity and special treatment upon an individual because of anything but Christ Jesus and what He has done for all sinners and commanded us to obey (cf. Matthew 28:20).

Even Peter struggled with this lesson while sharing the Gospel with Gentiles in the presence of some Jewish Christians who insisted that a Gentile had to be *circumcised according to the custom of Moses* in order to *be saved* (cf. Acts 15:1,5). Even Paul had to rebuke him because the sin of partiality causes a person to act *hypocritically* and can lead others *astray by his hypocrisy*. Why did Paul confront Peter about this behavior? Because *their conduct was not in step **with the Gospel*** (cf. Galatians 2:11-13). It was about the Gospel—Jesus dealing with the sins of all mankind once and for all—and how behavior does or doesn’t reflect that Gospel.

This is also why it is so serious and dangerous for the Christian congregation to show partiality in a different way—showing partiality to people **in defense of their behavior which is sin**. Either way, it is a serious matter to ignore, negate or undermine the seriousness of sin and the work of Jesus for sinners.

Since the impartiality of God is rooted in the accomplished work of Jesus Christ for sinners, God is very partial because of Christ. After Peter shared what he had learned with Cornelius and those with him (who were Gentiles), Peter proclaimed the Person and Work of Jesus to them, telling them that *all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through His name* (cf. Acts 10:43).

Notice also in verse 35 of our text Peter conditioned this impartiality of God—*in every nation anyone who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him*. To fear God is to stand in awe of His power and works in our lives, realizing our absolute dependence upon His salvation **only** through faith in Christ Jesus. Only Christ defines doing *what is right* to make you *acceptable to Yahweh*. In John 6:28-29 some people asked Jesus, *“What must we do, to be doing the works of God?”* Jesus answered them, *“This is the work of God, that you believe in Him Whom He has sent.”* Believe in Jesus Whom God sent to deal with your sin once and for all—all sin, all

people and all time.

At the beginning of this sermon I said impartiality must be governed by a standard of conduct outside of oneself, to which a person **binds himself** so his life does not spin out of control. God is impartial because He has bound Himself to the Person & Work of His Son, Jesus Christ, for sinners. This forgiveness and salvation is for you, for me, for all people who acknowledge their identity as sinners in need of God's particular love for them **in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ**. This is why Peter referred to God's message as the *good news of peace through Jesus Christ, Who is Lord of all* (cf. Acts 10:36). Only through faith in Christ can sinners have peace with God and with other sinners. Why? Because Jesus has dealt with your sin once and for all. He came to defeat the devil who strives to destroy that peaceful relationship with God and others. Because of the peace we have with God through Christ we can look at others and treat them with God's impartiality in God's particular way—**they too are people for whom Christ died**. Amen.

*From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh*

*(that is, with our own perceptions, ideas and partiality).*

*Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh,*

*we regard Him thus no longer.*

*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.*

*The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.*

(2 Corinthians 5:16-17)

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