

March 27, 2022 – Prejudice

1 Corinthians 12:12-13

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Image by Sharon McCutcheon

Laid At His Feet

A Lenten Study

Can we let go of the things that we love that hold us back?

Prejudice

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Special Music:

“I’m Sorry” TobyMac

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUYCIC6vqKk>

Angela Maples was a beautiful young lady with a long dark hair and wonderful smile. She had just turned twenty-one. Her eyes twinkled and everyone found her both friendly and beautiful. She always wore long-sleeved blouses, even during the summer. Some people thought this somewhat strange but chalked it up to a fashion statement. Angela was bubbly and outgoing, cordial in public, and carried an air of charisma about her like a woolen sweater.

As a junior at the local university, she found herself needing to supplement her meager stipend from her parents to make ends me. There was an advertisement in the local newspaper from law a firm seeking a part-time receptionist. That would certainly beat flipping hamburgers and would be a good addition to her resume' when she graduated. So, she decided to apply. When she called the number, the firm set an appointment for the next day. She was to come in, fill out an application, and have a preliminary interview. It couldn't have been easier, and she knew that she would impress the firm with her social skills.

The next day, she arrived at the appointed time and began filling out the lengthy application. "All this for a job as a receptionist?" she mumbled to herself. Her resume' was not extensive and her job experience was spotty. But since attending college, her skillset had grown immensely. One might say that she didn't look bad on paper. Once she had finished, she returned the application to the front desk along with her resume', then returned to her seat and waited.

The chairs in the lobby were plush and the furniture was a deep cherry red. The office looked like a great deal of money had been spent to impress clients. A collection of obviously unread magazines and journals were carefully laid out on a coffee table and there was the smell of coffee coming from a pot on a small table in the corner. Angela did not indulge in the coffee, but instead waited patiently for her interview.

A door opened at the end of the hall and beautiful blond lady stepped into the hall, turned and shook the hand of an elderly gentleman and then walked quickly and quietly walked past Angela as she exited the building. Angela looked back down the hall and noticed that the elderly gentleman was beaconing her to come. She entered a large office and the gentleman directed her to a chair in front of a large antique cherry desk. The man sat in the desk chair and looked Angela over for a minute. Then he read through her resume' and her job application. At this point in time, he had not said a word. Angela was starting to feel a little like a piece of prime meat in the window of a butcher's shop.

Finally, the man laid the paperwork down and looked directly at Angela. "Miss Maples, I am Mr. Madigan." he said, "You appear to have the skills we are looking for. However, I do have a question for you."

Angela noticed that he was staring at her arm, and she realized that the sleeve of her blouse had shifted up revealing the skin beneath it. She quickly pulled the sleeve back down. "Yes, Mr. Madigan, what is your question?"

Mr. Madigan drew in a breath that whistled through his lips. “It is early fall, Miss Maples, and it is still extremely hot outside. Why are you wearing a long-sleeve blouse?”

“That is hardly an appropriate question, Mr. Madigan. I happen to like long-sleeved blouses. It’s a matter of personal choice.”

“That may be, Miss Maples,” Mr. Madigan replied, “But I have lived long enough on this earth to know the truth when I hear it. If you cannot answer my question truthfully, I will have to consider this interview over.”

“My apologies, Mr. Madigan, I truly think it is not an appropriate question for this interview. But, if you have to know, I have a discoloration on my arm. I was in a fire several years ago and the skin on my right arm splotched. I wear long sleeves so as to not cause others discomfort should they see it.”

“May I see the area, Miss Maples?”

“If you must, Mr. Madigan. But I hardly understand what that has to do with this receptionist job.” With that, Angela pulled up her sleeve revealing the mottled and blotched skin beneath.

“That will do, Miss Maples. Thank you for your cooperation.” Mr. Madigan picked up Angela’s resume’ and application once again and then said, “I’m terribly sorry, Miss, Maples. I misspoke. There seems to be several key skills that you are lacking to do this job. I should have noticed that earlier and saved us both some time. I’m am truly sorry that we cannot offer you a position at this time. Perhaps in the future. Have a good day, Miss Maples.”

Mr. Madigan pointed his finger towards the door indicating that this would be the appropriate time for Angela to leave. He opened the door for her, and they stepped into the hall. She offered her hand to shake, but he would not take the hand, stepped back into the office, and closed the door behind him.

Angela's eyes started to water as she headed back towards the lobby. As she left, she noticed another young woman eyeing her as she passed by. She wanted to tell the woman to not bother, that this was not the place she wanted to work. But instead, she opened the door and stepped into the sun as she walked quickly to her car trying to forget what had just happened.

Over the years, I have held many jobs. Most of them, I was pretty good at. There were a few that I wasn't. Years ago, I held the position of assistant manager with a retail store. At one point, they let me know that I would be doing the hiring for a couple of positions that had opened up in the warehouse. I remember the instructions well. I was never to put the age, race, gender, or religion on the application. Nor was I to write any notes on the application. These were written instructions and seemed very practical. Then I was given a verbal instruction that was not written down. I was told that if the candidate was dark skinned, I was to find some reason on the application to not hire them. My senior managers let me know that "those people" never worked out. Those instructions haunt me to this day.

Prejudice comes in many shapes and sizes. It can also be a positive or a negative response. A person can be prejudiced against someone or something, but they can also be prejudiced towards someone or something. It can also be a relational experience. There are some jobs that are better suited for someone with a more flexible and tolerant lifestyle. There are other positions where a more conservative lifestyle is appreciated.

There is a very fine line between prejudice and preference, and preference often looks like prejudice. "I would prefer that my bank tellers not wear nose rings." That statement is a preference with regards to how a company image is presented to the public. "I only hire women in this bakery because they are better cooks," is a generalization, not based in fact, that crosses the border into prejudice. "I will not hire a one-armed person because they cannot do the job," is

a definite prejudicial statement based on assumptions without any opportunity for the candidate to show the employer otherwise. “I will not provide service to anyone that has a lifestyle that I do not approve of,” is both prejudicial and discriminatory practice.

But, like the other core beliefs that we are talking about in our Lenten series, prejudice is a choice. A choice that hurts our relationship with our Heavenly Father. It is a choice by which we build walls to exclude others, knowing full well that God loves each and every one of us and doesn’t exclude anyone. “But they aren’t like us, preacher. They believe different things, they teach different things, they wear different things, they have tattoos, they have piercings, they color their hair funny colors, their culture celebrates different holidays, they go to church on Saturday rather than Sunday, they don’t eat meat, they listen to loud music, they use foul language, they think I should keep up with the times, they smell funny.”

And if you had the opportunity to listen to people when they open up to me you would hear, “Those people are old, they do not understand us, they don’t have any tattoos or piercings, they are so not cool, they listen to old music, they eat meat and enjoy it, they get mad at me when I talk to them, they expect me to come to church, they want me to change, they smell funny.”

Life would be so much easier if everyone believed basically what we believe, did things the way we do them, say the things we find acceptable, have the right color of skin, right number of teeth, right color of eyes. How boring the world would be if that were true. We are each created to be unique by an

awesome God who loves us so very much. We need to embrace that and understand that each and every human soul is also unique.

There is strength in diversity. When a coach fills out a sports team, they put players into positions where they are best suited. This makes for a stronger team. No one player has the exact same skillset as any other player and a good coach can see how the pieces will fit and work together to make the strongest team possible.

The church is much like that. We all have different skills, and we allow God to put us into positions where we can best serve the church as a whole. Those superficial things that we use to separate ourselves from others, can also bring glory to God's kingdom. Our differences allow us to have access to different parts of society where we can deliver the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ.

For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

Too often, we try to make these verses mean something different than what Paul is suggesting. Sometimes this passage is used to justify our prejudice. Sometimes we are taught these verses mean we should run counter to our culture. But Paul dealt with this constantly. Paul's father was a Roman and his mother was a Jew. When Paul took the gospel of Christ to the gentiles he

constantly ran into cultural barriers. The Jews and the gentiles were like oil and water. And while we, as Christians, may hang onto some Judeo roots, our understanding of scriptures is often based more on gentile observations.

I hear your minds whirling out there, “what are you talking about, preacher?” Here’s a little bit of history. In the very early church, that period right after the ascension of Christ, Christianity was viewed as another branch of the Jewish faith. You had Pharisees, Sadducees, and Christians. While the Jewish Christians considered themselves followers of Christ, they equally considered themselves as enlightened Jews. As Paul began delivering the message of Christ to the gentiles, Jewish Christians were trying to figure out how to bring those Christian converts into the folds of the Jewish faith. These converts were known as Hellenists because of their Greek roots. While everyone was arguing about how to deal with these new Christians, the number of Hellenistic Christians kept expanded exponentially. Then, in 66 AD, there was a Jewish revolt against Rome and the Jewish populations dwindled along with many of the Jewish Christians. Those that survived the revolt were dispersed about the empire as they tried to flee retribution from the Romans. This period is known as the Jewish Diaspora. And still the Hellenistic Christian population continued to grow. As the Christian leadership transitioned from a Jewish foundation to a Hellenistic foundation, Christianity became separated from Judaism, coming into its own and building new, independent roots. The church, as we know it, grew out of this new movement. The church today is a product of this change.

You must be asking yourself why I am telling you all this history. The Hellenistic Christians did have ties to Greece and Greek philosophers, much of which found its way into Christian literature. Most of the New Testament was written in Greek rather than Aramaic, Aramaic being the common Jewish tongue at the time of Christ. That influence affects us. Even more importantly, though, Jewish law bound the Jewish people together. By actively setting boundaries and being exclusive, they maintained control over their core beliefs.

The Hellenistic Christians, on the other hand, were comprised of many cultures, not just Greek. When Paul is bringing the message to the gentiles, he also brings a common understanding that the nature of Christ needs to be integrated into those various cultures. He did not bring them Judaism. He brought them Christianity. The same is true of the other disciples as they brought the good news of Jesus Christ to all parts of the world. Many of these cultures clashed with one another.

But the message of Christ was not just a message of tolerance, but a message of embracing diversity. It was not a message that did not beg people to find commonality in their cultures, but commonality in the message of Christ. It was a message that said it doesn't matter if you are a slave, or free, or black, white, red, brown, Spanish, Portuguese, Roman, Egyptian, Greek or Jew, handicapped or sick, rich or poor, republican or democrat, millennial, Gen X, Gen Y, or Gen Z, Baby Boomer, rapper, crooner, scientist, technician, doctor, lawyer, or artist. Jesus loves you. Because Jesus loves you, you can love others even if they are different from you. You don't need to change them, tolerate them, or

integrate them, or assimilate them. Your only task as a Christian is to love them. Jesus never pushed people away or excluded them. If we claim that we are following the example of Christ, we won't either.

“But that person is a criminal!” we cry out. God loved David in the midst of his sin. Jesus loved Judas and washed his feet on the very night that he would betray him. Jesus loved and forgave the thief on the cross. “But, I'm not Jesus,” we say.” And I remind us all that we want to be like him. Dealing with our prejudice is a good place to start.

I will let you in on a secret. When we do that, when we love all people in their diversity, we can learn so much from them. When we open our minds to other cultures and practices, people with disabilities or blemishes, people with ideas and beliefs that don't coincide with ours, rather than pointing fingers, or building fences, we may be pleasantly surprised about how much they are willing to share with us. But we need to approach them with humility and love, not with condescension, pity, or prejudice. We must come with an acknowledgement that God loves them just as much as God loves us.

Just as Jesus died for us, He died for them. Just as Jesus rose on the third day for us, He rose on the third day for them. Just as God welcomes us into fellowship and His Kingdom, God welcomes them into His fellowship and His Kingdom. We are equal. It is only in our own minds that we believe we are superior or dominant or that someone else is inferior. We hold ourselves back through our own prejudices and fail to love the way that Jesus loved.

This week, I ask that we all take a deep look at our core beliefs. Are we harboring prejudice there? Are we holding onto it tightly with our fists? When we see that burn victim in the store, are we averting our eyes? Do we avoid talking to people that seem unkempt? Do we feel haughty and superior because of our culture or skin color? Do we refuse to be around people because of their political leanings? We need to think about laying our prejudice at the foot of the cross and leaving it there. Are we willing to be counted when it comes to seeing or hearing injustice and prejudice? Or is it something we either don't want to acknowledge or find too central to our belief system to give up?

This is something that we truly need to pray about during this season of lent. It would be so easy to walk away from these words and pretend we just didn't hear them. It is so easy to just say "I'm not prejudice" without doing any self-reflection. Self-reflection is hard, folks. No two ways about it. Facing who we are and committing to change is never easy. But we are called to do it. When we take on the mantle of Christ and become born into a new spirit, we agree to letting Christ work on cleaning and changing our hearts.

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God bless you all!

AMEN

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