

“No Distinction”
a sermon from Acts 15:9 by Phil Henry

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I’ve heard that all of an Englishman’s preferences are a matter of principle. Which is another way of saying that for some, there is no distinction between what is “true for me” and what is “true for you.”

Religious people, and Christians, in particular, are susceptible to this. Sort of like the joke about a two men who met each other on what they thought was a deserted island and were delighted to find out that both believed in God.

“What denomination?” the first man asked. “Presbyterian!” the other answered. “Oh really, me too! What kind of Presbyterian?” he asked. “Evangelical,” he answered. “Oh really, me too! Are you an amillennial or a postmillennial?” “Postmillennial,” he said. “Me too! Are you a covenanting postmillennial?” “Yes!” “Wow, *me too!*” Are you a supralapsarian covenanting postmillennial?” The man paused...and said, “NO; I’m infralapsarian.” The first man said, “Die heretic!”¹

That’s funny because it hits close to home. There’s something about the pursuit of truth that opens a person up to forgetting to see the forest for the individual trees. It is a kind of “priority error”—first things get put in second place, and second things

¹ I’ve heard this joke in a number of varieties; here is one I found on the web using Baptists instead of Presbyterians: www.humnri.com/HumZ/jokesread1955.html

get put in first place, and before you know it, the good becomes the enemy of the better and the best.

Our text this morning is about discovering what kind of distinctions God makes. What the text that I just read says that is so remarkable is that the only distinction God makes is based on faith.

So, if you forget everything else I say this morning, at least remember this: the only distinction God makes is between someone who has faith in Him (no matter how imperfect) and those who do not. Everything else is secondary.

That's why I've called this sermon, "No distinction," because in the text which I just read, the early leaders of the new sect called The Way, or "Christianity," were religiously and ethnically Jewish. They didn't stop going to the temple, they hadn't necessarily stopped offering sacrifices, they hadn't really stopped observing the Holy Days, and, specific to our passage, they were religious about keeping themselves ritually and ceremonially clean.

Because of these religious practices, they were accustomed to making distinctions between "clean" persons and "unclean" persons. This included the food they ate, the clothes they wore, the people they touched, and even the way they went to the bathroom and engaged in marital intercourse.

But as I mentioned, God's only distinction is based on who has faith in Him and who does not. This has huge implications first for religious people who think that the Creator is taking note of who does what—you know, kind of the Santa Claus list of "naughty or nice" view of God. It also has implications for people who do not have faith in God because of what they have decided are unacceptable distinctions they see religious people making. "If that's what Christianity is all about, I don't want anything to do with it."

Of course, this is its own kind of intolerant distinction, but I'll save that for another sermon.

I'm going to discuss this subject of making distinctions in three parts: first, looking at the biblical context of making distinctions; second, looking at the Gospel simplicity of God's one distinction—faith; and third, looking at how God's simple distinction is the foundation of the mission God has given to the church in the world.

To repeat: Let's look first at **1)** biblical context of making distinctions; then **2)** the Gospel simplicity of God's one distinction of faith; and finally **3)** how faith is at the heart of the mission of the church in the world.

Biblical Context of Making Distinctions

There were practically no areas of life untouched not only by the Mosaic laws relating to getting and staying religiously "clean," but also the rabbinic traditions that had sprung up along these lines.

This is not unique to Judaism; Islam, Hinduism, and other religions have laws related to religious purity.

Regardless of the religious tradition, however, the impulse is the same: some how, some way, we must show by our lives and behavior that we believe God is Holy and we are not, without some preparation, able to be in His Holy Presence.

One of the most famous passages of the Bible along these lines can be found in the Old Testament prophesy of Isaiah where the prophet, face to face with what he describes as "the Lord sitting upon His throne" hears angels cry out, "Holy holy holy is the LORD God of Hosts..." In this scene, Isaiah cries out, in great fear: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of Hosts!"

But notice Isaiah doesn't say, "Hmm, since I'm unclean, I should go wash up before meeting with God." He says, "Woe is me," which is to say, "There's no hope for me! I am undone! I have no hope!"

There is a Christian tradition which I actually like, that sees the proverbial fig leaves in the garden that Adam and Eve used to cover themselves after sinning against God's command—these fig leaves as man's attempt to hide his sin before the face of a Holy God. As such, the phrase, "fig leaf" has become a colloquial expression for anything a person attempts to do to cover up a mistake, but that attempt is still ineffective.

In that biblical account there is a fascinating description of death; I'd like to read it to you: "And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skin and clothed them" (Gen. 3:20b).

The message is profound: not only is Adam unable to "clothe" himself appropriately apart from God's intervention, but the clothing that God provided, "garments of skin" required blood to be shed.

Thus at the very heart and beginning of the biblical story, we find an association being made between sin and being clean before God by way of the shedding of blood.

This is, I think, one of the most disturbing of all the teaching in the Bible about cleanness and impurity. In fact, it is so intense that Moses writes in Leviticus "Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sin."

Thus, blood cleansing is related to water cleansing in Scripture. Behind all of the ritual washings and water cleansings is this concept that human beings are sinful and God is not. Something must be done in order to bring about the moral and religious purification necessary for broken, fallen human beings to stand in the presence of a holy God. That "something" must begin with God's initiative, for everything that a human being does will necessarily be tainted with the very impurities and corruptions that the necessary cleansing is attempting to remove.

Furthermore, because it is linked with blood, it is also linked with death. Elsewhere in the Bible we read the explanation why blood must be shed for sins to be cleansed: "the life is in the blood."

This brings me to my second point: the Gospel Simplicity of Faith.

I have been asked more than once by people investigating the Christian faith: "why was there so much blood in the Old Testament, and why is there practically no blood in the New Testament?"

The answer is that the Old Testament blood—and there was a lot of it...in one place it is described as running red like a river—was the warm up act for the ultimate blood letting, blood-shedding event in history, the death of Jesus Christ.

[Note: the remainder of the manuscript was unfinished before the sermon was delivered; what follows are thoughts & notes added after the fact.]

The Gospel Simplicity of Faith

This brings me to my second point: all of this biblical context of blood and cleansing points to the one great event in biblical history which is the death, and the shedding of the blood of the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

It alone signifies that there is no other bloodshed that can "cleanse the conscience" and "purify, once and for all" the consciences of sinful people.

Thus, because it is Jesus and His blood, the only distinction that God makes is the simple distinction of faith: do you believe in Jesus?

This is all the more important when it comes to figuring out who fits into the church or not (which was the crisis in Acts 15). The only barrier, the only distinction, is to be made on the basis of the blood.

If someone's heart has been cleansed by God by faith in Jesus Christ, that one fits into the church no matter what else may be true of him or her.

Nothing could be simpler. Nothing could be more difficult.

Difficult, I say, because this involves renouncing all our own efforts to cleanse our consciences and to purify our souls, to make ourselves right before a Holy God.²

Simple, I say, since there could be nothing less difficult than asking God to do for us what we could never do for ourselves: to make us ceremonially, religiously, and ritually pure and clean.

The Mission of the Church in the World Begins with "No Distinction"

Finally, my third point this morning is how faith, and this idea of "no distinctions" lays the groundwork for the Mission of the Church in the World.

If the whole context of the Bible and the blood shedding in the Bible points to the death of Jesus and the shedding of His blood, once and for all, for the sins of the world, the question is this: how does that change the way we view the mission of the church?

This way: if Jesus shows no distinction except that of faith in His blood, and the cleansing power of His death and resurrection, then neither should we.

For all our many differences, and we have many—both as individual persons and also as a church with other churches—this one thing, the cleansing power of faith in

² This is a profound quote that describes a life of anti-faith: "No one saves us but ourselves. No one can and no one may. We ourselves must walk the path." -Buddha. Walking by faith is a repudiation of this principle!

the blood of Christ—this one distinction should matter, all other issues can take a second seat.

I'm told that people of different races have trouble or difficulty worshipping together. Whether this is because of discomfort for being around people who are different than oneself, or whether it is because of different cultural practices related to singing, praying, preaching, meeting and greeting, or whether it is because of something else, it's a human tendency to want to be around people that are "the same" as you are.

Nevertheless, because human beings are creatures of habit, too often creatures of bad habit than good, our normal human tendencies can quickly become a prejudice or stereotype that goes against the Word of God.

Here's how it works: instead of my preference being this or that in worship, it becomes a principle of "right" worship...it must be done that way.

Or, the seven last words of the church on earth: "We've always done it that way."

Religious racism, judging a person's acceptability before God by their religious practices and ethnic background, was exactly what the Holy Spirit chose to eliminate through the ministry of the Apostle's to the Gentiles.

It is this specific situation about which Peter indicates in our text "God made no distinction between us and them..."

It is this precise obstacle that God overcomes when he "cleanses their hearts by faith" and "cleanses ours by faith as well."

Seeing what we have in common with others (a sinful nature and being made in the image of God) is the starting point for this understanding of the church's mission.

From there, we must recognize that it is always God's plan to bring in the nations to His Ultimate Eschatological Assembly at the end of Time. (Read further on in Acts 15 for James's miniature sermon on this topic, and to see how he quotes the Old Testament.)

So while every particular church may not look like "the nations" some should. Others whose Sunday worship services are not international in their "look and feel" should nevertheless be international in the way they look at the world, and at their mission.

But this is about more than racism, my friends. This is about the love of Jesus which transforms our hearts to such an extent that no difference, no distinction, even between someone that looks and talks just like we do, is more important than this distinction of faith.

All other squabbles, all other quarrels, all other hurts and memories of the past—they don't disappear for the Christian, but they are understood in light of the cross of Christ. Etc. etc.

Recently I heard a great quote along these lines: "God often comes cleverly disguised as everyday life." Its not in the grand events of history we see God most active, but in the ordinary, mundane, seemingly innocent or "meaningless" circumstances that God loves to appear.

These are the times when we learn a lot about ourselves and about the Lord.

Jesus said something similar: "When you did it unto the least of these my brethren you did it unto me." Simple, ordinary, otherwise unnoticeable people, says Jesus, are the best "picture" of him that we can find, and what we do "unto them" is a reflection of our love for him.

What's radical here is that Jesus calls them brethren—these are his brothers, the poor, the marginalized, and the needy.

We assume that God is altogether like us—that is the historic idolatry of the people of God. As a result, we assume also the people who are like US are the people who God is interested in saving, these are the people God is seeking.

The importance of making no distinctions for the mission of the church can be seen in this: if we don't follow the distinctions God is making, we will make an idol of our own distinction and elevate that priority above God Himself.

Conclusion

Lewis in his book *Until We Had Faces* writes an allegory of two women, one whose face was beautiful, and one whose face was not. In this allegory, he has a remarkable description of the beautiful woman, named Psyche. Lewis says:

Of Psyche's beauty—at every age the beauty proper to that age—there is only this to be said, that there were no two opinions about it, from man or woman, once she had been seen. ... She made beauty all round her. When she trod on mud, the mud was beautiful; when she ran in the rain, the rain was silver. When she picked up a toad—she had the strangest and, I thought, unchanciest love for all manner of brutes—the toad became beautiful. (*Until We Had Faces*, CS Lewis, 22)

Making things beautiful is truly the mission of the believer in the world. We need more people who, like Psyche, makes even the 'brutes' beautiful.

In order for that to happen, we must ourselves be transformed and cleansed by faith: cleansed of our biases, our prejudices, which is to say, cleansed of our fears.

From there, we must entrust our lives to the God who has saved us as we embark on His work in the world: seeking and saving the lost.

This looks a lot like what Psyche did: making things beautiful by the grace of God which is at work in our lives.

It may sound exotic, but it actually begins right here, right at home. It begins with you relationship with your wife or husband, with your children or parents. It begins with those most like you—those in your own church, for example.

And then, when people who are outsiders come in to your worship service, or hear about your activity as a congregation, they will realize that something radical is taking place there that doesn't take place in any other club or organization.

Despite the differences that exist between us—and we should affirm them—we are intent and focused on making sure no distinction except that of the blood of Christ really matters in the end.

I began this morning talking about priorities and keeping "first things first." Tim Keller, PCA pastor in Manhattan NY, writes of the importance of this, and the sin of the neglect of this:

"The famous Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard wrote a fascinating little book called *The Sickness Unto Death* in 1849. In it he defined "sin" in a way that is rooted in the Bible but also is accessible to contemporary people. "Sin is: in despair not wanting to be oneself before God . . . Faith is: that the self in being itself and wanting to be itself is grounded transparently in God." Sin is the despairing refusal to find your deepest identity in your relationship

and service to God. Sin is seeking to become oneself, to get an identity, apart from him.

What does this mean? Everyone gets their identity, their sense of being distinct and valuable, from somewhere or something. Kierkegaard asserts that human beings were made not only to believe in God in some general way, but to love him supremely, center their lives on him above anything else, and build their very identities on him. Anything other than this is sin.

Most people think of sin primarily as "breaking divine rules," but Kierkegaard knows that the very first of the Ten Commandments is to "have no other gods before me." So, according to the Bible, the primary way to define sin is not just the doing of bad things, but the making of good things into ultimate things. It is seeking to establish a sense of self by making something else more central to your significance, purpose, and happiness than your relationship to God."

--Tim Keller, quoted in the Sunday bulletin at Desert Springs PCA, 6-7-09.

Notice, especially, the idea of sin vs. faith. Faithlessness isn't just a character defect, its sin. Sin isn't doing bad things, first and foremost, but "making good things into ultimate things." Unbelief, at its heart, does this every time.

Luther once said: "My calendar has only two days on it: today and the Last Day."

Today is a great day, then, to return to the mission of God into the world in our hearts, to make every effort to love those who are part of the family of God, and to focus on the one distinction that we have in common with everyone else: we are sinners, in need of the blood of Jesus.

Let us pray.

Appendix: Word study on "cleansing" or "purifying" (katharidzw)

The word used in Acts 15:9 "clean" or "cleans" or "purify" is used throughout the NT to indicate a religious or ritual cleansing. Here are several important verses along these lines. The Greek text is listed first with the key word in bold/red. An English translation (or simply the NIV translation) follows.

Matt. 3:12 ου το πτυον εν τη χειρι αυτου και **διακαθαριει** την αλωνα αυτου και συναξει τον σιτον αυτου εις την αποθηκην το δε αχυρον κατακαυσει πυρι ασβεστω

(his winnowing fork is in his hand and he will clear the threshing floor, separating the wheat and the chaff, etc.)

Matt. 8:2 και ιδου λεπρος ελθων προσεκυνη αυτω λεγων κυριε εαν θελης δυνασαι με **καθαρισαι**

(a man with leprosy came to him and said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can cleanse me.")

Matt. 8:3 και εκτεινας την χειρα ηψατο αυτου ο ιησους λεγων θελω **καθαρισθητι** και ευθεως **εκαθαρισθη** αυτου η λεπρα

(Jesus said, "I am willing, be cleansed." And he was cleansed-out-of his leprosy.)

Matt. 10:8 ασθενουντας θεραπευετε λεπρους **καθαριζετε** δαιμονια εκβαλλετε δωρεαν ελαβετε δωρεαν δοτε

(Heal the sick, cleanse the leprosy, cast out demons. Freely you have received; freely you shall give.)

Matt. 11:5 τυφλοι αναβλεπουσιν και χωλοι περιπατουσιν λεπροι **καθαριζονται** και κωφοι ακουουσιν νεκροι εγειρονται και πτωχοι ευαγγελιζονται

(The blind see again and the lame walk; the leprosy are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised and the Poor have the Gospel preached to them.)

NAS has these footnotes on this text: **Matthew 11:5**

"GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM..." — Or *good news*

"the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT..." — Is 35:5f; Matt 8:3; 12:13

“POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL...” — Is 61:1; Luke 4:18

Matt. 23:25 ουαι υμιν γραμματεις και φαρισαιοι υποκριται οτι **καθαριζετε** το εξωθεν του ποτηριου και της παροψιδος εσωθεν δε γεμουσιν εξ αρπαγης και αδικιας

(Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence)

Matt. 23:26 φαρισαιε τυφλε **καθαρισον** πρωτον το εντος του ποτηριου και της παροψιδος ινα γενηται και το εκτος αυτων καθαρον

(Blind Pharisee! First cleanse the inside of the cup and dish and then the outside will also be clean.)

Mark 1:40 και ερχεται προς αυτον λεπρος παρακαλων αυτον και γονυπετων αυτον και λεγων αυτω οτι εαν θελης δυνασαι με **καθαρισαι**
Mark 1:41 ο δε ιησους σπλαγχνισθεις εκτεινας την χειρα ηψατο αυτου και λεγει αυτω θελω **καθαρισθητι**

(... “If you are willing you can make me clean!” ... “I am willing, be clean!”)

Here, notice Jesus’ imperative (Be Clean) follows the expression of his desire (“I Am Willing”). This is a strong reply to the unstated inability of man: “I can’t make myself clean but if you are willing you can make me clean.” See also Luke 5:12-14.

Mark 7:19 οτι ουκ εισπορευεται αυτου εις την καρδιαν αλλ εις την κοιλιαν και εις τον αφεδρωνα εκπορευεται **καθαριζον** παντα τα βρωματα

(“For it doesn’t go into his heart but into his stomach and then out of his body. (In saying this Jesus declared all foods clean.)”

Note: this speaks directly to the context of Acts 15 as it addresses the ceremonial laws relating to eating clean foods, the very laws that God instructed Peter no longer applied to people in Acts 10. As a result of that dream-instruction, Peter visited Cornelius, baptized his household, and symbolically started of the Gentile mission in the world.

John 2:6 ησαν δε εκει υδριαι λιθιναι εξ κειμεναι κατα τον **καθαρισμον** των ιουδαιων χωρουσαι ανα μετρητας δυο η τρεις

Jesus and John's disciples are debating about "ceremonial cleansing."

John 3:25 εγενετο ουν ζητησις εκ των μαθητων ιωαννου μετα ιουδαιου περι **καθαρισμου**

The stone water pot at the Wedding of Cana contained water used for "ceremonial cleansing." There was plenty of water here, so this was no small detail. It is also significant that Jesus turns the *ceremonial* water into wine.

Acts 10:15 και φωνη παλιν εκ δευτερου προς αυτον α ο θεος **εκαθαρισεν** συ μη κοινου

Peter's vision commanded/instructed him to call nothing "unclean" which God Himself called "clean." This becomes the basis for the Jerusalem council, which, effectively, is a council on worship practices and what is acceptable religious behavior.

Acts 11:9 απεκριθη δε μοι φωνη εκ δευτερου εκ του ουρανου α ο θεος **εκαθαρισεν** συ μη κοινου

Same text, same context.

Acts 15:9 και ουδεν διεκρινεν μεταξυ ημων τε και αυτων τη πιστει **καθαρισας** τας καρδιας αυτων

2Cor. 7:1 ταυτας ουν εχοντες τας επαγγελιας αγαπητοι **καθαρισωμεν** εαυτους απο παντος μολυσμου σαρκος και πνευματος επιτελουντες αγιωσυνην εν φοβω θεου

NIV: Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.

Eph. 5:26 ινα αυτην αγιαση **καθαρισας** τω λουτρω του υδατος εν ρηματι

to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word,

Titus 2:14 ος εδωκεν εαυτον υπερ ημων ινα λυτρωσηται ημας απο πασης ανομιαις και **καθαριση** εαυτω λαον περιουσιον ζηλωτην καλων εργαων

who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and **to purify for himself** a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

Heb. 1:3 ος ων απαυγασμα της δοξης και χαρακτηρ της υποστασεως αυτου φερων τε τα παντα τω ρηματι της δυναμεως αυτου δι εαυτου **καθαρισμον** ποιησαμενος των αμαρτιων ημων εκαθισεν εν δεξια της μεγαλωσυνης εν υψηλοις

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After **he had provided purification for sins**, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

Heb. 9:14 ποσω μαλλον το αιμα του χριστου ος δια πνευματος αιωνιου εαυτον προσηνεγκεν αμωμον τω θεω **καθαριει** την συνειδησιν υμων απο νεκρων εργαων εις το λατρευειν θεω ζωντι

How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, **cleanse** our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

Heb. 9:22 και σχεδον εν αιματι παντα **καθαριζεται** κατα τον νομον και χωρις αιματεκχυσιας ου γινεται αφεσις

In fact, the law requires that nearly everything **be cleansed** with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

Heb. 9:23 αναγκη ουν τα μεν υποδειγματα των εν τοις ουρανοις τουτοις **καθαριζεσθαι** αυτα δε τα επουρανια κρειττοσιν θυσιαις παρα ταυτας

It was necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things **to be purified** with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these.

James 4:8 εγγισατε τω θεω και εγγιει υμιν **καθαρισατε** χειρας αμαρτωλοι και αγνισατε καρδιας διψυχοι

Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and **purify your hearts, you double-minded.**

2Pet. 1:9 ω γαρ μη παρεστιν ταυτα τυφλος εστιν μυωπαζων ληθην λαβων του **καθαρισμου** των παλαι αυτου αμαρτιων

But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that **he has been cleansed** from his past sins.

1John 1:7 εαν δε εν τω φωτι περιπατωμεν ως αυτος εστιν εν τω φωτι κοινωνιαν εχομεν μετ αλληλων και το αιμα ιησου χριστου του υιου αυτου **καθαριζει** ημας απο πασης αμαρτιας

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, **purifies us from all sin.**

1John 1:9 εαν ομολογωμεν τας αμαρτιας ημων πιστος εστιν και δικαιος ινα αφη ημιν τας αμαρτιας και **καθαριση** ημας απο πασης αδικιας

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and **purify us from all unrighteousness.**