

Romans 3:22b-24  
Pastor Steve  
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### **There Is No Difference**

Our alarm goes off and we feel the cold right away. We had the heat on right before we went to sleep but without insulation and windows that seal, it's long gone. We shower and get dressed with many layers. Just like every day, we load our backpacks with the basics: a computer, books, snacks, and toilet paper. We double check to make sure we've got enough drinkable water. And then we head down 7 flights of stairs and out of our gated community.

We stop at a tiny window on a busy street and order breakfast. Our stomachs growl as the woman spreads batter on a huge skillet and tell her what we want inside it. In about 2 minutes she finishes and hands us our delicious breakfast that has no point of comparison in America. We hurry and ride the escalator up to the walkway above the busy street below us, take one down the other side, and use our bus cards to get inside the bus stop.

We wait for half an hour and bus after bus comes, but our bus, the 285 must be running late. When it finally does show up we cram on and pack ourselves in with too many other teachers and students. Millions of other people are making their morning commute around us. Some in cars, some on bikes, some on foot. And after about an hour we make it to our university to teach.

After a few hours of teaching, we do it all in reverse. This time when we get off the bus, we head straight to the wet market to see if they have the food we want to make dinner. But they don't. So when dinner time

rolls around we head back down our 7 flights of stairs, the third time in a day. We walk to a restaurant half a block away, eat a bowl full of noodles. And for dessert, we stop to get some kind of ice cream, our personal tradition and comfort food. Not that long ago, life was different.

It's easy to notice differences, isn't it? For the first few months in East Asia, it's what we mostly saw. Differences stuck out. But I don't think it's just in cross cultural settings, differences are easy to see all the time. They're all around us. What language you speak. How you communicate nonverbally. What clothes you wear. Your haircut. The list of differences between people never ends!

And here's why differences are important for us today. Whether you are mission minded or not depends on what you think of differences or the lack of them.

Paul wrote this letter, Romans, to Christians who sometimes struggled with differences. It wasn't political parties or mask vs. no mask. It was about who should be allowed to be Christian. Some Jewish believers had their doubts about Gentiles who had worshipped false gods. Some tried to force Jewish traditions onto the Gentiles before they would be together.

Some thought that no matter how close the Gentiles might get, they'd never truly be a part of God's people.

In this context, God speaks to his people through Paul, "**There is no difference.**"

"No difference? Paul, you must have an eye issue. The differences are obvious! They speak differently. They dress differently. Their food is different. They weren't part of God's Old Testament chosen nation.

Some used to give to support disgusting ritual practices to false gods.” To some Jewish believers, the differences were too much.

How do you feel about differences? You know what you’re supposed to say. But how do you really feel? The devil works hard to use differences to keep people away from Jesus. He tries to do it through you and me. He buries this thought deep within the sinful part of us, “there is a foundational, basic difference between you and an unbeliever.”

He whispers into your ear, “You deserve God’s goodness. You follow what he wants for the most part. Your family is a WELS Lutheran family. You don’t cheat at school or work like other people. You are different from an unbeliever.” He turns us inward and convinces us that we somehow deserve more than others. He blinds us from our own deep need for God’s grace.

But **there is no difference.** All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. You and I have failed and deserve nothing good from God, just like everyone else.

You wanna know what God says to all this? **There is no difference!** This is for everyone! All are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God piles it on. The not guilty verdict comes freely, by his grace, through his payment for us, that came by Jesus. **There is no difference.** It’s not because of us. It’s grace.

Grace was an essential part of our lives in East Asia. We depended on grace. When we needed help ordering food, or paying bills, or getting around, or living, people showed us grace. Friends spent hours every week on us. They bought us meals and let us stay in their houses. Coworkers translated. Strangers guided us down the right roads. It happened all the time. They took care of us when we couldn’t take care

of ourselves. Did we deserve what those people did for us? No. We couldn't pay them back. It was grace.

What's your experience that teaches you about grace? Is it someone who shares their ice cream with you? Is it the love of your parents for you through your teenage years? How about friends that stay with you after you fight? Does it come from the time someone paid for your drink at Starbucks? Is it your church family who promise to be with you no matter what? Does it come from a food pantry or shelter in our community? Take a second and think about that grace experience.

And now think about this. What God tells you here isn't just a reflection of grace. **There is no difference.** Jesus is grace! He sets you free from your sins and your failures. Jesus is something you could never deserve.

And he includes you. There's no room for the devil to convince you of anything else. **There is no difference.** God tells you in one word: all. All fall short and all are justified in Jesus. All means all people. You are included in all. That is certain and solid truth that God wants you to know. Jesus died for all. Jesus died for you. All means **there is no difference.**

Most things we know aren't for all. They're for here and not everywhere.

Our lives where we are now are unique from other people in other places. But I think you know one thing that really is for all. I'll let you hear it first. Coca Cola. Coke is a worldwide brand that just about everyone, everywhere can recognize. If you look it up, officially only two countries don't have coke. Unofficially, they sneak it in too.

Because Coke is such a worldwide thing, I think one of their commercials was genius. It's the one they did in the 70's, the song I'd like to buy the world a coke. Here's the brilliance behind it: they

wanted to plant the idea in your head that everyone wants a Coke. And if you could buy everyone a Coke, all people would be better for it. It was a turning point for Coke to become something all people have in common.

A Coke would be ok but you've got something better to share with all people. You know Jesus and his grace for yourself. Make it a goal to share him with all. **There is no difference**, so do it freely, by grace and not based on who you think deserves it. Each individual person you know and meet is part of all. **There is no difference**. They need Jesus too!

And do it by noticing differences. Get to know people and what makes them unique. Be friends first and earn the right to tell them what you care about. Learn how to talk in way they'll understand. Share your perspective that we all have the same need for help. Share your perspective that we all have that need met in Jesus.

All the differences we experienced in East Asia brought a feeling of adventure. We woke up and we never really knew how that day would go. Some days were adventures we can't forget. Differences can be exciting. But what made us happier was that we knew how most days would end. The doorbell would ring. Every couple minutes there would be a knock at the door. And again and again we'd welcome our friends and study God's Word. One night we dug deep into the Old Testament. Another night, we went through Bible Information Class. On Fridays we'd talk about relationships, our love for each other, and God's love for us. We'd go back to the two things that united us and all people. Two things you get to share too. In a world full of differences, **there is no difference**: Jesus is what we all need and Jesus is what God freely gives us. Amen.