

The Goodness of Givenness

Allotted Periods and Boundary Places (Acts 17:26-27)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on May 8, 2022

Introduction

- ❖ In the last few weeks, we've been in a mini-series we're calling *The Goodness of Givenness*. We're trying to draw greater awareness to a dominant idea regarding selfhood – to how people view themselves. Some describe it as expressive individualism. Some call it a belief in the Sovereign Self. **It's essentially the idea that we are our own sovereigns (masters) with the authority to define and design our own self-identities.** And if – on our journey towards self-expression – we have to reject external authorities in order to be true to ourselves, then so be it. That's an authentic expression of courage in the eyes of our culture.
 - **Now this approach to selfhood has so permeated our culture to the point that many would assume that this is just the way it is and always has been.** It's like fish in water. Fish don't notice water or think about water. To them, water is normal because water is everywhere.

- ❖ **So what we're trying to do in this series is to point out the water.** What have we been drinking? What have we been swimming in? Without even noticing. That's why we've crafted a series aimed at analyzing these dominant cultural trends. Because even though you may have grown accustomed to the water – we want to remind Christians that we've been born again by the Spirit. That we're new creations in Christ. **We're like birds created and redeemed to soar in the air, but we seem content to be swimming in the water.**
 - So we've been trying to push back, with the truth of Scripture, against the modern idea of the Sovereign Self. Now so far we've talked about how this would apply to your gender identity and your mortality. Today, we're going to talk about your ethnicity. Just as with your gender and your aging body, your ethnic heritage is a given from God. You didn't choose your where you were born, when you were born, or to whom you were born. You didn't choose your ethnicity. You had no say in that. And so you have no authority or ability to change those realities.

- ❖ **I think what happens, when we don't recognize the givenness of our ethnic heritage, is that we have a tendency to respond with either a sense of shame or superiority.** We might respond to our ethnicity with shame. Rejecting our given ethnic identity. Ashamed of our heritage. Ashamed of the way we were made.
 - Or we could end up responding with superiority. Revering our given ethnic identity to the point of idolatry. Assuming our heritage is somehow greater than others. Not recognizing the commonalities we share with all other peoples made by the same God who gave us the same nature that reflects his image. So I believe talking about the goodness of our givenness as it pertains to ethnicity provides a necessary corrective.
 - Now as I explained earlier, in this series, we're not walking through one biblical passage like we normally do. So we just read a longer portion of Acts 17, but I'm only going to focus on vv26-27. And in so doing, I want to draw out three observations: (1) God made all the different ethnicities, (2) God made all ethnicities from the same source, (3) God made us all different but put within us the same desire.

God Made All the Different Ethnicities

- ❖ Let's begin with an acknowledgement that God made all the different ethnicities present on this earth. That's a particular point that the Apostle Paul emphasizes in his famous sermon in Athens. Now before we look at what he says in Acts 17:26, let me briefly lay out the background context.
 - Paul is on one of his missionary journeys. He and his missionary team were most recently at Thessalonica and Berea where they experienced severe opposition. So Paul was sent on ahead to the city of Athens in hopes of deescalating tensions, while the other brothers wrapped up their ministry in Berea.
 - So while Paul was waiting for his team to join him in Athens, he couldn't help but continue his gospel ministry in this new city. We're told in v17 that he first goes to the synagogue to teach about Jesus and the gospel. But he doesn't limit his ministry to houses of worship. The text says he also reasoned with those, "*in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.*"

- ❖ Now when you read "*marketplace*", don't picture a farmer's market or night market. This is **the Greek agora**. It wasn't just a marketplace of goods. **It was really a marketplace of culture and ideas**. The *agora* was the city's central public square where you'd find temples, law courts, libraries, shops, theaters, galleries, etc. You'd find city officials, judges, philosophers, and of course, merchants and vendors.
 - Now in v18 we're told that some of the teachers of the dominant philosophies of the day were there in the *agora* and were curious about what Paul was teaching. They assume he was a preacher of foreign deities. Jesus and the resurrection – these were concepts they've never heard before.
 - So in v19, they bring him to the ***Areopagus*** (the hill of Ares or Mars Hill). And there he probably stood before a council of the city's intelligentsia. It was like a philosophy review board where they were trying to determine if he should be censored or given a free pass to preach his message.

- ❖ So starting in v22, Paul, while standing in the midst of the *Areopagus*, preaches the gospel in a contextually-strategic way to Gentiles who have no familiarity with the OT and the God of the OT. Now he begins by pointing out their admitted ignorance. Earlier, he had stumbled across an altar with this inscription: To the unknown god (v23). **For being the intellectual capital of the ancient world, it's ironic that – when it comes to the most important truth in all the world – they were ignorant**. They had an altar to an unknown god.
 - Now let's be clear: Paul is not suggesting that they actually do worship the one true God but just without knowing his name. No, his emphasis is on their ignorance. And now – what they can't name or rightly know – Paul will explain.

- ❖ He starts by explaining that **God is the God of creation**. In contrast to Stoic philosophers who had a pantheistic vision of God, Paul stresses that God is *not* a part of creation. He *is* the Creator. "*The God who made the world and everything in it.*" (17:24). Next, he insists that **God is not confined to a temple** where he has to be attended to by priests.

- No, God “*does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.*” (17:25) He is all-sufficient within himself.

- ❖ And then we arrive at v26. **Paul says that God is the maker of all the different ethnicities on earth.** “*And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place.*”
 - Paul states that God made “*every nation of mankind*”. Every *ethnos* of mankind. That Greek word *ethnos* is often translated as nation. But nation, in this context, must not be confused with nation-states that have formal governments and borders.
 - **We’re talking about distinct ethnic people groups. *Ethnos* is where we get the word ethnic(ity).** *Ethnos* is defined – not by politics and borders – but by distinct language and culture. So it’s possible (and common) to find many different *ethnos* within the same country.

- ❖ **So the point Paul is making in v26 is that God made us ethnically different.** As Christians, we don’t explain ethnicity by pointing to evolution. By pointing to random mutations and changes to the genetic code over an unspecified long period of time. That *would* be a secular explanation if there was no God. But if God *is* the God of creation – as Paul stressed in v24 – then the existence of all the different ethnicities on earth are by design.
 - Now we recently studied Genesis 11 and the Tower of Babel. **And we saw how all the different languages – and subsequently all the different ethnolinguistic groups on the earth – were a result of human pride and rebellion.** Genesis 11 began with all the peoples speaking one language and refusing to fill the earth. They built a tower to make a name for themselves. So the LORD came down in judgment, confused their language, and dispersed them over the face of all the earth (Gen 11:9).

- ❖ **So one might assume that God disapproves of (and did not intend for) the diversity in languages and thus the diversity in ethnolinguistic groups.** In our different ethnicities. But you would have to read that implication into the text. Because we’re not told that, apart from Babel, God would *not* have diversified our languages and ethnicities. As if his original plans were to preserve us as one ethnic groups with one language.
 - The story of Scripture seems to suggest that that was never God’s plan. Because when we arrive at **Pentecost in Acts 2** – which everyone recognizes as a reversal of Babel – **we don’t see God forming a new people (the Church) that goes back to speaking one language and representing one ethnicity.** No, just the opposite. We see a diversity of peoples still speaking different languages. And yet miraculously they can all understand each other, and they experience a deep-seated unity in the Spirit.

- ❖ And then at the end of the age, when Christ has returned, **Revelation 7:9** gives us that famous vision of a “*great multitude that no one could number, from every nation [ethnos], from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.*”

- ❖ So if one ethnic group speaking only one language was the original plan all along before human sin and pride ruined it, then you would expect a return to that state when all of creation is redeemed in the end. **So the fact that diversity of ethnicity and language remains for eternity suggests that they were part of God’s plan all along, and Babel just so happened to be the ordained means for how God planned to initiate that diversity.**

- ❖ What’s the takeaway? **It’s that your ethnic identity is a given from your Creator.** Your ethnicity is a part of his good creation. It may not be the most primary aspect of your identity, but your ethnicity is a key aspect of your identity. And you have no reason to deny it or downplay it. **You have no reason to be ashamed of your ethnicity.**
 - This is something that you need to hear. Especially if you grew up as an ethnic minority – particularly if you were vastly outnumbered by the majority in your hometown, neighborhood, school, workplace, or church. **One of the common occurrences of those who grew up very cognizant of the fact that they were an ethnic minority – is the experience of ethnic shame.**

- ❖ **There was a time in my life, growing up here in Houston, where as a child I wished I wasn’t Chinese.** I wanted to be like the rest of my classmates. I went to a private school for my elementary years, and as a young Chinese American I was in the clear minority. So was my girl cousin in the same grade. Well, at this school, there was an annual school performance where each class had to participate in group dance. And in this dance, boys and girls of the same grade were always paired together.
 - Every year, I was paired with my cousin. And I don’t think it was because we were such great dance partners. I remember wishing I wasn’t Chinese so I could dance with some else besides my cousin. **In subtle ways like that, I was regularly reminded that I am different than most of my classmates.** And as a child, those experiences can result in a sense of shame over my given ethnicity. I didn’t see the goodness. I only saw the difference in my face compared to what was presented as normal.

- ❖ **Friends, you may have had similar experiences or ones that were far worse – that were overtly racist and discriminatory.** We, as a people of various ethnicities, grieve with you. I can understand if you have a hard time seeing the goodness of your givenness. I know why you wish you could change your skin, your hair, or your eyes or nose.
 - But hear this: God made from one man every ethnicity of mankind. He determined allotted periods and the boundaries of our dwelling place. That means the Lord predetermined when you would be born and into which family and which country you would be born. **Your ethnic makeup, your cultural and generational experience, your family’s heritage – all of these things were not accidents or the results of chance.** God made you this way by design. And he does all things well. You can be proud of these given aspects of your identity. You *should* be proud of your ethnicity.

God Made All Ethnicities From the Same Source

- ❖ Just watch out for pride. There is a difference. Between being proud of the ethnic heritage you've been given by God and being filled with pride in your ethnic identity that leads to a sense of superiority. This is where our second observation in Acts 17 provides the necessary corrective. That is, God made all ethnicities from the same source.

- ❖ Look back at v26, “*And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth.*” Notice how Paul says that every *ethnos* of mankind comes from one man. **God made every ethnic group out of the same man, the same human ancestor, the same source.** This was an intentional emphasis on Paul's part.
 - He was challenging a popular Athenian attitude. **Out of all the ancient Greek city-states, Athens was known for boasting in being the only truly indigenous Greeks.** In contrast to the Spartans or Corinthians whose ancestors immigrated to the region, Athenians claimed to have sprung up from their native soil. **They carried an air of superiority over other groups.** They were guilty of ethnic pride. In fact, that was characteristic of ancient Greeks in general. **In their eyes, there were only two types of people in the world: Greeks or barbarians.**
 - That's why Paul didn't mince words when preaching to the Athenians. **He directly challenges their sense of ethnic superiority by emphasizing the unity of all mankind.** Athenians, Spartans, Corinthians, barbarians – they're all cut from the same cloth. Every *ethnos* of mankind comes from one man.

- ❖ That man, of course, is Adam. In our Genesis series, we saw how God created all of mankind by starting with one man and one woman – commanding the pair to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. **And from this one couple came all the peoples of the earth, including all the various ethnic groups.**
 - And back in that series, when we preached on race and the *imago dei*, we explained why tracing our common ancestry back to Adam is so vital in the pursuit of ethnic harmony. **Unless every human being is understood to be a descendent of the first human pair created in the image of God – then there is always room for someone to argue that some ethnic groups today might descend from another lineage and thus are not image bearers of God.** And not deserving of the same human rights we enjoy. That's how people have tried to justify the mistreatment, enslavement, or genocide of marginalized peoples and oppressed minority groups.

- ❖ That's why it matters that everyone in human history can trace their lineage back to this first pair. **Our common ancestry undercuts all arguments for racial superiority.** Biblically, there is only one race – the human race. Mankind. Now, as the text says, there are different *ethnos* of mankind. But we're all mankind. **We're all human beings made in the image of God.** That's a pointed message for the Athenians back then, but it's also for us today.

- ❖ **All peoples of all ethnic identities have within themselves the fleshly tendency to view their group as superior to others.** It may not be expressed directly through an overt act of racism. It's usually far more subtle. **It could take the form of simply assuming that the standards and experiences of *our* culture are normative for all others.**
 - If we assume that every young man or woman should pursue higher education and advanced degrees – and conclude that those who choose *not* to are probably unintelligent or lazy – that's taking a fairly consistent norm within Chinese American culture and imposing it on other ethnic groups. If you meet someone with only a high school education and you immediately make negative assumptions about them – that's an expression of ethnic superiority that needs to be recognized and repented of.

- ❖ Friends, this is something all of us need to watch out for. A sense of superiority is not just a danger for those in the ethnic majority. **But whenever you're in a context where you are in the majority (like worshipping in a Chinese heritage church), it's incumbent upon you to be sensitive to those in the ethnic minority.** To be careful that you don't make your cultural distinctives the normative expectations for everyone. And maybe the first step is just learning to recognize that some of the things you think or do – that you assumed everyone thinks and does – is actually a distinctive of your ethnic and cultural heritage. And not something to be imposed on everyone. When you're in the majority, it's harder to see that.

God Made Us All Different but Put Within Us the Same Desire

- ❖ But as Christians, it's our responsibility to see that; to repent of any ethnic pride that we might carry; and to strive to love our neighbor as ourselves. We need to recognize why God made us different and why he placed us all over the face of the earth in different locations and different time periods. That leads to our third observation – God made us all different, but he put within us the same desire for the same pursuit.

- ❖ When Paul stresses in v26 the givenness of our heritage – how God determined the “*allotted periods*” in which we'd live and “*the boundaries*” of where we'd dwell – he's saying that we all come from different periods in history and different ethnic groups. **But we all share a similar origin in Adam and a similar pursuit in life.**
 - Listen to v27, “*that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us.*” **Now in the context of his sermon, Paul's main point was to push back against the polytheism of his audience.** The Greeks were religiously inclusive and had little hesitancy to add more gods to their existing pantheon of gods.
 - But Paul says in v27 that God ordained all the ethnic and cultural differences in our world – not so that various groups would end up devising their own versions of God – but that they might seek after the one true God.

- ❖ The phrase “*feel their way toward him*” can be translated as “groping for him”. It carries the connotation of groping blindly in the dark. **Without Scripture – without the light of special revelation – Gentiles can only grope about or feel around for God.** Like blind men.

- ❖ Paul saw plenty of evidence of that among the Athenians. There was plenty of groping about and feeling around for God in Athens, which explains their rampant idolatry and this statue erected to an unknown god.
 - But that's not just an Athenian problem. That's a universal problem. **God has made us all different and placed us in different ethnic groups, but he put within all of us the same desire – a desire for him!** But sin has corrupted that desire and misdirected our search for God, leading us astray towards idolatry.

- ❖ So that means all of the worldly pursuits of mankind – all of our sinful diversions – can be understood, at the root, as mankind's search for God. **G.K. Chesterton famously said that, "Every man who knocks on the door of a brothel is looking for God."** The immediate pursuit could be to fulfill a fleshly lust; to satisfy an empty feeling; to ease an anxious spirit; to assuage a guilty conscience – but, in the end, what everyone is really groping for is God.
 - But, sadly, the hope that every *ethnos* of mankind would feel their ways towards God and find him is hampered by sin. Sin alienates us from God. **We don't want him and yet something in us – something we can't seem to shake – gropes for God.** That's what explains our rampant idolatry.

- ❖ Now look back at v27. **Paul is suggesting that we can't blame God for this alienation.** Since, remember, he's actually not far from each one of us. We're the ones far from him. If it weren't for our sin separating us, God would be accessible.
 - Paul's argument in his Mars Hill sermon is that mankind's consistent failure to find God – and our resultant idolatry – proves that God can only be found if he initiates and comes to us in the person of Jesus whom he raised from the dead (17:31).

- ❖ Friends, this is the good news of the gospel. God is actually not far from each of us. Because he came to us in the flesh, in the person of Christ. **If you repent of your sins; turn away from the Sovereign Self; and trust in Jesus as your only Master, your only Lord and Savior – you will find God.** You will find him to be merciful, forgiving, patient, and kind. You will find a loving Father.

- ❖ Church, as we come to recognize and respect the goodness of our given ethnicity, this last point reminds us of another given we must not ignore or deny. **That's our given commission to make disciples of all nations** (Mt 28:19). Of all *ethne*. Of all ethnic people groups.
 - Because we believe that there's only one God who made the world and everything in it – and because we believe he made from one man every *ethnos* of mankind – we are convinced that "*there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*" (Acts 4:12)

- ❖ The Athenians looked to Athena. The Ephesians depended on Artemis. Other *ethnos* probably trusted other gods like Zeus, Poseidon, Apollos. But Paul understood those so-called gods to be merely images formed by the art and imagination of man (17:29). So he faithfully carried out his given commission and preached Christ.

- ❖ **Church, the lost among every *ethnos* of mankind are blindly groping about and feeling their way towards God.** What role will you play in fulfilling the Great Commission to make God-loving, compassionate disciples of Jesus Christ among all nations? Some should go. Some should send. All should pray. Because that's a given for all Christians.