

No Respector of Persons

Leviticus 19:15–18; Acts 10:34–43

What did the apostles preach about? Here, in our New Testament text this morning, is another example of apostolic preaching. We can readily see that the apostle Peter was totally focused on Christ. Wherever he went, he preached Christ. Notice the emphasis in our text: “... preaching peace through *Jesus Christ*—He is Lord of all ... how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit ... who went about doing good ... whom they killed by hanging on a tree. Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly ... who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead.” The emphasis throughout is Christ—Lord of all, God’s Messiah: crucified, risen, the judge of all men, the Savior of all who believe in him. The apostle Peter and the rest of the apostles preached *Christ*—something all true preachers must do as well.

Peter’s short sermon is filled with sound doctrine. Its focus was on God—what he has done to save sinful men through Jesus Christ. Peter did not focus on man and his abilities. He was not trying to give his hearers an emotional boost. He was not like a coach trying to pep up his players before the game, telling them, “You can do it; now get out there and win.” One coach advised other coaches about how to give a pre-game speech: The pre-game speech is all about *energy*. Energy is critical for a team to stay united, to perform at peak levels, to defeat an opposing team. What you are essentially doing during the pre-game speech is infusing energy into your team. Your job as the coach is to bring out their best. The right words said the right way can infuse your players with motivation and energy to wake your team out of its slumber. Rhythm, tempo and inflection all matter. You have to connect. Look your team in the eyes; feel the emotion, power and energy that are created in moments like this.¹

Now that may be good advice for a coach trying to motivate his team. But that is unbecoming for a preacher. The preacher’s job is not to get his people to *try harder* but to *look to Christ*. No amount of trying can save a hell-bound sinner. Only Christ can save. Peter’s sermon pointed to Christ. If a preacher points to self, he is a deceiver, a usurper; he is not faithfully preaching the Bible. A person cannot be saved if he thinks he can save himself. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; he did not come into this world to teach sinners how to save themselves. Peter was a faithful preacher. His preaching left men no other hope but Christ. But what a hope that is! Peter’s sermon ends with the words “Through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission [forgiveness] of sins.”

There is such a lot here that it will take several sermons to get through it, but this morning I want to focus particularly on verse 34, where Peter says, “In truth I

¹ <https://www.captainscoach.com/news/2018/5/4/how-to-give-a-pre-game-speech>

perceive that God shows no *partiality*.” Our Old Testament text has “You shall not be *partial* to the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty.” *Partial* and *partiality* both contain the element *part*. *Partial* means to favor one side above the other, to be biased. *Partiality* is unfair bias, favoritism. The Leviticus text is setting forth a principle for human judges: do not be partial! It is unbecoming for a judge to be political. The Acts text states a characteristic of God himself: God shows no partiality. Human judges are to reflect the character of God: not to be partial, because God himself is not partial.

The title of our sermon this morning is taken from the King James Version: “God is no respecter of persons.” This, in my opinion is preferable to *partial* or *partiality*. After all, God does make choices. He chose Israel; he passed by all the other nations. From all eternity he chose a people to be given to the Son, and the Son undertook the mission to come and save them. So in a sense, God *is* partial. God chooses. But God is no *respecter of persons*. Here, beloved, is an attribute of God, and if you rightly understand it, it will be a great comfort to you. So listen closely.

Now the reason Peter says this should be immediately apparent. He and his companions from Joppa have just journeyed to Caesarea to preach the gospel to the Roman centurion Cornelius and his family and guests. Caesarea was the capital of the Roman province of Judaea, the seat of the Roman governors, and the headquarters of the Roman troops. Caesarea was the great Gentile city of Palestine.² The people who populated Caesarea were uncircumcised Gentiles. Why did a good, observant Jew like Peter go there? He went at God’s command. God had appeared to Cornelius in a vision and told him to send for Peter. He similarly appeared to Peter and challenged him with the statement, “What God has cleansed you must not call common.” He informed Peter that some men were coming, and he was to go with them. So now Peter has entered the home of Cornelius and stands before him. Cornelius has begun the exchange with the words, “we are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you by God.” Then Peter begins his sermon with the words “Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons” (KJV). Here he is, his first time ever preaching to a congregation of Gentiles. He is here at the direct command of God, and it suddenly dawns on him that God is no respecter of persons. Peter is setting forth the character of God, and it is vital that we understand it accurately. What does it mean?

Now this idea of being a respecter of persons is a well-established scriptural truth, found no fewer than 14 times throughout the Bible. In our Old Testament text human judges are told, “Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment: thou shalt not *respect the person* of the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty: but in

² Easton’s Bible Dictionary (Logos Bible Software)

righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbor.” Other Scriptures have, “Ye shall not *respect persons* in judgment; but ye shall hear the small as well as the great; ye shall not be afraid of the face of man; for the judgment is God’s” (Deut. 1:17). “Thou shalt not wrest judgment; thou shalt not *respect persons*, neither take a gift” (Deut. 16:19). Human judges—all of them, not just professing Christians—are to judge justly, as God himself judges. Their judgment is to be just, whether the person who stands before them is rich or poor, small or great. All judicial judgments are to be absolutely in accord with God’s perfect justice. God himself shall judge his people with righteousness.³ God’s wrath burns against human judges who pervert justice.⁴ When King Jehoshaphat (fittingly, his name means *Jehovah judged*) appointed judges in all the fortified cities of Judah, he charged them: “Take heed what ye do: for ye judge not for man, but for the LORD ... Wherefore now let the fear of the LORD be upon you ... for there is no iniquity with the LORD our God, *nor respect of persons*, nor taking of gifts” (2 Chron. 19:6–7). There is no respect of persons with the Lord; therefore, there is to be no respect of persons with human judges. Yet sadly, many human judges fall short of this standard. In a sinful world the wicked often get off scot free, and the righteous are persecuted. But God is just, and judgment day is coming. The righteous will be vindicated. Surely King Jehoshaphat was correct: “there is no iniquity with the LORD ... *nor respect of persons*, nor taking of gifts.” The God of all the earth judges with perfect righteousness. He does not take bribes, and there is no respect of persons with him.

But what exactly is respect of persons? Let us go back to our Old Testament text, which states, “thou shalt not *respect the person* of the poor, nor honor the *person* of the mighty.” In the original Hebrew, the word rendered “person” is literally *face*. The original literally has: “thou shalt not lift up the *face* of the poor, nor honor the *face* of the great.” Hebrew uses concrete expressions like *face* where English uses abstract concepts like *partiality*. The Hebrew word meaning *face* is used well over 2,100 times in the Hebrew Bible, even in contexts that English speakers would find odd. For instance, Hebrew has no word meaning *in front of*. If you want to say, “The tree is in front of the house” in Hebrew, you would say, “The tree is before the face of the house.” That manner of speaking seems strange to us, but it makes perfect sense in Hebrew.

So our Old Testament text has “thou shalt not *respect the person* of the poor,” or more literally, “thou shalt not lift up the *face* of the poor.” What is this saying to human judges, whether public or private? It is saying that human judges should not let a person’s appearance color their judgment. They are not to “lift up the *face* of

³ Ps. 72:2

⁴ Ps. 82:1–2

the poor, nor honor the *face* of the great.” Now the text does not say which of these individuals is the plaintiff or which is the accused. It makes no difference. When we look at a person, we are apt to be influenced by his or her face. We must not do this! We must apply the biblical principles of justice equally to all. In Western jurisprudence we have this idea of a woman with a rag tied around her eyes, holding up the scales of justice. Justice is said to be blind. But that’s only half the story. Justice is to be blind to the faces of the plaintiff and the accuser, but it is *not* to be blind to the eternal principles of justice. Not at all! Rather, justice must at all times have an eye to the law of God. Human judges must never skew justice in favor of a pretty face, a flattering eye, a person’s social standing or political connections. Such perversions of justice will invariably call down the judgment of Almighty God.

At the present moment the trial of former police officer Derek Chauvin is taking place in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Chauvin was the officer who knelt on the neck of George Floyd on May 25 as George Floyd died. As almost every American knows now, Derek Chauvin is white, and George Floyd is black. Following the death of George Floyd there were riots across the U.S. Sadly, the case has become politicized. News outlets, rather than exercising restraint and waiting for the facts to be proven at a trial, have already tried the case and reached a guilty verdict, and in so doing fanned the flames of public outrage.

Patrick Buchanan, citing the autopsy report, summarizes the issue: Chauvin’s defense attorneys will likely make a credible case, backed by evidence, that Floyd’s death was not caused by the knee on his neck but by the battered condition of his heart, the near-lethal dose of fentanyl in his system, and his anxiety and panic at being arrested. The prosecution will counter-claim that Chauvin’s knee on Floyd’s neck, and the two other cops sitting on him, precipitated the stopping of his heart.⁵

The trial is a volatile situation waiting to happen. Any acquittal of Chauvin, or conviction on a lesser charge than murder, could trigger riots like those that plagued the U.S. through the summer of 2020.

Now during the trial the judge and jurors are going to see faces, both black and white. But the word of God requires them—and us all—to form our opinions on the facts of the case in accordance with God’s eternal principles of justice.

Now in our New Testament text the apostle Peter refers to this well-established principle to conclude, as he stands before Cornelius and an entirely Gentile audience, “Of a truth I perceive that God is no *respector of persons*.” The meaning in context is clear: God wants Gentiles to be saved! He wants them in his church! Whereas before, God’s salvation was brought to the Jewish people, now it is to be

⁵ <https://buchanan.org/blog/who-and-what-killed-george-floyd-142867>

proclaimed to all men—Jew and Gentile alike. God is no respecter of persons. God does not look at a face and say, “You are a Jew, you can be saved” and at another face and say, “You are a Gentile, you cannot be saved.” Certainly this is true, and we can all be thankful that this is the case.

When Peter asserts that God is no respecter of persons, he uses a word that occurs just this once in the Bible, a word made up of two elements: *face* and *receiver*, the very same elements that are used in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of our Old Testament text, in Leviticus 19:15.⁶ The meaning is that God does not receive a *face*; this is equivalent to the Hebrew: “Thou shalt not lift up the *face* of the poor, nor honor the *face* of the great.” God does not receive men and women on the basis of their face or any physical characteristic. He is not a respecter of persons.

Now Peter is in no way saying that God had *been* a respecter of persons in the past (when his salvation was limited largely to the Jews), but would no longer be a respecter of persons anymore. The reason God tells his people not to be respecters of persons is because that is his character at all times and has been his character all along. God is not a respecter of persons; therefore, civil judges should not be respecters of persons; therefore, *none of us* should be respecters of persons. This is a permanent, binding moral requirement, because it is a permanent part of God’s character.

Did God choose the Jews because of their pretty faces? Did he choose them because they were a great and noble people and a mighty force to be reckoned with? Did he choose them because of their deserving? Not at all! Moses makes it clear when he says in Deuteronomy 7:7, “The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples.” The Jews were the least in number and the least deserving. Why did the Lord set his love on the patriarch Abraham and his physical and spiritual posterity? The next verse makes that clear: “but because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.” What is the Scripture saying? The Lord set his love on Abraham and his seed because he loved them! That seems to English ears like a tautology, but it is not. What the text is saying is that the reason God loved Abraham and his descendants the Jews is to be found only in the sovereign, electing love of God. But this much is clear: God did not set his sovereign, electing love upon the people of Israel because of any characteristic in themselves; he loved Israel *in spite of* their defects—their *undeserving*. And we can all give thanks for this, for we are *all* undeserving.

⁶ LXX: οὐ λήμψῃ πρόσωπον (thou shalt not receive a face); Gk. προσωπολήπτης (a receiver of a face). Both expressions are derived from πρόσωπον (face) and λαμβάνω (to receive).

God chose Jacob, the younger twin—the deceiver—and passed by Esau, the older and more worthy. And so it is with us. “God has chosen the *foolish* things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the *weak* things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the *base* things of the world and the things which are *despised* God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence” (1 Cor. 1:27–29). Gill comments: “God has chosen the weak things of the world; who cannot boast of their birth and pedigree, of their ancient and illustrious families; have no titles of honor to aggrandize them, nor estates, possessions, and worldly substance to support themselves with.” If the Savior has drawn you to himself by his Spirit, rest assured that it is not because you deserve it, for none of us deserves it. If it were by merit, it would not be by grace.

Many of us at one time or another have suffered feelings of inadequacy or inferiority. Other people seemed to be faster, smarter, wittier, prettier, more successful, more accomplished, more athletic, handsomer, more popular, more competent. It seemed as though we did not measure up. I remember elementary school recess, when we would play a game. The two most athletic guys in the class—never me!—were appointed to choose teams. It was always so embarrassing to be one of the last ones chosen. There were only a few kids left, and as it got down to the last two, I could hear the kids shout to the team captain: “Choose *him*” (the other guy!). Yet all of us are utterly inadequate to merit God’s salvation! God never would have chosen us if he had been a respecter of persons! “We are *all* as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags” (Isa. 64:6). We were dead in trespasses and sins; we were children of disobedience, followers of the devil; we were by nature the children of wrath (Eph. 2:1–3). We didn’t deserve salvation.

If we were to deserve salvation, it would have to be on the basis that we had perfectly kept every requirement of God’s law—both outwardly and inwardly. For example, we loved God with a perfect love and desire his glory above all else. We keep his commandments out of perfect love for God and not out of a desire for man’s commendation or approval. I worship God because I love him, not because staying home would hurt someone’s feelings or cause him to look down on me. Obviously, I could not, for even a split second, think about breaking any of God’s moral laws as long as no one was looking, or if I thought I could get away with it. Jesus must at all times and in all situations be my absolute Lord and master. I must *never* give place to the devil. According to Scripture, the only one who ever perfectly measured up to that perfect standard is the Lord Jesus Christ. “If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, *Jesus Christ the righteous*” (1 John 2:1). The Lord Jesus is the only one in Scripture so described. He, truly, is the righteous one, and the only way to be saved is to possess his perfect righteousness by faith.

God does not lift up the face of the “rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief.” As God told Samuel, “The Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7). A man might have a poker face; he might be able to tell a believable lie with a perfectly straight face. A respecter of persons might be taken in by the con. But the Lord certainly will not be taken in. Too many people have been taken in by a smooth-talking con artist. The biggest con artist of all is the devil. The one who came to Eve and persuaded her to doubt God would like *us* to doubt God too. “Hath God said?” is the root of all the devil’s lies.

The devil wants you to think that you are not that bad, that God grades on the curve, and you will make it into heaven. But that is not the testimony of Scripture. “All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God”—“all,” even you. We all fall short—all except Jesus Christ the righteous. God “made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21).

Sinner, your only hope is the mercy of Christ. Believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead. Confess him with your mouth: “He is my King, my Lord, my Savior.” Then live for him, every moment of every day. Amen.

In this text, then, we are taught a very precious characteristic of our Father God. Every one of us ought to be profoundly grateful for this aspect of God’s character.