

When Partiality Is Lawful and Unlawful

Proverbs 28:21; Deuteronomy 1:16

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Why are you partial to certain people? Note that I did not ask if you were partial to certain people, but rather assumed that you are partial to certain people. For we all show partiality to people, and I would add that we necessarily and rightly do so at times.

I show partiality to my wife over other women in the way that I treat her. I show partiality to my children in the way I care for them. I show partiality to the members of this church in the degree of fellowship I have with them. I show partiality to the triune God in the way I trust Him, love Him, and obey Him. Furthermore, it would be a grievous sin on our parts not to make a distinction between a liar and a faithful witness on the pretense that we cannot show partiality or not to make a difference between an idolater and a faithful worshipper of the one true living God.

Dear ones, partiality is not wrong in and of itself. In fact, it is morally required if you would serve and worship the Lord faithfully; for you are to show your approval of that which is righteous and your disapproval of that which is wicked. You must show a partiality to those who are godly over those who are ungodly. Otherwise, you would find yourself in the absurd and wicked position of rejoicing not only in the truth, but also rejoicing in error. The Apostle Paul, speaking by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, sets matters straight when he says that the love of God within us “rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth” (1 Corinthians 13:6). So you see, you are to show a partiality to truth over error and to righteousness over wickedness. There is, however, a partiality which is an abomination to the Lord as we shall see.

This Lord’s Day we will be looking more closely at the subject of partiality as revealed in Proverbs 28:21. Let us consider together the following two main points from our text: (1) Partiality Is Condemned; (2) Partiality Has a Price.

I. Partiality Is Condemned.

A. Listen to God’s evaluation of partiality: “To have respect of persons is not good” (Proverbs 28:21). Literally, Solomon says, “To regard faces is not good” i.e. to regard the outward appearance of a person is not good.

B. What is approved here and what is condemned?

1. God is NOT condemning your appreciation of the natural beauty of the face of a child, man, or woman. It is not lustful or sinful merely to confess, “That is a handsome man or that is a beautiful woman” any more than it is sinful to confess “that is a beautiful child or that is a beautiful sunset.” Since God is man’s Creator and the Creator of all that is beautiful, the face of a man, woman, or child reveals the glory of God in its usefulness and in its beauty. Even covered parts of the body are beautiful, but they are intended only for the eyes of those who are united together in marriage. When, therefore, your thoughts and desires carry you beyond an appreciation for the natural beauty of the face of a man or a woman (to whom you are not married) to desire to be with them in intimate situations, you have clearly crossed over the line into sinful lust. So God is not condemning your appreciation of the natural beauty of the face when you are told not to show regard to the face of a person.

2. God is not condemning a particular love which you have for family members over non-family members (as noted earlier in the sermon). God, in fact, says you should especially care for family

members (whether natural or spiritual): “But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel” (1 Timothy 5:8).

3. Nor is God condemning your preferential joy for those thoughts, words, and actions in the lives of people that are holy over those which are evil (as noted earlier as well).

4. God, however, is condemning all partiality wherein you disregard the truth or wherein you ignore or neglect the commandments of the Lord in order to give preference to the face or outward appearance of a person. Whenever who a person is becomes more important to you than the truth and righteousness of God as revealed in His Word, you have fallen into the sinful partiality condemned by God in Proverbs 28:21.

5. Listen to the explanation of Matthew Henry in his commentary on Proverbs 28:21 wherein he states that sinful partiality is:

to consider the parties concerned more than the merits of the cause, so as to favor one because he is a gentleman, a scholar, my countryman, my old acquaintance, has formerly done me a kindness, or may do me one, or is of my party and persuasion, and to bear hard on the other party because he is a stranger, a poor man, has done me an ill turn, is or has been my rival, or is not of my mind, or has voted against me.

6. Dear ones, sinful partiality takes your eye off of the law of God as the righteous standard for your thoughts, words, and deeds and places your eye merely upon the relationship another person bears to you, or the important status of others, or the approval you will receive from others, or the advantage or benefits you will gain from others. Sinful partiality is to make decisions on the basis of outward appearance, outward relationships, and outward advantages rather than upon the basis of God’s truth as revealed in His Holy Word.

7. Let us consider various illustrations of sinful partiality.

a. When judges disregard the Law of God and look rather to the standards established by man, or look to the esteem and applause they will receive from a sinful nation, or some advantage they will receive, they have exhibited sinful partiality. To disregard the First and Second Commandments and rather to prefer false religion and idolatry within this nation is sinful partiality. To disregard the Fourth Commandment and rather to prefer Sabbath breaking within this nation is sinful partiality. To disregard the Sixth Commandment and rather to prefer abortion within this nation is sinful partiality. To disregard the Seventh Commandment and rather to prefer adultery, incest, pornography, or sodomy is sinful partiality. This is first used in the context of a court. For every time a judge rules in favor of that which is wicked, he also rules against God and His Law. There is no neutrality. He rules either for God or against God. He shows partiality either to that which is lawless or to that which is lawful. Consider the following verse in this regard: Deuteronomy 1:16 (also Psalm 82:2-4; Proverbs 18:5; Proverbs 24:23). Judges ruled by sinful partiality in condemning Naboth (whose vineyard King Ahab wanted and false charges of blasphemy were brought against him), in condemning Christ, and in condemning the apostles, for the Jewish Sanhedrin ruled in order to please itself rather than to please God.

b. When politicians seek to win an office or to hold an office based upon popular opinion polls or special interests groups who contribute money to their campaign and wield much influence over voters, or make promises they do not keep, rather than standing fearlessly for the truth, they are condemned here by God for sinful partiality.

c. When church officers make decisions on the basis of what will keep the people coming or what will keep the money coming, rather than on the basis of what is agreeable to the Word of God, they show sinful partiality. One of the sinful abuses condemned by our spiritual forefathers as they considered the Romanist and Episcopal systems of church government was the tendency to move one’s way

up the ladder of the hierarchy in the church by way of special favors—you do something for me and I will do something for you. The false prophets and prophetesses (in Ezekiel 13:19) told lies (in the name of God) in order to have a more comfortable life. Church leaders turn to entertainment and showmanship (in the name of God) in order to have the comforts, honor, and applause they so much desire in this life. They have their reward in this life for showing such sinful partiality in complete disregard of the Regulative Principle of Worship.

d. When fellow employees at work ask you to turn your head and look the other way while they steal and rob from their employer (whether hours they have not worked or materials of some kind), you are placed in a position as to whether you will show sinful partiality to the wicked. Or when you take advantage of a client in not performing what you said you would do, you too fall into the sin of partiality.

e. I had mentioned earlier that there is a sense in which we ought to have a lawful partiality toward our family members in loving and caring for them in a way that we do not do for those outside the family. However, it is not a lawful partiality but an unlawful partiality when we disregard the Law of God in overlooking conspicuous sins or even in justifying their sins because they are family. Nor can we lie to others for a family member simply because they are family. That is not love for a family member, but idolizes a family member. It is in effect to make a family member the Lord. It is to show a sinful partiality.

f. When you young people cave in to the pressure of friends to do that which is evil and contrary to the revealed will of God in Scripture so that you will fit in, or so that you will be cool, or so that you will be liked, or so that you will have a girlfriend or a boyfriend, you too have shown that you have a sinful partiality, for you have regarded the face of man over the face of God. Remember what happened to Samson when he regarded the face of a woman (Delilah) over the face of God? He became weak and vulnerable and fell under the heavy chastening of God.

g. I'm sure you will think of many other illustrations in which you may sinfully show regard to the countenance of man over the countenance of God in your desires, words, and actions. God says it is not good in Proverbs 28:21 and says even more than this in Proverbs 17:15.

h. The sin of showing a regard to the face of people condemns the racial slavery that was once practiced in this nation and once written into the Constitution of this nation. For to hate, to despise, to mistreat, to deny basic human rights, or to enslave a person based merely upon the color of his skin, or based merely upon his ethnic background is to exhibit a sinful partiality. It is not the color of one's skin or the ethnic background that is evil, for God Himself has made us to differ as to color or ethnic origin. These distinctions are not contrary to the Law of God. What, however, is to be despised in all people (including ourselves) is the corruption and sin of man. Thus, when we speak against the sin of sodomy, that is not a "hate crime" any more than speaking against the sin of adultery, idolatry, murder, or theft. Do we hate such sins? Yes, we do (whether found in ourselves or others). For we cannot love such sins and love God and His righteousness at the same time. What God proclaims to all sinners is not a love for such sins, but forgiveness of all such sins through faith alone in the Lord Jesus Christ and repentance for all such sins.

i. Having considered God's condemnation of sinful partiality, let us now turn briefly to our second main point.

II. Partiality Has a Price.

A. Our text in Proverbs 28:21 says, "For, for a piece of bread that man will transgress." That is not a misprint when you see the word "for" printed twice. The first "for" is used as a conjunction and the second "for" is used as a preposition. In other words, the translators might have said, "Because for a piece of bread that man will transgress."

B. Here we see the consequences of partiality. It leads one to sell his soul in order to gain some advantage for himself/herself. At first, he is only willing to sell his soul for a very high price. But once one's

soul is for sale (even if at first it was only for a high price), eventually God says one will be willing to sell it at any price (even for a piece of bread). For your soul eventually will become no more important than a piece of bread. But Christ says our souls are most valuable and we are fools if we think we can give anything in this life in exchange for them (“For what will it profit a man to gain the whole world and to lose his soul?”). Beware, dear ones, for you know not where your compromises with the truth will eventually lead you.

C. Don’t think this only happens to weak, powerless men. For Solomon uses a word for “man” which comes from the word for “strong” or “powerful.” In other words, it is the strong and powerful man (like Samson) who will find himself selling his soul for a piece of bread in order to gain some advantage for himself. Don’t view yourself as beyond falling into this pit. It can happen to you and it can happen to me. This is a warning against all sinful pride that would boast of being invulnerable to this consequence. But God says, “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap” Galatians 6:7.

D. Why is the partiality found in Proverbs 28:21 condemned by God?

1. Because this partiality is contrary to the holy nature of God. God Himself hates this sinful partiality. Such partiality is not a part of His holy character (Deuteronomy 10:17-19).
2. Because this partiality forsakes the truth in order to gain some advantage for oneself (it is man-centered rather than God-centered—it is selfish rather than selfless). And very often one seeks to justify such partiality in God’s name or with such godly motives and intentions. Such partiality is hypocrisy.
3. Because it leads one into bondage from which he will not escape without severe consequences.
4. Because it values earthly pleasure, earthly advantage, earthly riches, earthly honor, earthly comfort more than one’s eternal soul.

E. Dear ones, in conclusion God demonstrates His impartiality in setting His undeserved love upon particular sinners like you and me from all eternity and in time. For God did not elect you nor call you because you were more holy, righteous, loving, good, honorable, or upright than the next person. We were all condemned sinners. We were all the chief of sinners before a holy God and deserved His righteous wrath and eternal condemnation in hell. But God out of His infinite mercy set His love upon you and effectually called you to Himself by His sovereign grace not because of what you could do for Him, not because of what was in you, but because He chose you in sovereign love to be His own.

F. Furthermore, God demonstrates His impartiality in preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ to the ungodly and in inviting all (regardless of what they have done) to come to Jesus Christ by faith alone. All (without partiality) are invited to come to Christ and to receive from Him forgiveness of sin, righteousness, and eternal life. None who come will be excluded—not even the most wicked among men. From the oldest to the youngest, male or female, Jew or Gentile, law-keeper or law-breaker, all need Christ and all without partiality are invited in the gospel to come to Christ without price (without any works on their part). Dear one, do not ignore, neglect, or despise this offer of salvation made by the God who is without partiality, for to do so will bring you under the eternal condemnation of God who judges without partiality. On that final Day of Judgment who we were related to, what church we attended, our baptism, our works will be worthless before a holy God. For all our works will be judged according to absolute righteousness and found lacking any righteousness of our own because we stand not in the righteousness of Christ. This is the only righteousness which will withstand the judgment of God. Come now and embrace by faith alone this gospel of salvation that is offered to you and live forevermore.

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