

Straight Bible Talk

Manchester Church of Christ, Share Christ's Love and Share His Message

Prejudice

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“Nothing can reach the heart that is steeled with prejudice.” These words are taken from Thomas Paine’s first paper on the American Crisis.

While we can readily see prejudice in the minds of others, it is not so easy to see it in our own mind. Our good opinion of ourselves will cause us to excuse our prejudice and we may even cite an instance or two which seem to confirm our prejudice as being a correct view of the matter. What we will not do is examine all the facts in the case.

Why is that so? Because we have enough facts to confirm us in what we want to believe. Therefore, further information is considered useless.

Having reached a conclusion based only on the facts we want to consider, we then proceed to provide a convenient label for the matter at hand. Once the label is applied, there is, again, no further use for facts. The “label” says it all.

During World War II, we fought against the Germans, the Japanese and the Italians. Obviously, the Japanese were the bad guys because they began the war by bombing Pearl Harbor while we were still at peace. Since it was obviously the Japanese who had initiated the war, people felt justified in labeling all Japanese people and slandering them with all sorts of obnoxious names. Not only was this done, but our government felt justified in taking people, in this country, of Japanese descent and placing them in “internment camps.” (That was just a nice phrase for locking them up and throwing away the key.) In recent times our government has admitted the wrong done to the Japanese-

Americans and reparations have been made.

The point is that the good in many Japanese was overlooked because of a prejudice associated with the actions of the Japanese leadership in Japan in attacking America.

In similar ways has prejudice been conceived against virtually every race and ethnic group by someone who is different from them. Whether it be whites prejudiced against black, Asians prejudiced against Europeans or Arabs prejudiced against Jews, prejudice is locked in the heart that is steeled against the intrusion of any fact that might prove the prejudice to be exactly what it is: a prejudging based on limited experience.

Prejudice is not limited to the examples cited above, but extends into every area of religion as well. People are not only prejudiced against other people, but they are prejudiced against other ideas that are not their own. Just as the religious leaders in the days of Galileo condemned his ideas because they were not their own, so too, do religious leaders and their followers reject, out of hand, ideas that do not coincide with their own. Those who condemned Galileo even claimed that the Bible was against his ideas.

The problem was not the Bible, but their understanding of the Bible. In the same way today, there are still many people who misuse the Bible to support their prejudice and will not consider further evidence from the Bible that would prove them wrong.

In the field of religion, prejudice leads

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Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.”

Acts 17:31

All scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise indicated.

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people to conclude that certain religions are cults. Cult is a word that is susceptible of a variety of interpretations.

An on-line dictionary gives several definitions for the word "cult." Number six was: "a religion or sect considered to be false, unorthodox, or extremist, with members often living outside of conventional society under the direction of a charismatic leader."

Perhaps the "key" in that definition is the word, "considered." It is not necessary that it be true. It is simply "considered" to be false, etc. The word "prejudice" comes to mind in this context. It is prejudice that has caused the group to be labeled a cult. The fact that early Christians are a cult under the definition given ought to cause any thinking person to reconsider before randomly applying the label to a group that he, or she, does not like.

It is far more difficult to arrive at specific reasons for disagreeing with the Jehovah's Witnesses, or the Mormons, or the Muslims, for example, than it is to simply refer to them as a cult. Remember that it is the heart steeled with prejudice that cannot be reached. Have you refused to become a part of one of the above groups because you have found their claims to be wrong, or is it simply prejudice? (I am not advocating joining one of those groups!)

Truth has nothing to fear from investigation. Prejudice has everything to fear from investigation. Truth can only glow more brightly when the light of honest investigation is cast upon it. Prejudice does not want to be brought to the light for fear that it will be exposed for what it truly is. Often people become angry in order to cover up their lack of a reason for their beliefs. That anger simply reveals the underlying prejudice that is their guide.

I remember an occasion when we were going through a neighborhood, knocking on the door of each person. One lady came to the door, and upon learning that we were from a church, she slammed the door, angrily saying, "I have my own religion!"

I remember thinking, "If that is what your religion has done to you, I'm glad I don't have your religion." Her mind was as closed as the door that she slammed. A pleasant, "No thank you, I'm not interested," would have gotten me off her porch just as surely as the slammed door and it would have left her with a better feeling as well. But prejudice does not produce that kind of a result.

There are times, when we are busy, that we do not have time for unexpected visitors at the door. But, prejudice never has time. The mind is closed and there is never an opportune time to consider additional information that might lead to changes in the life of the prejudiced person. The heart is steeled with prejudice.

Jesus Seeks to Open Minds

Most people hold their religious views as a result of some little bit of knowledge that they acquired a long time ago.

They heard enough to satisfy them and decided that there was nothing else to learn. Their minds then became closed and their life is lived on the basis of that little bit they learned without any desire to check and see if it is true.

Jesus came to the people of Israel right after some challenging preaching from John the Baptist. John challenged their morals with a call to repent (to change their mind and bring their lives into agreement with God). Jesus stretched their minds even further. He challenged their religious notions about what was really right and what was really wrong. He also challenged their thinking about the nature of God's kingdom.

Not only did Jesus challenge their conceptions of right and wrong, he challenged their conceptions of God's plan for the nation of Israel. They had misunderstood the purpose for which God was going to send them a Messiah (a king). They looked for deliverance from the Romans. Jesus offered them deliverance from sin. They preferred to keep their sins and get rid of the Romans. Jesus was crucified. That is the ultimate act of a prejudiced mind. Get rid of anyone who challenges you to think.

When Jesus spoke of his plan to die, he was opposed by Peter. Peter was in tune with the common prejudices of his day. He did not believe the Messiah would die. Jesus said, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's." The Jewish people were interested in a prosperous life in the land of Israel. God was interested in their salvation from sin. God is interested in truth. People are usually more concerned about supporting their prejudice without regard to what may or may not be true.

We have a natural prejudice that mimics Peter. We want a good life for ourselves and for our children. We are naturally prejudiced against any view that would seem to threaten that good life. Heaven, to such, is "pie in the sky." We put all our eggs (so to speak) in the basket of health, wealth and prosperity. We are persuaded that our true interests lie in that direction.

Consider a couple of comments that Jesus made to those who were prejudiced against him. "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about me." Jesus had claimed to be the Son of God (that is, the Messiah) but they had rejected his claim. Now he tells them that in their search of the Scriptures they had missed some important information. They need to look again so that they might find what they had missed. Nothing changed. These were prejudiced

people and they would not let Jesus be their teacher!

Another comment was made by Jesus a little later. “If you continue in my word, then you are truly disciples of mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” It is truth that sets us free from guilt. It is not a redefinition of sin that we need. It is forgiveness. Prejudice has led many to imagine that what God has condemned cannot be true. There must be another explanation. Truth is not what is sought, but freedom from guilt without a change to accept what God has said. “The Bible cannot be right because it does not agree with my experience,” one thinks. It is only prejudice that has blinded the person to the reality that stares him in the face.

Truth sets us free from prejudice. It is truth that will reveal the reality concerning global warming. It is truth that will determine the guilt or innocence of those that are accused. It is truth that will clear our minds of the misconceptions and false ideas that we hold dear. But truth comes at a tremendous price. That price is the need to rethink and perhaps to change the direction of our lives. That is why prejudice acts as a steel trap to keep us enslaved to our false ideas and our false hopes.

Jesus’ Mission for His Disciples

When Jesus had been raised from the dead, he sent his trained disciples (we call them apostles) on a mission to the world. “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned.”

The world to which he sent them was prejudiced. The Jews believed that their salvation lay in following the teachings of Moses. They had missed Jeremiah’s prophecy of a new covenant. They had missed the part in Psalms about the Messiah taking his seat at the right hand of God. They obviously missed the part in Isaiah about the Servant of God dying for the sins of the people.

If someone should suggest that it would be easy to cause such people to become followers of Jesus, we might suggest a mental exam. The extreme prejudice that faced the disciples of Jesus when they preached to the Jews is well documented in the book of Acts. Threats, beatings or death by stoning was the lot of those first disciples of Jesus in Jerusalem. Yet there were many Jews who accepted Jesus and were baptized. Thousands became followers of their Messiah, the one who had died and was raised again to sit on his throne in heaven.

When Paul (an apostle of Jesus) went to Berea, a Macedonian city, it was said of the people there that, “these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.” The result was converts to Jesus.

The Roman world presented different problems, but again there was extreme prejudice against those who preached Jesus. Rome ruled the world. How could a Roman learn anything of value from someone who came from that despised little corner of the world called Israel? The first Roman convert was a centurion by the name of Cornelius. Perhaps one might say that it was easy because Cornelius was a God-fearing man before he encountered Jesus. Yet many others also became Christians and the Christian religion was firmly planted in Rome, the governing seat for the heathen world.

Other problems presented themselves when the disciples of Jesus began preaching to the Greek world. The Greeks had many gods whom they worshipped. They say that there was a road leading up to Athens that was lined with statues representing the various gods whom they worshipped. The Greeks were also esteemed as the best educated people in the world. They had the philosophers (Socrates and Aristotle were Greeks). They had the schools and the teachers. What could they learn from the despised followers of an uneducated Jew from Israel? Again, the history is recorded; thousands of Greeks from such places as Corinth and Athens became followers of Jesus. Truth overcame prejudice. It always will.

Continuing Religious Prejudice

One thing that you can depend upon is that prejudice against the truth in religion will continue. The nature of people has not changed since Jesus was rejected by many of his own people. The particular prejudices change. People will always be prejudiced. Some will be open to examining their prejudices. Some will not. Those Jews, who were willing to examine their prejudices in the light of what was true, became followers of Jesus. The same happened with Romans and Greeks. Some people will open their minds. Some will not.

The word “gospel” is a Bible word that translates as “good news.” It is based on an understanding that sin is real and that sin has caused a break in one’s relationship with God. It is based on an understanding that people are in need of God’s forgiveness and that there is no pleasant future for those who are out of fellowship with Him. It is good news because it presents a way back to God that is open to everyone who understands and admits their need.

A brief summary of the good news is that through the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus there is an acceptable sacrifice that has been offered to God for our sins. When the first disciples challenged people to believe, it was the message that Jesus had died for their sins.

Most religious people who call themselves Christians are in agreement up to this point. Jesus died for my sins and through Jesus I may be forgiven.

What comes next is obscured in the mists of confusion as competing Christian groups give different answers to the question, "When am I forgiven?" The answers range from, "You were forgiven when Christ died," to "You can never be sure until you reach heaven." There are a lot of variations in between and some would even put their answers outside of that range.

How can there be so much confusion when one simply looks at the mission Jesus gave to his disciples, found near the end of the gospel according to Mark? "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned."

But, we can hear the voice crying, "But, it says over here . . ." Thus does prejudice raise its head and protest against new information. The Bible does not contradict itself. Does it say somewhere that one does not have to be baptized in order to be saved? That would be a contradiction. "He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved." Those words will not go away. They have to mean something. May we suggest that Jesus said exactly what he meant to say.

The protest continues that baptism cannot be a requirement for salvation because baptism is a work and works do not save. Perhaps that would resolve the dilemma except that Jesus is the one who has placed baptism between us and salvation. Jesus certainly understood about works that do not save and obviously he did not include baptism in that category. Perhaps one might want to suggest to Noah that works do not save so that there is no need for him to build the ark. Perhaps one might want to suggest to the rich young ruler that works do not save so there is no need for

him to go to Damascus and there be told to "Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name."

One needs to be careful about drawing conclusions without a statement of God to back up that conclusion. Otherwise one is perhaps only justifying a prejudice rather than following where God would lead.

The protest against being baptized in water continues as one argues that this is baptism of the Holy Spirit and not water baptism that is spoken of by Jesus in Mark. The same Bible again tells us (in a letter to Christians) that there is "one baptism." (That is found in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, chapter 4.) Any theory that requires two baptisms for Christians cannot be true, but again illustrates the prejudice that cannot accept Jesus' statement near the end of Mark' gospel.

Yet others, because of another prejudice would contend that those can be saved who have been baptized without believing. It is sufficient that someone else acts, by faith, in their behalf. To contend for salvation through baptism without believing is no better than contending for salvation through believing without baptism. It is the practice of churches, in opposition to the clear teaching of Jesus. Opposing Jesus is the problem. Prejudice continues the practice in spite of the truth that Jesus spoke. "He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved."

Prejudice should not allow us to close our minds to new information. Often we do accept new ways of thinking and new ways of acting. Truth is a powerful force. It will always win out in the end. We just need to make certain that we are on the right side of truth. We need to follow where Jesus leads. All other roads lead to the wrong place. Prejudice may lead us on a detour now and then, but we need to listen to Jesus and get back on the right road. He is the Son of God.

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