

**God Shows No Partiality—
We Shouldn't Either**

Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

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Parts of India still honor their ancient caste system. It is believed to be more than 3,000 years old. It is a rigid social hierarchy that divides people into one of four groups based on family of origin, the kind of work your parents do, and other factors. At the top of the caste system, the most privileged position in India, are the Brahmins, the intellectuals, the priests and teachers. They represent less than 5% of the population. Next in line are the warriors and rulers. Below them are farmers, traders, and merchants. Then at the bottom of the social order are the Shudras, the laborers.

Well, I say they are at the bottom, but not really. There is another group lower than the Shudras, but they technically are outside the caste system. They are called Dalits or the untouchables. They make up nearly 22% of the population. The word Dalit means, “ground,” “suppressed,” or “crushed.” These are the lowliest people in Indian society. They are regarded as ritually impure because their work involves human waste or animal carcasses. They may clean the bathrooms in people’s homes or offices or work with leather or as a butcher. Their role in Indian society is so low they are considered to be untouchable.

While the caste system is officially outlawed in India, it is far from dead, especially in rural parts of the country. Ninety-five percent of Indian people still marry within their caste. So imagine being born to parents who are Dalits, the untouchables. Maybe your mom is a maid and cleans restrooms. Or maybe your dad is a butcher and the local grocery store. You didn’t choose your family. You didn’t choose your parents’ jobs. But your family of origin chose your role in life, a role that at one time you could not escape.

“Unfair!” we’re likely to say, right? “No one should be locked into a role given at birth that he cannot escape. Every person should be judged by her ability, her character, and not something as arbitrary as one’s parents’ jobs.”

It seems every society has had its “in group” and its “out group,” its privileged and those denied privilege. Think South Africa and apartheid, Rwanda and the conflict between the Tutsi and Hutu, Chechnya, or Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza strip. Or talk to some African Americans in this country who feel trapped in a role because of their family of origin.

It is a human tendency to show partiality, to show bias based on skin color, family of origin, sexual orientation, religion, political affiliation, and other factors. And it was no different in the day of Peter and the early church. They had their “in group” and “out group,” those who were believed to be “chosen people” and then all the rest, the “not chosen people.” The Jews were the chosen ones, of course, and they would not associate with Gentiles, who were not chosen. Back in the days of the bible, Jews wouldn’t eat with a Gentile, marry a Gentile, or even touch a Gentile. To do so made a Jewish person ritually unclean.

That system of treating others with partiality became a major issue in the early church. In the beginning, the church was essentially Jewish. The earliest converts were Jewish, like Jesus, like the twelve apostles, like Paul. Church gatherings were in the synagogue. In the earliest days, the church was kind of a subset of Judaism. But guess what happened? Eventually Gentiles began to follow the teaching of Jesus and asked to be baptized. Suddenly Gentiles, the not chosen, the unclean, were attending services with God’s chosen people.

Here is the first major issue the early church faced: could the Jewish Christians accept Gentile Christians? Could they allow those old ways of treating one another to die? Those old ideas about who was clean and unclean, who was acceptable to God and who was not acceptable. Could the early church transition to a new way of relating to one another so that they were truly brothers and sisters in Christ? Could they reach a place where they showed no partiality?

That's what Peter's sermon is about in Acts 10. The sermon was based on a vision Peter had. It was noon. He was at home. As was common in their day, Peter went to the rooftop of his house where he could catch a cool breeze and rest. My translation says that he fell into a trance. Maybe as the cool breeze blew he took a nap and dreamed. In this dream, he saw a great sheet descending from the heavens being held by its four corners. In the sheet were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds. Peter heard a voice telling him to kill and eat the animals. But he couldn't do it. The animals were unclean. It was against the dietary laws of his religion to eat such animals, so, like a good Jew, Peter resisted.

It happened a second time. This time he heard a voice that said, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." It happened a third time, and then the sheet was taken away.

While Peter was still rubbing his eyes and trying to make sense of this dream, a group of men arrived at his house. They had been sent by a Gentile man named Cornelius. Cornelius, the Gentile, wanted to meet with Peter, the Jew. Peter agreed to visit Cornelius. When Peter arrived, the text says that Cornelius fell at Peter's feet and worshipped him. Peter objected, saying, "Stand up; I am only a mortal." Peter then said to Cornelius and the other Gentiles who accompanied him these very important words,

Your yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.

Do you see how big that was? Somebody ought to be standing up and applauding right now, even if this is Weatherly! This was huge. Peter was going against hundreds of years of tradition, tradition that had been codified in the religious law of his people. This had been engrained in him. But God had shown him another way, a better way, a higher way. What God has made clean, Peter, you must not call profane or unclean.

So Peter delivered a sermon, which I read earlier. I've before said that Peter always had a sermon in his hip pocket. At Pentecost. At the

Jerusalem council. He was always ready. So Peter pulled out his sermon, and here are the first words of his sermon:

I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

Bombshell! Lightning strike! I don't have the vocabulary to express what a shocking turn this was. Peter was saying that he wasn't chosen any more than Cornelius. He was saying that God really did not divide people into the chosen and the not chosen, the "in group" and the "out group." God, he said, shows no partiality. In every nation, in every tribe, in every village, in every home, anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God.

Enough said! If I was a better preacher, I would stop here. But let me say one more thing.

If God shows no partiality, then we must not either. "Unfair!" God says to our world. "No one should be locked into a role given at birth that he cannot escape. Every person should be judged by the reverence they hold in their heart and their effort to do what is right."

God shows no partiality. It is a message as old as the Bible, but our world still struggles to embrace it. There are still long held prejudices, biases, regarding who we should and should not eat with, marry, or even touch. Our tendency still is to put people in their caste: gay or straight, migrant or non-migrant, black or white, liberal or conservative. You know the categories. Once we have them labeled, properly in their caste, then it's okay to treat them with disrespect or hatred.

No, God shows no partiality, and we shouldn't either. God shows us another way, a better way, a higher way. What God has made clean, let us never call profane or unclean.

Closing Prayer

Lord, forgive our littleness, and help us to be better reflections of you. Amen.