

The Believer's Lifestyle: **WHO MATTERS TO GOD?**

By Andrew Wilson
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Deuteronomy 10:12-13, 16-19
Luke 23:32-34, 39-43

Paul declares in his letter to the Romans:

"...God does not show favoritism" [Romans 2:11].

James, Jesus' brother, rebukes the church for giving special attention and honor to rich people, and for treating poor people as second-class citizens. He writes:

"...as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism" [James 2:1].

God doesn't show favoritism and neither should we. That's Paul's and James' message. The word that is usually translated as "favoritism" in Paul's and James' letters is *prosopolempsia*. Showing no *prosopolempsia* means showing no partiality. Paul and James are rebuking people in the church whose judgments of others are swayed by superficial things such as rank or popularity. They're urging Christians to see others as God sees them, and to judge each person only according to the things that are valuable to him.

This teaching has a certain appeal for us as Americans. "Favoritism" and "partiality" aren't American values. Most of us believe in the idea that all people are equal before God. We believe the poor ought to be given every chance to succeed. And although various forms of bigotry still plague our society, most of us abhor the practice of discriminating against others on the basis of their race, gender, religion or sexual orientation.

If you were shopping at one of our local groceries and you saw a sign above the door that read "No Mexicans Allowed" or "No Jews Allowed," you'd probably be stunned. Many of you would actively protest the policy, and pressure the company either to change the policy or leave town. At the very least you'd stop shopping there.

The point is that, when it comes to gross displays of bigotry, most of us are quick to defend the underdog. We don't need to be told by community activists that the Bill of Rights applies to people of all races and creeds. We get that.

What many of us *don't* get, it seems to me, is that a spirit of favoritism and partiality still plagues our society and our church *despite* our progressive attitudes about problems such as racism and sexism. And in this regard, both liberals and conservatives in America have shown a real lack of leadership.

Many liberals seem to believe we still live in the 1960s, and that we've made no progress as a nation in the area of basic human rights. The reality is that we *have* made dramatic progress in the fight against bigotry and exclusionary practices. Yet what we've found is that, despite these victories, our society is still deeply divided. Our political landscape is now cluttered with special interest groups – groups that, seemingly, will say or do anything to advance the interests of the few at the expense of the many. Many of our most prominent leaders – both on the left and the right – maintain their power not by bringing people together, but by spreading fear and sowing seeds of discord.

Now that I've offended you liberals, let's talk about cluelessness on the right. Many conservatives seem to believe that, having won the important legal battles to ensure basic rights for minorities, and having secured a basic safety net for the poor and disabled, our main goal now should be simply to grow our economy. The reality is that the American economy is booming, and many poor people are being lifted out of poverty as a result. And certainly we should celebrate that fact.

Yet what we've found is that, as our wealth has grown, our civic spirit has declined. Americans in general seem more and more preoccupied with personal success and less and less determined to help those who are less fortunate. Moreover, few of our cultural and political leaders are even talking about these problems.

Now we're getting closer to what Paul and James are referring to when they speak of *prosopelempsia*, or the spirit of favoritism. They're not talking about legal rights for minorities or a woman's right to vote. Rather, they're pointing to the basic human tendency to favor one person or group over another simply because they happen to be rich, or powerful or highly educated, or influential, or good looking. Or because they happen to resemble *us*.

Measured by this yardstick, it seems to me that we're all guilty of showing favoritism.

We do it when we complain to our friends about the take-over of our neighborhoods and schools by ethnic minorities.

We do it when we get annoyed with poor people, or we act as though we were superior to them by virtue of our achievements.

We do it when we tell jokes about homosexuals, or we exclude them from our fellowship. Many church people are particularly hard-hearted in this regard. Some Christians don't even try to hide their disdain for gays and lesbians.

We show favoritism also when we look contemptuously at those who struggle in areas that aren't a problem for us. Maybe it's someone who's overweight. Maybe it's someone who smokes or drinks too much. Maybe it's someone who doesn't share our work ethic.

Favoritism rears its head whenever we fail to share Christ's love with others simply because we think they haven't earned it.

What the Bible teaches us is that God shows no favoritism – he loves *all* people – and that being a disciple of Jesus means learning to practice the same kind of all-encompassing love.

In Jesus' day there were plenty of religious people who had a very different picture of God. They thought God favored the people who followed the law and spurned the people who didn't. Jesus challenged this view of God and his love. He told the leaders of the temple, who separated themselves from common people, that they were self-righteous hypocrites. He spent time with tax collectors, drunkards, hookers and other social outcasts. When people complained and said: "Hey, don't you know that those people are filthy, disgusting sinners?"

Jesus responded: "I didn't come to help people who have their act together and don't think they need God. I've come to help those who are lost and desperate, and have no where else to turn."

Jesus' lack of favoritism and all-encompassing love were on display even in the moment of his death. According to Luke, Jesus was crucified with two criminals. The first criminal insulted Jesus and basically told him that his failure to escape death showed that he wasn't really the Christ. The second criminal reprimanded the first. "Don't you fear God?" he asked. "We've been justly condemned for our crimes, but this man is innocent of the charges against him." Then he called out to Jesus: "Remember me when you come into your kingdom" [Luke 23:42].

If ever there was a time when we might expect God to condemn instead of forgive it was in that moment. That unnamed criminal had done nothing to earn God's favor. What he deserved, and what he fully expected to receive, was judgment leading to destruction. But Jesus said to him: "...today you will be with me in paradise" [Luke 23:43].

When Paul says that God shows no favoritism, what he means is that the way back to God is never closed. Regardless of how much evil we've done, regardless of how many commandments we've broken, Christ stands ready to receive us when we repent of our wrong-doing and reach out to him in faith.

Many religious people today have trouble accepting the idea that God loves all people. It's hard for them to believe that he doesn't take pleasure in the destruction of abortionists, drug traffickers and fanatical Islamic terrorists. It doesn't make sense to them that God could love the criminal and hate the crime. But that's exactly what God does. With Fatherly love in his heart, he says to us, and to every other sinner: "All the evil and hatred and resentment you're carrying with you are killing you. Let it all go – give it to Christ, and let it die with him on the cross – and receive the gift of eternal life."

Some Christians see in Christ's call to love their neighbors a mandate to try to change them. Of course there are times when it's appropriate for us to admonish others, or to try to steer them down a particular path. Parents have a duty to discipline their children. Bosses have a duty to correct those they supervise. Teachers have a duty to offer constructive criticism of their students' work.

But what we need to recognize, through it all, is that it isn't our job to change people. People change – they mature and grow – only because they *choose* to do so and because God *enables* them to do so.

When we take the attitude that we're indispensable to the process of another person's salvation, all kinds of things can go wrong. For example, if the person follows our lead, we'll probably end up taking credit for work we didn't really do. On the other hand, if the person fails to listen to us, we'll probably end up getting angry and frustrated. We might even wind up condemning the person as a worthless reprobate.

When we issue judgments against others, what we're saying is that no one, not even God, can save them. But God's love is deep and his search for the lost is relentless. He loves the one lost sheep on the hillside as much as he loves the 99 resting in his sheepfold. Therefore, we should never underestimate the redeeming power of his grace. We should never write off others as though their situations were hopeless. No one – not even the worst of sinners – is so far gone that God can't save her.

Favoritism is the fruit of a judgmental spirit. Favoritism occurs in the church when people adopt a critical and unforgiving attitude. Remember Lucy in the *Peanuts* comic strip? Lucy is so

memorable because she represents the judgmental person we're constantly struggling not to become.

In one strip Linus has his security blanket round his neck and his thumb in his mouth, but he's troubled. He asks Lucy, who's sitting next to him: "Why are you so anxious to criticize me?"

And Lucy's response is typical. "I just think I have a knack for seeing other people's faults."

Exasperated, Linus throws up his hands and asks: "What about your *own* faults?"

And Lucy explains: "I have a knack for overlooking them."

Anyone who sets out on a holy crusade to change another person is going to face many pitfalls. And that goes double if the holy reformer happens to be a Christian. We can easily convince ourselves that we want only what's best for the other person. But it's so easy for us, as we work our reform strategy, to adopt a superior attitude. It's so easy for us to become fixated on the other person's failures, and to overlook our own.

Someone once observed, very wisely, that "faults are like the headlights of a car: those of others seem more glaring than your own." When we find ourselves looking down the illegal immigrant washing our dishes, it helps to remember that Jesus came to take away her sins. And when we find ourselves getting angry with the kid who just keyed our car, it helps to remember that he's created in the very image of God. When we go to the DMV, to the dentist, to McDonald's, to school, or to work, it helps to remember that everyone we see – everyone with whom we lock eyes – matters to God.

Our minds are filled these days with thoughts of our new enemies: Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda, the Taliban, Mahamoud Ahmadinejad and Kim Jong-Il. As we close today, I want to challenge you with a question: If even our enemies matter to God, then how are we to relate to them?

Though our country today is deeply divided over the war in Iraq, most Americans generally support what we now call the War on Terror. The justification that is usually given for the war is simply that the people we're fighting are evil, and therefore don't deserve to live. It's common to hear people speak of terrorists as monsters or crazed beasts. Some Christians support the war because they think God has appointed our nation to deliver his justice to Moslem extremists.

Jesus told us we should love our enemies and pray for them. We're to love them because God loves them. On the basis of that teaching, I've come to the conclusion that there can only be one legitimate reason for America to fight a War on Terror, and that is to protect innocent people.

In the context of the 9-11 attacks, loving our enemies means, at the very least, recognizing their humanity. Of course we must condemn the actions of all terrorists in the strongest possible language. Furthermore, I believe we have to confront the sponsors of terrorism, and seek to eradicate the perpetrators as long they pose a credible threat to our nation. But, as Christians, we have to resist the temptation to curse them or to speak of them as though they were insects instead of men and women created in God's image. Those who justify dropping bombs on the grounds that our enemies are irredeemably evil have stepped way over the line that has been drawn for us by the Lord.

Following the Lord's example, God calls us to love the sinner and hate the sin. To those who haven't experienced God's mercy and grace, it doesn't make sense that we might love the soul of a person while at the same time disapproving of what that person may say or do. But that's exactly what God does with us. He hates our sin and loves – *us*.

God doesn't play favorites and neither should we. There are no forgotten sheep. Every person matters to God. Every person seated with in this sanctuary, and every person you'll meet this week, reflects the face of Jesus. And as his disciples, we're called to love them as God loves them.

LET US PRAY:

Lord Jesus, thank you for loving us even that love isn't returned. Thank you for seeking us when we wander from you, and embracing us when we come back.

This open table where we now gather remind us that you don't show favoritism. All who seek your grace are welcome. Take away from us the spirit of criticism and faultfinding. Teach us to love all people, even those who seek to do us harm. Help us to be gentle and kind, but also wise and discerning, so that others will see you at work in our lives. We pray in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.