

The Least of My Brethren (Favoritism)
03-12-17AM

In Matthew 25:31-46 Jesus gives us a prophetic view of the Day of Judgment. This view is to the judgment of those in the kingdom (1 Pet. 4:17). The single measure in this description is how we behave towards our brethren. What is interesting is Jesus' use of the term "*the least of my brethren*". It begs the question: who are "the least" of our brethren? For the sake of this message, we will create several possible categories: those who are weak, those with whom we have little in common, and those with whom it is not easy to get along.

Fundamentally, Jesus was warning us with this part of His message of the danger of favoritism, or partiality. In James 2:1-4 we are warned of the sin of being partial to different brethren. Jesus was telling us that on the Day of Judgment, we will be examined for how we connected with ALL of our brethren. We need to understand that the church is not a social club; it was not created to entertain us or make us feel good. Instead, it was created to enable people who seek God to have help getting to heaven. When we begin to form cliques or groups within the church, we are using the church for social purposes.

THE WEAK CAN BE THE LEAST OF OUR BRETHERN – ROMANS 14:1-10

It is not a sin to be spirituality weak. When we are newborn into Christ, all of us are babes (1 Pet. 2:2). But sometimes the mature can have an attitude of disassociation from the immature. Sometimes immature Christians are not easy to be around; they may be selfish, a sign of immaturity (Phil. 3:15-16). They may be doctrinally weak, also a sign of immaturity (Heb. 5:13-14). Yet we are not freed from our obligation to consider their needs as our own.

Likewise, many of us will struggle with burdens in our lives that leave us feeling weak. Saints in weak moments need to be uplifted by brethren in such circumstances. We need help bearing our burdens (Gal. 6:1-2). Perhaps brethren are straying, and need to be admonished (Jam. 5:19-20). The point is that no matter the cause of weakness, it is a key time to engage our brethren, not to forsake them.

UNCOMMON BRETHERN CAN BE THE LEAST BRETHERN – EPHESIANS 2:14-22

In the NT church, the differences between the Jews and Gentiles brought about a great deal of strife. For over a thousand years the division had been a matter of God's law; now they are called to be one. It was a great struggle to find commonality. There are a number of struggles in the NT church on this issue; indeed, by Acts 15 and Galatians 2 there is a danger of two churches being formed. Consider that if this had happened, the Jews in one church might have been happier, and the Gentiles in the other church might have been happier, but the Lord would not have been pleased at all. Jesus died to give all men common ground.

Paul wrote about this issue and how he resolved it in 1 Corinthians 9:19-22. There he call us to become all things to all men. This means that in order to engage brethren with whom we have little in common, we need to create common ground with them. In other words, we need to be willing to change ourselves for our brethren.

UNPLEASEANT BRETHERN CAN BE THE LEAST BRETHERN – 2 TIMOTHY 2:22-26

Paul told Timothy to be patient and gentle when dealing with difficult brethren. We need to consider that not all brethren are always pleasant. Paul knew this firsthand; consider the words of the Corinthian brethren in 2 Cor. 10:10 when they said that "*his letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive and his speech contemptible.*" That had to have hurt his feelings. In 2 Cor. 1:17 the

brethren found fault (where it was not present, Jude 16) that he had not been able to come to them as he had hoped. When the brethren confronted Peter in Acts 11:2, their confrontation was less than kind (and Peter had been doing the Lord's work).

When brethren are unkind, we are not permitted to withdraw our association or refuse to engage them. Paul told Timothy that he needed to be patient, gentle and kind in his conduct to them. Peter patiently explained to the brethren in Acts 11 what God had done, rather than react in a similar manner as they had acted. According to James 3:13 we need to try to understand that sometimes there is a deeper cause for bad behavior. Our sympathy/empathy will not justify bad behavior, but understanding it will make it easier to be patient.

DO NOT ACCEPT BEING A "LEAST" BROTHER
We have said that we must engage and encourage even the least of our brethren. But for some, this is permission for them to behave as a "least" brother. But we need to make something very clear. First, spiritual weakness CANNOT continue. In Hebrews 5:12 those who should not be spiritually immature (but are) are admonished for their failure. In Mark 4:16-19 we are shown by Jesus that those who refuse to grow are eventually lost. Second, we need to understand that ALL Christians need to change; none of us should expect our brethren to conform to our behavior. Third, the message in 2 Timothy 2:22-26 regarding unpleasant brethren was that they are in SIN. It is a SIN to be offensive and insensitive, as demonstrated in Titus 3:10 and Romans 16:17. While we are patient, that sin cannot be allowed to go without challenge.

IT IS NOT A SIN WHEN:

We understand now that to avoid favoritism, we need to engage even the least of our brethren. We have suggested several meanings for the term Jesus used. But we also need to know that there are some points to consider. First, our attitude towards strong brethren is meant to be different than to weaker brethren or immature brethren (Galatians 6:1, 1 Corinthians 6:5). Second, it is not wrong that we spend time with those we share commonalities, including unbelievers (1 Corinthians 10:27). Finally, while we are to be patient with unpleasant brethren, that acceptance is not absolute; they must be warned, and if unrepentant, we reject divisive brethren and ideas (Titus 3:10, 2 Timothy 2:23).