

Respect of Persons

Leviticus 19:11–18, James 2:1–12

Every person's face is different. Isn't that amazing? There are now over seven billion humans on earth, and everybody's face is different. God is the great Creator—infinately creative—and no two creations are exactly the same. No two snowflakes are identical, and no two faces are identical. Even identical twins' faces are different. When I was youth director years ago in a large church in suburban Detroit, there was a family that had identical twins. When the twins first joined my youth group I had difficulty telling them apart. They dressed the same and had similar mannerisms. I asked their mother how she could tell them apart and she insisted they looked different. I just had to learn how to tell them apart—no easy task.

The human face is very important. It was created by God to reveal his image in man. And in our Old and New Testament texts this afternoon there are references to faces. In the original Hebrew our Old Testament literally says, “thou shalt not lift up the *face* of the poor.” Our New Testament text literally says, “if you are lifting up a *face*, you are working sin.”

The King James version has, for our Old Testament text, “thou shalt not respect the *person* of the poor,” and for our New Testament text, “if ye have respect to *persons*, ye commit sin.” *Person* here means something akin to *persona*: the aspect of someone's character that is presented to or perceived by others. What is presented to others? Essentially the face. We generally cover other parts of the body from view but expose our face. It is the face—and especially the eyes—that reveals to other people only a little bit of what is going on in the heart. The face might reveal clues to a careful observer that a person is lying. On the other hand, a gambler might develop a “poker face” which hides his reaction on seeing a card that he might have just been dealt, or hides the moves he might be planning to make, from other players. As humans living in a fallen world where evil people might be intending to take advantage of us, it is good to develop the art of reading faces.

If another person becomes bored listening to me, I can usually tell by facial expressions—he or she might begin staring off into the distance, for instance. Or a liar may have trouble looking me right in the eye and may be trying to avert my gaze. On the other hand, if one of my grandchildren looks at me adoringly, I am sure to pick up on that, too!

In this morning's sermon I cited the Old Testament dictum, “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). As a fallible human creature I may misread a face, but *God* never does; as a matter of fact, he alone has the ability to perfectly read the thoughts and intents of a man's heart. According to the book of Hebrews,

the Λόγος of God—that is, the Lord Jesus Christ—alone is “a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.” Make no mistake! The divine Christ alone can perfectly discern not only what a person is thinking at any given moment, but also the “intents” of what he may be planning to do in the future.

This is why so-called “hate crime” laws are so wicked and vile. For one thing, there is no such thing as a “love crime”; crime is crime; it is always an act of aggression against another person. Did the 15-year-old shooter at Oxford High School the other day *hate* his victims or just shoot innocent people randomly? It really makes no difference; his victims are either dead or wounded; they and their families are scarred for life from his hateful deed.

In order to prove a “hate crime” involves perfectly understanding the deepest thoughts of the human heart—something that no mere human, even a judge in a black robe—can do. If I were ever on a jury deciding a “hate crime” case—which will never happen because I am so vocal about this—I would vote to invalidate the hate-crime law itself, because the law itself is unjust and ought to be repealed by a biblically-informed society. There is no scriptural example of a hate-crime law—none! And rightly so. Man can only look at the face—the outward appearance. Only the Lord can correctly judge the heart, which he will infallibly do when all men, women and children stand before him at the last day.

Remember that our Old Testament literally says, “thou shalt not lift up the *face* of the poor.” Our New Testament text literally says, “if ye are lifting up a *face*, ye are working sin.” Newer translations use “partiality” or “partial.” The *New Living Translation* has “Do not twist justice in legal matters by favoring the poor or being partial to the rich and powerful. Always judge people fairly.” This is good advice, as far as it goes, but consider this: human judges are called upon to judge people fairly because *God himself judges people fairly*. God does not have one standard for himself and another for humans. The Ten Commandments—in fact, all the moral law—are expressions of the perfect character of God. God’s law requires purity because God himself is pure. God’s law requires a high regard for life because God himself has a high regard for life. God’s law requires that we not bear false witness because God himself does not bear false witness; in fact, God “cannot lie” (Tit. 1:2).

So God tells us not to respect persons, that is, lift up the face of a person as we judge and form opinions about other people. This means that we must not allow ourselves to be misled by a pretty face, show partiality to someone on the basis of physical characteristics. This teaching is widespread in Scripture. There are at least 13 occurrences, according to my count. Let’s take a moment to look at all of them.

Be sure to write down these references so you can look them up later. All references are from the King James Version (KJV).

Lev. 19:15 – Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment: thou shalt not respect the person (פְּנֵי) of the poor, nor honor the person (פְּנֵי) of the mighty: but in righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbor.

Deut. 1:17 – Ye shall not respect persons (פְּנֵי) 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: and the cause that is too hard for you, bring it unto me, and I will hear it.

Deut. 16:19 – Thou shalt not wrest judgment; thou shalt not respect persons (פְּנֵי), neither take a gift: for a gift doth blind the eyes of the wise, and pervert the words of the righteous.

2 Sam. 14:14 – For we must needs die, and are as water spilt on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again; neither doth God respect any person (שֹׁנֵי): yet doth he devise means, that his banished be not expelled from him.

2 Chron. 19:7 – Wherefore now let the fear of the LORD be upon you; take heed and do it: for there is no iniquity with the LORD our God, nor respect of persons (פְּנֵי), nor taking of gifts.

Prov. 24:23 – These things also belong to the wise. It is not good to have respect of persons (פְּנֵי) in judgment.

Prov. 28:21 – To have respect of persons (פְּנֵי) is not good: for for a piece of bread that man will transgress.

Rom. 2:11 – For there is no respect of persons (προσωποληψία) with God.

Eph. 6:9 – And, ye masters, do the same things unto them, forbearing threatening: knowing that your Master also is in heaven; neither is there respect of persons (προσωποληψία) with him.

Col. 3:25 – But he that doeth wrong shall receive for the wrong which he hath done: and there is no respect of persons (προσωποληψία).

Jas. 2:1 – My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons (προσωποληψία).

Jas. 2:9 – But if ye have respect to persons (προσωπολημπτέω), ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors.

1 Pet. 1:17 – And if ye call on the Father, who without respect of persons (ἀπροσωπολήπτως) judgeth according to every man's work, pass the time of your sojourning here in fear.

Note particularly that four of the 13 references refer specifically to God: Romans 2:11 categorically says, “there is no respect of persons (προσωποληψία) with God.” If this is translated “there is no partiality with God,” then there is a problem. *Partiality* is defined as *unfair bias in favor of one thing or person compared with another; favoritism*. Surely there is no *unfair* bias with God, for

everything he does is true and right and just, but it is true that God does favor some over others. Out of the mass of undeserving sinners in eternity past God chose *some* to everlasting life, and he passed by others. God “chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love” (Eph. 1:3). He did not choose everyone. He chose his elect. Now all of us were equally undeserving. He did not choose any of us because we were brighter, or wittier, or prettier, or nicer. But he did choose some, and pass by others. Some might say that he was partial—partial *toward* his elect and partial *against* the reprobate (defined in the New Oxford American Dictionary as “[in Calvinism] a sinner who is not of the elect and is predestined to damnation”—regarded as an archaic use). (The word *reprobate* is used seven times in the KJV; it is a translation of ἀδόκιμος, meaning *not standing the test*; *reprobate* is not used in the NKJV or ESV.)

God is a judge; his judgments are perfect. Consider these Scriptures:

Ps. 75:7 – But God is the *judge*: he putteth down one, and setteth up another.

Ps. 82:8 – Arise, O God, *judge* the earth: for thou shalt inherit all nations.

Eccl. 3:17 – I said in mine heart, God shall *judge* the righteous and the wicked: for there is a time there for every purpose and for every work.

Acts 10:42 – And he commanded us to preach unto the people, and to testify that it is he which was ordained of God to be the *Judge* of quick and dead.

Rom 2:16 – In the day when God shall *judge* the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to my gospel.

2Ti 4:1 – I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall *judge* the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom;

Heb 12:23 – To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the *Judge* of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect.

Yes, God does judge, but he never judges on the basis of a pretty face. He never chooses the deserving. All fallen sons and daughters of Adam are undeserving. He never lifts up the face of either the poor or the rich. He is no respecter of persons (faces).

Facial recognition software has been in use for some years, particularly by law enforcement. In some parts of the world it is also being used to facilitate secure transactions, validate identity at ATMs, and identify people getting onto airplanes and public transit. It is even used by large churches to keep track of which members are in attendance at services. But until recently I had not used facial recognition software myself. Then I got a new phone and was amazed to find out that it opens up by recognizing my face—even in the dark. My phone will open for me, but not for anybody else—pretty cool. I assume it is also transmitting images of my face to some secret government database. Maybe it is also surreptitiously

taking photographs of me while I type my sermon. This past week I discovered something else. I do not like to wear face masks, and I avoid places that require face masks. I can choose another doctor's office but I cannot choose another care home if I want to see my mother-in-law. So I reluctantly put on a face mask, telling the nurse on duty that I would do this only for my mother-in-law. And when I did that, then my phone wouldn't open. It would not recognize my face.

The Bible teaches that it is not consistent with a profession of Christ to regard the rich, and to despise the poor brethren. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you." Every member of the church is important. Amen.