

The Sin Of Partiality

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"My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality." —James 2:1

Back in the 1970s, in Norwalk, California, when I was seeking to be baptized, I was trying to quit smoking. I found that it required that I keep quitting, because I kept finding a cigarette in my hand. It was such an ingrained habit that I did it without thinking. Each time I did, I would leave the rest of the pack some place where I could not recover it.

One night during this time, my family went to the home of some friends for a barbeque. Out of habit, I lit a cigarette and took a drag. As I blew the smoke out, I overheard my mother bragging to our host that I had quit smoking. My mom had been blinded by her partiality toward me and my abilities, and I felt horrible that I had caused her shame and disappointment. Realizing this helped me to quit the disgusting habit for good.

James 2:1 broaches the topic of partiality: "My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality." The King James Version translates this virtually the same way except that instead of "partiality," it reads "respect of persons." In many ways, "respect of persons" is a plainer translation of the Greek, since that is exactly what the apostle is fighting: church members respecting some people over others.

Since we, too, are members of God's church, it is beneficial to take a closer look at this idea of partiality or respect of persons from time to time. This problem frequently rears its ugly head, causing trouble among brethren, so it is good to know what it is and how it manifests itself in a congregation.

Definitions

First, we need to make sure that we understand the full implications of partiality by reviewing some definitions of the term. *Webster's Dictionary* defines *partial* as "biased to one party; inclined to favor one party in a cause, or one side of a question, more than the other; not indifferent." A second meaning emphasizes favoring something "without reason," and a third, "affecting a part only; not general or universal; not total," implies dividing or separating things apart from the whole.

Another tool we can use to get a better grasp of a term is to see how other translations of a particular Bible verse use it. Here are several alternate translations of James 2:1:

International Standard Version: My brothers, do not practice your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ by showing partiality.

New International Version: My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism.

Good News Translation: My friends, as believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, you must never treat people in different ways according to their outward appearance.

James Moffatt Translation: My brothers, as you believe in our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Glory, pay no servile regard to people.

William Barclay Translation: My brothers, you cannot at one and the same time believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ and be a snob.

The New Testament in Modern English: Don't ever attempt, my brothers, to combine snobbery with faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ!

Amplified Bible: My brethren, pay no servile regard to people [show no prejudice, no partiality]. Do not [attempt to] hold [and] practice the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, [the Lord] of Glory, [together with snobbery]!

This term, rendered variously as "partiality," "favoritism," "respect of persons," "servile regard," and "snobbery" in James 2:1, is *prosôpolepsía* in Greek, and it is very close in meaning to the English word *partiality*. Vine's *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* expands on its meaning: "[It is] the fault of one who, when responsible to give judgment, has respect to the position, rank, popularity, or circumstances of men, instead of their intrinsic conditions, preferring the rich and powerful to those who are not so. . . ."

Armed with this understanding, we can explore some of the occasions when partiality occurs. For instance, parents almost always display partiality for their own children over other people's children, which is only natural, but sometimes they favor one of their own children over his or her sibling(s). This is bound to have disastrous results at some point.

People also make economic distinctions, showing a bias for one brand of car, clothing, appliance, or laundry soap. Some are partial to stocks and bonds, while others prefer to invest in land, gold, or commodities. Such preferences are usually just personal opinions due to habit, experience, advertising, or personal recommendation.

Of course, there are racial, social, religious, and political prejudices. We read or hear of such biases frequently. Many of these kinds of partialities can get one in trouble with the group in question, the law, the community, or the church, depending on how radically a person displays them. Even in supposedly free and equal societies, prejudices abound, as they are part of human nature.

Further, intellectual snobbery and elitism abound. Those who have advanced degrees too often look down their noses at those whose educational achievements were stymied by a lack of opportunity or funds or plain bad grades in school. Though it is more rare, a reverse intellectual snobbery has been known to exist among poorly educated Americans from time to time.

In the church, we often witness the "holier than thou" individual who wears his spirituality on his sleeve for all to see. He is quick to criticize others for their shortcomings, drawing away from fellowship with them for their "lack of conversion." Such a person is showing a bias toward his idea of righteousness, which, as we know, is called "self-righteousness."

There are many other kinds of partiality, and if one keeps an eye out for them, they are easy to spot. Respect of persons is part of the underside of the human condition, so it is not surprising that the Bible presents so many illustrations of it.

Biblical Examples

God provides us with dozens of examples of men and women who were partial to various people or things, and along with the examples come important lessons we can learn to avoid their mistakes. Sometimes, a right and godly favoritism is shown—particularly by God Himself—and an unrighteous, human reaction causes a great deal of trouble. Yet, more often, human partiality toward or against others opens the proverbial can of worms. A number of examples come immediately to mind.

»When God accepted Abel's offering but rejected Cain's—favor based on obedience and proper attitude—hatred, jealousy, resentment, and murderous rage resulted (see Genesis 4). This first example is one of godly favor taken badly.

»Through favoritism, Isaac (toward Esau) and Rebecca (toward Jacob) instilled a spirit of competition, strife, and resentment between the two brothers, which led to an even-now ongoing feud, more than 3,500 years later (see Genesis 25 and 27)!

»Jacob's partiality to Rachel was the source of a great deal of hostility and scheming among Jacobs's wives and concubines (see Genesis 30). This also created rivalries between their sons.

»Jacob's favoritism for Joseph made his half-brothers so jealous that they were ready to murder him (see Genesis 37). Instead, they "only" sold him into slavery, telling their father that he had been torn to pieces by a wild beast. This caused the patriarch no end of grief.

»Through his partiality as a father, Eli allowed himself to become complacent to the gross sins of his two sons (see I Samuel 2—4). This led both to calamity for Eli's house and national defeat at the hands of the Philistines.

»King David's partiality blinded his eyes to his children's evil actions, particularly Amnon's rape of his half-sister, Tamar; and Absalom's murder of Amnon and his rebellion against David himself (see II Samuel 13—18). Later, he ignored Adonijah's preparations to take over his throne, in spite of his expressed desire to have Solomon succeed him (see I Kings 1).

»In the story of Esther, Haman's prejudice almost cost the lives of all the Jews living in the Persian Empire (see Esther 3—8). Only an act of great courage and self-sacrifice saved the Jews from annihilation.

The Bible contains a host of other examples that thoroughly demonstrate the insidiousness of this potential sin. It is clear that the effects of partiality are the real problem. A person can have the best of intentions and reasons for his bias—as God's favor certainly is—but the reactions of those not in

favor cause events to spin out of control. At other times, and certainly in most cases of human bias, the respect of persons is clearly wrong from the outset, and the carnal reactions of those it affects just makes matters worse.

Emulating God

In his epistle, the apostle James is combating the practice of showing favoritism toward the wealthy at the expense of poorer brethren. He asks in James 2:4, in doing so, "have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?" Here, he gets to the crux of the problem. As converted children of God, we are supposed to be able to make righteous judgments through the gift of God's Spirit. However, when we show partiality or respect of persons, we have allowed evil thoughts to compromise our judgment.

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary emphasizes that "the sin in question [respect of persons] is peculiarly inconsistent with His 'faith.'" Christ died for all, rich and poor alike, and His doctrine consistently stresses the spiritual equality of believers and unity in a brotherhood of believers. Thus, preferring one person over another because of wealth or status introduces an element of wickedness into Christian relations: division.

Matthew Henry agrees:

The apostle is here reproofing a very corrupt practice. He shows how much mischief there is in the sin of *prosôpolepsía*—*respect of persons*, which seemed to be a very growing evil in the churches of Christ even in those early ages, and which, in these after-times, has sadly corrupted and divided Christian nations and societies.

. . . You who profess to believe the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, which the poorest Christian shall partake of equally with the rich, and to which all worldly glory is but vanity, you should not make men's outward and worldly advantages the measure of your respect. In professing the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, we should not show respect to men, so as to cloud or lessen the glory of our glorious Lord: how ever any may think of it, this is certainly a very heinous sin.

What about God's supposed favoritism for His chosen people? For many centuries, it seemed as if God was partial toward Israel in that only Israelites had an opportunity for salvation. From our perspective today, we know that He was working solely through Israel only for the time being, preparing a people for the coming of His Son in the flesh.

After Jesus' resurrection, God soon opened salvation to the Gentiles too, as related in the story of Cornelius in Acts 10. In verses 34-35 of this chapter, Peter draws a conclusion from his experiences with the vision of the animals let down in a sheet from heaven and with the conversion of the household of Cornelius: "In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him."

In Romans 2:11, speaking of the righteous judgment of God, Paul repeats this point: "For there is no partiality with God," a truth Paul understood from the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 10:17). To the Galatians, the apostle makes the spiritual equality of Christians even more specific: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28; see I Corinthians 12:13; Colossians 3:11).

It is clear that God is not a respecter of persons, giving everyone an equal opportunity for salvation and judging all by the same standards. And certainly, we should want to be like God, respecting every member of the church as an equal brother or sister in Christ.

English playwright George Bernard Shaw wrote, "We educate one another, and we cannot do this if half of us consider the other half not good enough to talk to." The church of God is an educational institution, and every member has a part to play in helping to build up others as they prepare for God's Kingdom. Eliminating biases and prejudices will go a long way toward bringing unity and growth to God's church.