

**“What it means to be Reformed”; Session # 36 – Sola Gratia – “Is God a Respector of Persons?”, Prepared for the Adult Sunday School Class
on May 15th, 2015, by Pastor Paul Rendall.**

Read Acts 10: 1 and 2 – “There a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment, a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always.

Cornelius was seeking, but we must understand that something further was needed for this devout man to be saved. His good works and his prayers were acceptable to God. He himself was acceptable to God as someone whom God would take special notice of, according to His sovereign will in election. And so, God sent the Apostle Peter to Cornelius.

Now, let us ask this question: Was there any work of God the Father and the Holy Spirit going on in Cornelius’ life before this point? There is no doubt that there was great common grace given to him, which had led him to be very religious, long before he was saved by hearing and believing the gospel, as it was preached to him by Peter. But the Father’s purpose was to save Cornelius and his household. A person can be very moral, and very religious, and yet unsaved. There are many people in the world today who are like this. So we see, that it was absolutely necessary for the Father to draw Cornelius to Christ (John 6: 37) and it was necessary for the Spirit to so work that Cornelius would be shown that he could not save himself by means of his religious works, even though God was pleased with his works. God the Spirit was cleansing Cornelius by the washing of water with the Word.

There was also a work which God did, of convincing Peter of a very important theological truth so that he would open the door of salvation to the Gentiles.

Look at Acts 10: 9-16. “The next day, as they went on their journey and drew near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour. Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat; but while they made ready, he fell into a trance and saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth. In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. And a voice came to him, “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.” But Peter said, “Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean.” And a voice spoke to him again the second time, “What God has cleansed you must not call common.” This was done three times. And the object was taken up into heaven again. Now while Peter wondered within himself what this vision which he had seen meant, behold, the men who had been sent from Cornelius had made inquiry for Simon’s house, and stood before the gate. And they called and asked whether Simon, whose surname was Peter, was lodging there. While Peter thought about the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Behold, three men are seeking you. Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them.”

So, Cornelius being washed and cleansed he was no longer in the realm of common grace. He had definitely been moved by God Himself into the realm of special grace. But it took his hearing the gospel from Peter lips and his exercising his faith in the message of Christ which was preached to save him and to justify him.

It says in verse 22 – “And they (Cornelius’ servants) said, ‘Cornelius the centurion, a just man, one who fears God and has a good reputation among all the nation of the Jews, was divinely instructed by a holy angel to summon you to his house, and to hear words from you.’” There was something that Cornelius still needed. He needed the words of the gospel, and he needed the accompanying work of the Holy Spirit in his heart in regeneration. He was going to receive both. He was going to receive special and saving grace as he heard the gospel.

When Peter came to visit Cornelius in Caesarea, Cornelius had called together his relatives and close friends. After a few preliminary matters were dealt with concerning the fact that Cornelius should not worship the messenger, but rather the God who had sent him, it says this in verse 30 of Chapter 10: Acts Chapter 10: 30-35 - “So Cornelius said, “Four days ago I was fasting until this hour; and at the ninth hour I prayed in my house, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing, and said, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your alms are remembered in the sight of God.’” “Send therefore to Joppa and call Simon here, whose surname is Peter.” “He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.” “When he comes, he will speak to you.” “So I sent to you immediately, and you have done well to come.” “Now therefore, we are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you by God.” “Then Peter opened his mouth and said: “In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality.” “But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him.”

An Objection to the Doctrine of Election – Is God a Respector of Persons if He chooses some and does not choose others to eternal life?

In attempting to understand the Doctrines of Grace, the doctrines of God’s Sovereignty, it is good to be able to consider the objections. A frequently heard objection to God’s sovereignty in election is that if predestination and election are true that it makes God a respecter of persons. This objection we will consider by looking at the verses in the Bible which address this subject, for that is where we should receive our answers.

1. The application of the gospel to Gentiles as well as to the Jews. (No Respector of Persons)

Acts 10: 34 – “Then Peter opened his mouth and said: ‘In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality.’” (God is no respecter of persons.) “But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him.”

2. So, it very clear, that even though God does not show partiality, He does have respect to His own purposes in election.

Romans 9: 10-12 – “And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of Him who calls), it was said to her, ‘The older shall serve the younger.’” “As it is written, ‘Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated.’”

We must ask ourselves this fundamental question. When Peter said that God shows no partiality, was he referring to the choice of Cornelius to eternal life, or was he referring to the fact that Cornelius was a Gentile? I think that it is clear that he was speaking of the fact that God is no respecter of persons in this sense – that in every nation the person who fears God and does what is right is accepted by Him. The person who fears God has the beginning of wisdom because to fear God is to have regard for Him and for His word when it is presented to you. This

can only take place when God is intending to bestow saving grace upon an individual. It is not as though Cornelius was a saved man yet. What was happening here, was that Cornelius was accepted by God in the sense that God realized that he had improved upon all the common grace that had been given to him because God had already sovereignly determined to give him the special grace which would bring him savingly to Christ, in in the gospel. God was not under any obligation to do this. For salvation is not of works. But He had determined to do this in just this way from before the foundation of the world.

Here were devout people with Cornelius, men and women who had received much common grace, who were mercifully changed by special grace into saved Christian people; people who were told by the angel what they must do to be saved, as it says in verse 6. “He will tell you what you must do.” They must believe in Jesus Christ in order to receive the remission of sins and then they received the Holy Spirit, and they were granted the grace of repentance. God is no respecter of persons as regards who the gospel should go to, in these New Testament times. But He is a respecter of persons in a holy sense when it comes to His election of them, and His regard for their offerings. God has every right, as God, to be sovereign as to who He will bestow His grace upon. Look with me over at Genesis 4: 1-4 –“Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, and said, “I have acquired a man from the Lord.” “Then she bore again, this time his brother Abel.” “Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground.” “And in the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the Lord.” “Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat.” “And the Lord respected Abel and his offering, but He did not respect Cain and his offering.” “And Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell.” “So the Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry?” “And why has your countenance fallen?” “If you do well, will you not be accepted?” “And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it.”

3. Also, in the judgment of human works, God is absolutely impartial. (God is no respecter of persons)

1st Peter 1: 17 – “And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one’s work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here in fear; knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.” “He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you who through Him believe in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.”

2nd Chronicles 19: 6 and 7 – “Then he set judges in the land throughout all the fortified cities of Judah, city by city, 6 and said to the judges, “Take heed to what you are doing, for you do not judge for man but for the Lord, who is with you in the judgment.” “Now therefore, let the fear of the Lord be upon you; take care and do it, for there is no iniquity with the Lord our God, no partiality (no respect of persons), nor taking of bribes.”

4. The statements of great theologians on this subject:

Charles Hodge in his systematic theology, Chapter 11, on Predestination, has this to say about God as a Respector of Persons:

State and refute the objection that our doctrine is inconsistent with the rectitude of God as an IMPARTIAL RULER.

“Arminians often argue that reason teaches us to expect the great omnipotent Creator and Sovereign of all men to be impartial in his treatment of individuals — to extend the same essential advantages and conditions of salvation to all alike. They argue also that this fair presumption of reason is reaffirmed in the Scriptures, which declare that God is “no respecter of persons.” — Act. 10:34, and 1Pe. 1:17. In the first-named passage this applies simply to the application of the gospel to Gentiles as well as Jews. In the second passage it is asserted that in the judgment of human works God is absolutely impartial. The question as to election, however, is as to grace not as to judgment pronounced on works, and the Scriptures nowhere say that God is impartial in the communication of His grace. On the other hand, the presumptions of reason and the texts of Scripture must be interpreted in a sense consistent with the palpable facts of human history and of God’s daily providential dispensations. If it is unjust in principle for God to be partial in His distributions of spiritual good, it can be no less unjust for him to be partial in His distribution of temporal good. As a matter of fact, however, we find that God in the exercise of His absolute sovereignty makes the greatest possible distinctions among men from birth, and independently of their own merits in the allotments both of temporal good and of the essential means of salvation. One child is born to health, honor, wealth, to the possession of a susceptible heart and conscience, and to all the best means of grace as his secure inheritance. Many others are born to disease, shame, poverty, an obtuse conscience and hardened heart, and absolute heathenish darkness and ignorance of Christ. If God may not be partial to individuals, why may he be partial to nations, and how can his dealings with heathen nations and the children of the abandoned classes in the nominally Christian cities be accounted for?”

Archbishop Whately gives this excellent word of warning to his Arminian friends:

“I would suggest a caution relative to a class of objections frequently urged against Calvinists drawn from the moral attributes of God. We should be very cautious how we employ such weapons as may recoil upon ourselves. It is a frightful but undeniable truth that multitudes, even in Christian countries, are born and brought up in such circumstances as afford them no probable, even no possible, chance of obtaining a knowledge of religious truths, or a habit of moral conduct, but are even trained from infancy in superstitious error and gross depravity. Why this should be permitted neither Calvinist nor Arminian can explain; nay, why the Almighty does not cause to die in the cradle every infant whose future wickedness and misery, if suffered to grow up, he foresees, is what no system of religion, natural or revealed, will enable us satisfactorily to account for.”

John L. Dagg in his systematic theology says:

“Obj. 4. The doctrine of election represents God as a respecter of persons; but Peter affirmed that “God is not a respecter of persons” [Act. 10:34].”

“The same phrase has different significations, according to the connection in which it is used. We may affirm that God is, in one sense of the phrase, a respecter of persons, for His word states, that “He had respect unto Abel and his offering” [Gen. 4: 4]. The first Christians were taught, not to have respect of persons, by giving superior places, in their religious assemblies, to those who were rich, and wore gay clothing [Jam. 2: 3]. The Hebrew judges were required not to have respect of persons, by favoring any one in his cause [Lev. 19:15]. In this objectionable sense, God is not a respecter of persons. Before him, the rich and great of the earth are as nothing: yet he has respect to his saints, however humble and despised among men. When Peter

affirmed that God is not a respecter of persons, he was addressing the first company of uncircumcised persons to whom the Gospel was preached; and his words manifestly imported the equal admission of Gentiles with Jews, to the privileges and blessings of the Gospel. “God is not a respecter of persons; but in every nation, he that feareth God, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him” [Act. 10:34, 35]. The words express nothing contrary to what Peter elsewhere says: “Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people, that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” [1Pe. 2: 9].