Probability, Prejudice, and Christ

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John 1:43-51

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." 44 Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. 45 Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." 46 Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." 47 Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" 48 Nathanael said to him, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." 49 Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" 50 Jesus answered him, "Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these." 51 And he said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

Marking MLK and Roe V. Wade

For about ten years now, we have taken the Martin Luther King holiday weekend and the Sanctity of Life Weekend, which always come back to back in January because of King’s
birthday on January 15 and the anniversary of Roe v. Wade on January 22—we have taken these two anniversaries as providential opportunities to bring God’s word and the gospel of Jesus Christ to bear on the sins and the hopes that these anniversaries signify.

The Martin Luther King anniversary calls attention to the sins of ethnic enmity—disfavor toward people rooted in ethnic differences; and the Roe v. Wade anniversary calls attention to the sins of sexual licentiousness and selfishness and homicidal indifference to the life of unborn children.

**Not Only Sins, But Also Hopes**

And these two anniversaries signify not only sins, but also hopes. The Roe v. Wade anniversary signifies the hope that men and women may increasingly see their sexuality as a sacred trust from God and for the glory of Christ; and the hope that more and more people may come to see unborn children as human beings created in the image of God with the precious potential of being redeemed to praise Jesus Christ forever; and the hope that whatever heartrending situation makes a pregnancy seem unbearable, God always, always, has a better way forward than killing the child—better for the child and better for the mother and the father and the grandparents.

And the Martin Luther King anniversary signifies the hope that some day people “will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character;” and the hope that ethnic ill-will and strife around the world will diminish as people see others mainly as humans created in God’s image, rather than representatives of dishonorable groups; and the hope that structures rooted in racism will collapse; and the hope, especially for us who follow Jesus, that the cross of Christ will be exalted as the only final means of reconciliation between God and sinful man, and between sinful man and sinful man.

**Greater Than Black and White**

The issues raised by the Martin Luther King anniversary are greater than the black-white issues of our own unhappy history in America. They touch on the Kikuyu and the Luo of Kenya, the Kurds of Northern Iraq, the Uighurs of China, the Sinhalese and Tamil of Sri Lanka, the Turkish workers in Germany, the Latino immigrants in the U.S., the Aborigines of Australia, and the Jewish people everywhere.

Even in our own country the issues of ethnic disrespect and strife have been much more widespread than the horrors of slavery and the Jim Crow era. Irish, Polish, Lithuanian, French, Italian, German, Hungarian, Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Scandinavian, Hispanic, and dozens more—in other words, all of us—have not always loved each other well here in the United States. The erosive power of time has worn away many alienating walls in America, but the history of our troubled tribal ill-will is not pretty and is not over.

**Christ Came Across the Divide**

My hope in this message is that thousands of us at Bethlehem would put to death the remaining corruption in our hearts that thinks or feels or acts with ill-will toward others because of their race or ethnicity. The Bible says, “Put to death what is earthly in you” (Colossians 3:5). And it
mentions “evil desires” which would include the spontaneous desires to avoid others or belittle others or hurt others because of their ethnic difference from us.

The divide could not have been larger between sinful human beings and the infinitely holy Son of God. But Christ did not despise us. He came to us. He loved us. He died in our place to give us life. And he did all this when we were more alien to him than anyone has ever been alien to us. When we feel or think or act with disdain or disrespect or avoidance or exclusion or malice toward a person simply because he or she is of another race or another ethnic group, we are, in effect, saying that Jesus acted in a foolish way toward us. You don’t want to say that.

**Removing a Subtle Self-Justification**

So that’s my goal with this message: that thousands of us at Bethlehem would put to death the remaining corruption in our hearts that thinks or feels or acts with ill-will toward others because of their race or ethnicity. I focus on the heart issue because if we could mortify this sin, if we could root out this remaining corruption, we would be spared many sins and bear much more of the fruit of love.

So here is what I want to do. I want to try to remove one of the subtle self-justifications we use to protect the sinful prejudice in our hearts. Before I tell you what this subtle self-justification is (and it is in all of us, every ethnicity, not just some of us), I want us to focus on a particular part of the text that was read from John 1. It’s not the main point. It is an implication relevant for our situation.

**“Can Anything Good Come Out of Nazareth?”**

In verse 43, Jesus calls Philip to be his disciple. In verse 45, Philip finds Nathanael and says to him, “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” In other words, Philip has believed on Jesus as the Messiah and is eager for Nathanael to know him too. He identifies this one written about by Moses and the prophets by calling him “Jesus of Nazareth.” He identifies Jesus with a town and a group of people who live in that town.

Nazareth was a small town, no larger than two thousand people.¹ The Old Testament is clear that the Messiah would be from Bethlehem of Judea (Micah 5:2). For whatever reason, Nathanael responds to Philip’s announcement in verse 46: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” The answer that Nathanael expects is no. His question amounts to a foregone conclusion: Nothing good can come out of Nazareth.

**What Was Nathanael’s Mistake?**

Nathanael is wrong. He has made a mistake. Jesus does come out of Nazareth, and he is good. Nathanael will have to eat his words very soon. But here’s question: What was the nature of Nathanael’s mistake?

**Sinful Prejudice?**
One way to describe it would be to say that it was sinful prejudice against the people of Nazareth. He had what we call a stereotype of people from Nazareth and he made his judgment about Jesus based on that negative stereotype, and he was wrong. We will come back in a moment and ask what is sinful about that.

**Probability Judgment?**

But there is another way to describe his mistake. One might say, Nathanael did what we all do every day: He made a generalization based on multiple experiences, and biblical evidences, and then formed a probability judgment based on that generalization. “My experience is that the folks of Nazareth are ordinary and even ornery, and I don’t see in the Old Testament that the Messiah can come from Nazareth. Therefore, from those general observations, I think it highly improbable, if not impossible, that this Jesus is the Messiah.”

**Life Depends on Generalizing**

Now this way of thinking—generalizing from the particulars of our experience and drawing probability judgments on that basis—is both inevitable and good. The human brain inevitably works this way. And in fact, our life depends on it working this way. You observe carefully that mushrooms with certain features are poisonous. So when someone offers you one like that, you turn it down. You have never tasted or tested that particular mushroom, but you see it as belonging to the general class that in the past has been poisonous, and so you form a probability judgment and refuse to eat it. Your life depends on not treating this individual mushroom in isolation from your experience of others like it.

But sometimes your judgment seems totally legitimate and proves to be dead wrong. You form a generalization that the I-35 bridge is safe. You have crossed it a thousand times. The state inspects it regularly. But on August 1, 2007, you make the judgment to cross in safety, and it collapses. Your probability judgment was wrong. But it was not a sinful judgment. It was well-warranted.

If I pass a man with certain features and dressed a certain way in this neighborhood, I form the probability judgment that he is Somali and Muslim. I could be wrong. But that is what my brain does with the information that I have.

**Generalizing Can Be Horribly Mistaken**

I see a white car with red lights flashing behind me on 11th Avenue. From all my experience, I form the probability judgment that this is the police and not a criminal faking the lights to trap me. I could be wrong. But I pull over.

O how horribly mistaken we can be. Years ago one of the doctors in our church working the emergency room at Hennepin County Medical Center told me of the most bizarre thing he had ever seen. A man was brought in from deer hunting with an arrow through his back straight through his heart and coming out his chest. One of his own hunting buddies had shot him by
accident. How? He formed a probability judgment that something brown moving in the bushes must be a deer. And he was wrong. Dead wrong.

**Jesus Doesn’t Condemn Generalizing**

Nevertheless, we do and we must think this way. Jesus once commended this way of thinking in a kind of backhanded way. The Pharisees came to him to test him by asking for a sign from heaven. Jesus was not happy about this because he had given them enough evidence, and he knew their request was owing to their hardness of heart. So he said to them in Matthew 16:2-3, “When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’ And in the morning, ‘It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.”

In other words, you are really good at generalizing about the natural world and forming probability judgments from the way a red morning sky precedes a storm and a red evening sky precedes fair weather. You have studied the world, and you are good at this way of thinking. It works. But when it comes to seeing spiritual reality, you are blind. Jesus doesn’t condemn this universal way that the human brain learns from experience and forms probability judgments.

**When Probability Judgment Becomes Sinful Prejudice**

So what about Nathanael? Philip says (John 1:45), “We have found . . . [the Messiah], Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” And Nathanael answers (v. 46), “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Is this a non-sinful, fully warranted probability judgment that proved to be wrong—like judging the I-35 bridge to be safe proved to be wrong; or is Nathanael guilty of sinful prejudice?

I think he is guilty because he doesn’t say, “Can the Messiah come from Nazareth?” He says, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” If his heart were right, gracious, loving, patient, hopeful toward the people of Nazareth, he might have been legitimately skeptical about whether the Messiah would come from Nazareth, but he would probably not have said, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Nathanael has moved from legitimate probability judgments to sinful prejudice. His view of these people is so negative that he sweeps all of them into the stereotype, including Jesus. His reaction is immediate. He does not consider the possibility that Philip might know what he is talking about. He is temporarily blinded by his prejudice.

**Judge Him by His Glory, Not His Group**

Philip doesn’t argue. He simply says in verse 46, “Come and see.” In other words, give this man a chance. Judge him by his glory, not his group. In verse 47, Jesus sees Nathanael coming and says, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” In other words, Jesus acknowledges that Nathanael is honest. He’s not deceitful. What you see is what you get. So he is teachable. Nathanael asks, “How do you know me?” And Jesus says, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.” With that, the stereotype is shattered. Nathanael knows he was wrong. And he changes his mind. Verse 47: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”
The Line Between Probability Judgments and Sinful Prejudice

Now here is the point I want to make: There is a fine line between legitimate probability judgments and sinful prejudice. It is a real line. God sees it even when we don’t. And my concern in this sermon is to plead with you not to let the legitimacy of probability judgments function in your heart as a subtle self-justification for sinful prejudice. That’s my concern.

This is very risky to say what I am saying. It’s risky because there will be some people who hear this, and in the hardness of their heart, they will take my words about generalizing and probability judgments and use them as a cloak for their own prejudices. I know that. But I take that risk because there is another group of people—most of us at Bethlehem, I think—who deep down know we already use this self-justification. We don’t have names for it. We don’t work at it. It just comes naturally, and it feels so legitimate. I am pleading with born-again saints—sinful saints with remaining corruption. I am pleading that you hear my plea and say, “Yes, thank you for helping me see the subtlety of my own sin. I must put this to death.”

Three Indications of a Good Heart

Let me close with three indications of a good heart as we struggle with the line between inevitable generalizations and sinful prejudice—the heart that has received Christ and knows forgiveness and is indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

1. This good heart desires to know people and treat people for who they really are as individuals, not simply as a representative of a class or a group. If this were not so, Jesus could never be recognized for who he really is. Do you desire—really desire—to know people and treat people as individuals not merely as samples of their group?
2. This good heart is willing to take risks to act against negative expectations and belittling stereotypes when dealing with a person. Paul said, “Love believes all things, hopes all things” (1 Corinthians 13:7). I think he meant that love strives to believe and hope for the best, not the worst.
3. This good heart is ready, like Nathanael, to repent quickly and fully, when we have made a mistake and judged someone wrongly.

God, Help Us

Our hearts are deceitful still. And corruption remains. We must put it to death. May the Lord give us absolute honesty with ourselves and him. May he expose every remnant of sinful prejudice. May we never use the legitimacy of generalizing to cloak the sin of prejudice. May the glory of Christ shine in our lives. God, help us.

1 Andreas Kostenberger, John (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), p. 81.