

Respect of Persons

H.E. Phillips

I get that feeling of disgust mingled with anger when I observe some brother in the Lord being mistreated, ignored, even slandered, and for no other reason than that he is poor, uninfluential, or less educated than others. Every time I see or hear of this I think of the scene the Lord gave of the judgment in Matthew 25. He said the treatment one gives to "one of the least of these my brethren" is the treatment given to the Lord. You just remember this: what you do (or do not do) to the brethren you do to the Lord.

That feeling of disgust becomes more loathsome when I see some brother unduly honored, praised and bowed to as if he were an emperor, and for no reason other than that he is rich, popular, highly educated academic-wise, and socially or politically powerful. The political maneuvering, financial mergers, and social alliances are avenues by which many seek to have others respect their persons, or they seek to express their respect of the persons of others.

I can imagine someone saying, "That writer is trying to make himself a champion of the poor and less fortunate among brethren" or "He is envious and jealous of those who are more fortunate and more popular than he." Nothing is further from the truth on both counts. There is no special virtue and purity, or literacy, and there is no special evil and impurity about wealth, fame and academic attainment. It is as disgusting to me to see the poor and less educated look with disdain upon those who have worked hard to acquire wealth and education as it is in reverse. The extremes in wealth, popularity, education, etc., have nothing to do with how one brother ought to treat another. This is the very point of this lesson. Men ought not to be judged and respected upon their persons, but upon what their lives are as measured by the word of God.

Let me give the reason why I abhor the abuse of some and the unearned praise and honor of others. To show respect of persons means to accept (or reject) one upon the basis of who he is or what he has. It means "acceptance of faces" or persons; to receive or reject one on appearance or recognition of his person alone.

The matter of showing "respect of persons" is mentioned nine times in the New Testament: five times of God and four times of men. In each of the five passages relating to God, it is affirmed that He is NO respecter of persons and the areas where He does not respect persons are given. But in the four verses where showing "respect of persons" relates to man, they show the very nature of the sin and where it leads. Three verses are found in James 2 and one in Jude. This respect of persons is unjust and unfair in the measurement of a man; it makes man a judge of others by his own standard and ignores God's standard of right and wrong, and the word of God says it is sinful. This pits the truth against the person. If I respect the person, I tend to "bend" the truth to make it conform to the person. But if I honor God and His truth, I will strive to persuade the person to conform to truth. He then deserves respect, not because of his person, but because of his obedience to the truth.

We are taught to be like Christ. All who believe the Bible believe God to be perfect in every sense. If God does not respect the person of any man, it must right, merciful, just, holy, and Christ like to show respect to no man's person. If we learn to do this the law of the Lord will be far more

meaningful to us. The law of the Lord will become the standard of judgment and not the person of any man.

First, God respects the person of no man in accepting those who become His children. The Jews had the notion that they were favored by God because of their nationality, but God showed Peter and the six Jews with him when they went to the house of Cornelius that "God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him" (Acts 10:34-35). Every man is not accepted by the Lord, but it is not on the basis of his person that he is rejected; it is because of his disobedience. Peter said the truth is that "God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation" (Jew and Gentile) "he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him." It is what a man does and not who he is that determines whether he is accepted with God.

Second, God respects the person of no man when sin is involved. The righteous judgment of God, "who will render to every man according to his deeds" (Rom. 2:6), applies equally to "the Jew first, and also to the Gentile" (Rom2: 9-10). With God sin is sin whether it be by Jew or Gentile. "For there is no respect of persons with God. For as many as have sinned without law shall also perish without law: and as many as have sinned in the law shall be judged by the law" (Rom. 2:11-12). If you transgress the law of the Lord, He will not stop to check whether you are a Jew or Gentile, rich or poor, popular or unknown, ruler or servant, scholar or unlettered. You will be a sinner whoever you are because God respects the person of no man when sin is involved.

Third, God will render good to those who do good without respect of persons. The poorest, least esteemed man on earth will receive good from the Lord for the good he has done, and it will be by the same standard and on the same principle that the most esteemed on earth will receive it. "Knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free . . . neither is there respect of persons with him" (Eph. 6:8-9). Whatever good **any man doeth** he will receive of the Lord, and the person of that man has nothing to do with it. It is what the man does, not who he is, that counts with God.

Fourth, God will render just punishment to all who do wrong without respect of persons. "Knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ. But he that doeth wrong shall receive for the wrong which he hath done: and there is no respect of persons" (Col. 3:24-25). The most noted evangelist or the most highly esteemed bishop in the Lord's church will receive the same punishment for his wrong as any other person on the face of the earth. His position or his honor will in no wise affect God in dealing out the just wages for his wrongdoing.

Fifth, the judgment of God toward every man will be without respect of persons. "But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy. And if ye call on the Father, who without respect of persons judgeth according to every man's work, pass the time of your sojourning here in fear" (1 Peter 1:15-17).

Now compare this with man's dealing with man. "My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons. For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; and ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the

poor, Stand thou here, or sit here under my footstool: are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts? ... But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors" (James 2:1-4,9).

These verses picture the abominable condition so evident among many brethren today. A well-known evangelist will come into an assembly and some brethren will act as if Christ himself has arrived. They must honor him with special eulogies and favors. They do the same for a very rich man, a famous political figure, or a noted entertainer. But these same brethren will hardly speak to an unknown, poor man who is "just a faithful Christian." If you think I am saying that all well-known evangelists, rich brethren, and brethren who have become successful in their fields of endeavor should be ignored and the poor honored, you have missed the point of this study. The word of God teaches that we should treat the rich and poor alike. We should honor the brethren -all brethren, regardless of who they are or what they have. They should be respected for what they have done and are doing of the living word of God. This is the way God deals with all of us.

We show respect of persons for personal advantage. It is a selfish move. We tend to favor the wealthy because we hope to profit by it. We run after the influential because we expect to enhance our own influence and popularity by the association. We associate with the powerful because we desire to be secure. What can the poor, weak and unknown do for me? Nothing! Why then should I give him any special attention? This is the root of the whole matter. There is no love for the brethren, and, consequently, no love for God (1 John 4:20-21).

The Spirit said by Jude that the evil "brute beasts" who had committed every conceivable sin known to man, were "walking after their own lusts; and their mouth speaketh great swelling words, having men's persons in admiration because of advantage (Jude 16). The ASV says, "showing respect of persons for the sake of advantage." Like many brethren today, these were using flattering words to show respect of persons for their own personal advantage. Let us learn to treat others without partiality and measure them by what they do according to the standard of God's word and not according to their persons, who they know and what they have.