

Prejudice to Purity: What Does it Take?

Prejudice can take many forms. We can *preconceive* or *prejudge*, and can be *predisposed* or *partial* to one over the other without the benefit of first-hand *knowledge* or *experience*. Some of these prejudices are as innocent as preferring chocolate ice cream over strawberry without ever trying strawberry. Other prejudices are obviously much more consequential, and dangerous, to others and us. But, we probably all have prejudices of one form or another- things about which we make up our minds (and are therefore dictating our practices) without any real knowledge or experience. Let me illustrate the problem with a bible character about whom the NT actually has very little to say, but there is often “much in little”...

Text: John 1:43-51

Subject: Nathanael's Journey from *Prejudice to Purity*

I. Preliminaries

Jesus had been preaching in Perea, and headed into Galilee, v.43a. In Bethsaida (literally, *house of fishing*; it was apparently a *fishing village* near where the Jordan River enters the Sea of Galilee), Jesus “*found*” Philip, v.43b. Some commentators try to make a point that previous disciples *found* Jesus, vv.35-37; but Jesus *found* Philip. While this *may* be true, the word translated as *found* in v.43 can mean *begin to experience* (thus without reference to who actually instigated the *experience*).

At any rate, it becomes readily apparent that Philip either had been *looking for* the Messiah, or had sufficient knowledge of the Scriptures to *recognize* Him when the opportunity was afforded him, v.45. We don't know what words passed between Jesus and Philip on this occasion, but they were sufficient for Philip to be convinced! The *Law* refers to the five books of Moses- the *Pentateuch*; the *Prophets* referred primarily to *Isaiah*, *Jeremiah*, *Ezekiel*, and *Daniel*, but also included all the rest appearing in the OT. The point is that

Philip was **fully convinced** by his meeting with Jesus that this was the Messiah predicted by the Scriptures.

Philip, naturally excited about the long-awaited fulfillment of these prophecies, *found* (whatever *heurisko* meant in v.43, its meaning is obvious here) Nathanael, v.45.

Philip further relays two important pieces of information regarding Jesus:

- He was “*of Nazareth*,” cf. Matt.2:23; (no OT *literary* prophet predicted Jesus as being from Nazareth; but, either: 1) *oral* prophets did so, and Philip was aware of their prediction; or, 2) the prophecies of Jesus humble and despised background are being referenced by Philip, cf. Ps.22:6-8; *et al*) and,
- He was “*the son of Joseph*,” Isa.11:1; cp.Matt.1:6,16.

These *identifiers* irresistibly pointed Philip to the conclusion that this was the Messiah of whom the Scriptures spoke

II. Nathanael's Prejudice

Nathanael's response to Philip's invitation surely echoed the current thinking of the day. Though not necessarily *mean-spirited*, cf. v.47, he seems to be parroting the common *stereotype*. **There are always reasons for stereotyping and prejudice.** This doesn't mean the reasons are “good” or even “justified,” but there are reasons. Consider some possibilities for Nathanael's apparent *prejudice* and *bigotry*:

- Perhaps he had heard such things all of his life, and thus **environment** played a part. This doesn't make his *prejudice* right because it assumes “how I was raised” to be correct and incapable of error.
- Perhaps he had some previously **experience** with someone from Nazareth that led him to conclusions about the place. This doesn't make his *prejudice* right because it judges everyone by the actions of one (or a few)- and thus is guilty of *small or specific sampling*.

- Perhaps he merely thought that the great Messiah surely could not hail from such a small and insignificant place (especially instead of Jerusalem). Surely the “Savior of Israel” would come from the seat of everything holy and special to the nation- from Jerusalem itself. If this is the basis, his *prejudice* further highlights the **spiritual blindness** of corrupted Israel to its own sin and apostasy.

But before we become too condemning of Nathanael’s *prejudice*, remember Jesus’ words of v.47. So, whatever the reason for the Nathanael’s attitude toward Nazareth, **there was no guile**. *Guile*, it seems here, refers to *deceit* or *treachery* (Greek word *dolos*). What does this mean?

It means Nathanael, though certainly *prejudiced* in his opinion of the Nazarenes, was **honest**- and perhaps outspoken enough to simply say what he thought. There was no malice, craftiness, or subtlety in his thought or word.

Whatever the reason for Nathanael’s **prejudice of skepticism**, it is placed in stark contrast to the **acceptance of faith** of Jesus as the Messiah by Philip!

III. From *Prejudice* to *Purity*

Nathanael’s *prejudice* against Jesus was overcome by one simple, but vital, characteristic: **honesty**.

How do we know Nathanael was *honest*? Jesus’ words of v.47 are not the only answer. Jesus surely had and demonstrated His ability to know someone’s heart- the NT is replete with examples of just this (cf. 1:42,43; 2:4ff; 3:1ff; 4:17), but this assessment came *after the fact* that demonstrated Nathanael’s honesty. How so?

Question: *Where* did the conversation (of vv.47b-51) between Jesus and Nathanael take place?

Remember that Philip had responded to Nathanael’s *prejudice* with the *invitation* to “Come and see,” v.46b. And v.47 begins with “Jesus saw Nathanael coming to Him...”

The point? Nathanael provides important keys to overcoming *prejudice*:

1. **Be Open**. Nathanael, despite his *prejudice*, whatever its source, was willing admit the possibility that he was wrong. Otherwise, he would have refused to go with Philip, cf. 1Cor.10:12; Matt.13:14-16; John 12:37-43.
2. **Be Honest**. Nathanael, despite his *prejudice*, was *without guile*. This moved him to *investigate* and *seek the truth*, rather than just continue in the ignorance of his *prejudice*, 6:41-45; 8:31-47.
3. **Be Fair**. Nathanael, despite his *prejudice*, was willing to *look fairly at the evidence*, vv.47-48. He realized that Jesus possessed *supernatural* abilities to see into his (Nathanael’s) heart, v.47; and *know* the otherwise *unknowable*, v.48. There was just no other *fair* way to explain the evidence before him! (cf. 4:16-19,28-29)
4. **Be Convicted**. Nathanael, despite his *prejudice*, was *open*, *honest*, and *fair*, and was thus *convicted* that Jesus was indeed “*the Son of God; You are the King of Israel*,” v.48! This conclusion was reached by first *knowing the Scriptures* with regarding the prophecies and abilities of the Messiah, and then by correctly *applying the Scriptures* to the evidence before him. It was not “blind faith”- it was **biblical faith**.

IV. Conclusions: *Prejudice* to *Purity*

We all have *prejudices* of one kind or another- whether *racial* or *spiritual* or *whatever*. But, these prejudices can and will be overcome when we follow Nathanael’s lead. If we are (or are willing to become):

- **Open** enough to admit them;
- **Honest** enough to investigate and seek truth;
- **Fair** enough to legitimately assess the evidence; and,
- **Convicted** enough to change.