

CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS



"DISTINGUISHING THE THINGS THAT DIFFER"

Sunday Morning, March 18, 1962

Crescent Hill Baptist Church

Louisville, Kentucky

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Scriptural Reference: Philippians 1:9-11.

A little over nine years ago I was formally ordained to the Gospel ministry. As the text for that occasion, the minister selected Paul's prayer for the church in Philippi. He read it this way: "And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and all discernment so that you may distinguish the things that differ; that ye may be sincere and void of offence unto the day of Christ" (Philippians 1:9-10). The phrase that he emphasized was the middle one, about "distinguishing the things that differ." While this is only a marginal reading in the American Revised Version, he felt these words best expressed the thought of the Apostle. And he held them forth both as a personal and as a ministerial goal. "To distinguish the things that differ" - this I must strive to do myself and help others to do the same.

I was deeply impressed by this at the time, but I did not fully understand the profundity of this idea. In the intervening years that understanding has increased, and I have come back again and again to the crucial significance of this goal. Certainly it is relevant to my own experience. Life is at times complex and confusing. It does not always meet me in obvious and clear-cut forms. There are many conflicting opinions and baffling ambiguities. The issues involved - the values at stake - what is right - these are not manifestly apparent in numerous situations in which I find myself. And this plight is certainly not uniquely mine in this day. We all face it to some degree - that bewildering jungle of uncertainty where there are many voices and innumerable alternatives. Our world has in it all kinds of opposites; therefore, it can never be simple. This problem is as old as thought and yet as modern as "the twist" - how to distinguish the things that differ? To perceive reality, and to separate the essential from the apparent, this is a fundamental task and a challenge to the ministry.

This morning I am attempting to live up to that ordination ideal. I shall strive to fulfill both goals by sharing with you what I have discovered in my own experience. The clarification that has come to me I shall pass on to you in hope that it will help.

I would like for you to visualize what we are doing this morning in terms of the image in Paul's prayer. The Greek verb ("dokimazein") here originally referred to the process of detecting counterfeit money. Think of a merchant who sits down at night to examine the proceeds of the day. As he looks at each coin he penetrates deeper than appearance; which are the real pieces of money, and which are not? This is what we shall do. Out of the currency of human experience, I want to show you three pairs of coins that have given me trouble. They look alike, but they are

not. Let me try "to distinguish the things that differ."

The first pair can be called prejudice and conviction. At first glance they appear to be identical. Both are conclusions, usually about some fundamental area of life. Both are deeply felt, rooted in emotion, and part of the very fabric of personality. By sight and sound it is very difficult to tell the difference, but when you examine them thoroughly the difference is radical. It is not found in the end-conclusion, but in the process by which the conclusion is reached. Look at each one closely. A conviction is produced by the honest facing of evidence. A person amasses everything he can find, deals with it as carefully as possible, and on the basis of this and this alone draws his conclusion. However, a prejudice is not formulated in the same way. Some factor other than honest evidence intrudes into the process. This may take any number of forms - ignoring facts, distorting facts, creating facts - but it is always a tampering with the knowing process. Instead of conclusions growing solely out of what is, they are willfully superimposed from without. This distinction roots back to ultimate origins; the opinions may look the same, but they are convictions or prejudices depending on where they started and how they arrived there.

Quite often we forget that moral responsibility extends into the realm of the mind as well as into what we say and do. I was greatly helped recently by reading an essay of William Clifford's entitled "The Ethics of Belief." He reminded me quite forcibly of what might be called "the morality of the mind." We have no right, he affirms, to believe anything on insufficient evidence. He tells a pointed story about a man who operated an emigrant ship in the nineteenth century. Before a group of folks were to set sail for America, the owner had reason to believe that the ship was not sea-worthy. It was old and badly in need of certain repairs. He was advised by the crew to have it overhauled, but this would have involved great expense. Rather than go to this trouble, the owner overcame his doubts by saying to himself: "The ship has made many voyages and weathered other storms. I believe it can stand another trip." So he did nothing, and in his contrived confidence bade the people and the crew farewell. Soon afterward he learned that the ship collapsed at sea and all were lost. He was surely responsible for the death of these people. Where had the error occurred? It can be found in his method of reaching a conclusion. The fact is he had no right to believe what he did on the basis of the evidence before him. He acted in accord with desire, not with fact, and this was tragic in consequence.

Therefore, the distinction between a prejudice and a conviction is ethical through and through. It is not a matter of incidental desirability. How you arrive at your conclusions is a matter of far-reaching impact. John Milton said that "a man may be a heretic in the truth," if he got there by the wrong means. And I would have you see the crucial distinction between these similar coins - prejudice and conviction. Then ask yourself: "How do I reach my conclusions? Does evidence do the creating, or is it created in the process?" Remember: it is always and everywhere wrong to believe anything on insufficient evidence.

The second pair of coins can be called shame and regret. Here we are dealing with the experience that follows any serious breach in the moral code. When one does that which is admittedly wrong and this is found out, the reaction can be exceedingly painful. From the outside it may look like "agony of one piece," but two very different realities may be at work. What I call "shame" is the egocentric

response; what I call "regret" is the relational response.

Let me illustrate the difference by asking you to imagine you are in a courtroom. Two business partners are on trial for fraud. Witness after witness testifies that these men raised money under false pretense and squandered it away illegally. They are found guilty and sentenced to prison. Both of them break down and weep uncontrollably. It appears to be the same experience of grief, but let us look within each man and ask what it is that disturbs him. One says to himself: "Why did I have to get caught? Think of all that I've lost - my freedom, my reputation, my standard of living. I'll never be able to live this down. I'm ruined, devastated, absolutely destroyed." The other is thinking in an altogether different vein: "What have I done? I have violated the very order of moral reality. I have betrayed my Maker, the One who gave me this conscience. I have hurt others - my family is humiliated; my church is embarrassed; old people have lost all their savings. O God, I am overwhelmed by the wrongness of what I've done!" Both men are grieving, but for different reasons. One suffers from shame, the other from regret - and this is quite a distinction. Seeing the consequences of evil in relation to self is one thing; seeing it in relation to God and others is something else. Paul speaks of this distinction in II Corinthians 9:7 when he contrasts "worldly sorrow" and "Godly sorrow." One is a hopeless dead end that leads to destruction - you cannot forgive yourself. The other contains a hopeful possibility - through repentance, restitution can be made.

Here is another crucial distinction - shame and regret. And again I would ask you to examine yourselves. How do you react to wrongs that you have done? I know you grieve, but why? Is it sorrow for yourself, or for what you have done to Him and them?

The last pair of coins can be called indifference and tolerance. Here we are concerned with our attitudes toward that which is different from ourselves. In both cases the appearance is one of acceptance and understanding. There is no violent clash or heated disagreement here. Provocation is carefully avoided at all costs; harmony is to be achieved and maintained above all else.

This approach to difference has been greatly exalted in our country. We pride ourselves in being pluralistic and peaceful at the same time. But the question is bound to be asked: what is the origin of this harmony? Is it true tolerance; that is, a recognition of one's own limitations and the integrity of another who holds an honest difference? Or, is it rather indifference to truth and value? Are we peaceful simply out of apathy, not committed sufficiently enough to anything to get aroused?

I felt this distinction needed to be made during the last presidential election. There were many who claimed to be tolerant and from this stance condemned any mention of "the religious issue." Yet the truth was they were indifferent to its implications. They decried any religious body who "got specific," because to them these cutting edges were unimportant.

I feel we need to rethink this whole area of how differences are related. I certainly do not advocate bigoted exclusiveness where distinctions become impossible barriers. However, neither do I feel that the cutting edge of truth should be ignored. Reality is exclusive as well as inclusive; all truth is of one piece; the

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affirmation of one position is the denial of its opposite. Sometimes in our fear of intolerance we lose sight of the hard shape of truth, and this is bad. Our concern for harmony must not destroy our concern for truth. There can be helpful dialogue between tolerant people who hold real differences. There can be little relationship with an indifference that is deeply committed to nothing.

I realize that I have not even "touched the hem of the garment" of all the ambiguities that face us. But I have two hopes for this sermon. First, that it will challenge you to live "an examined life." In our kind of world, it is imperative that you "distinguish the things that differ." To fail to do so is to become a loser in life. I was once called by a church member who operated a little store. She had accepted some rather large bills from a stranger, and they turned out to be counterfeit. When the sheriff came, I asked him what happened in such a case, and he answered: "The person who cannot recognize counterfeit is the one that loses." This which is true in business is true in life. You must distinguish the things that differ!

The second hope is that these specific examples have helped you. Be on your guard! There is a difference between a prejudice and a conviction...between shame and guilt...between indifference and tolerance. Because of this morning, may you be able to distinguish the difference that is there.

As was once prayed for me, so pray I for you: "That your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and all discernment, so that you may distinguish the things that differ."