

Do Not Show Partiality (Deuteronomy 16:18-22)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Deuteronomy

I. Background

- a. The **Book of Deuteronomy** consists of a few speeches Moses gave to the Israelites near the end of their forty years of wandering in the Wilderness.
 - i. Fun fact about the **Book of Deuteronomy**:
 1. I counted fourteen times in the Hebrew Old Testament where it calls for people to “love the Lord”. Nine of the fourteen are in Deuteronomy.
 2. Two of the remaining five places where this is found are in the book of **Joshua** (in **Joshua 22:5** and **23:11**).
 - a. There Joshua calls the people “to love the Lord your God”, by pointing back to what Moses had handed down to them previously, in **Deuteronomy**.
 3. Any way you look at it, this book has more references to “loving God” than all the other books of the Hebrew Old Testament *combined*!
 - ii. Another fun fact:
 1. **Question:** What are the three Old Testament books most frequently quoted by Jesus in the gospels?
 2. **Answer:** The books of **Psalms**, **Isaiah** and **Deuteronomy**.
 - a. There are differing opinions regarding which of these books is quoted most often. Perhaps it depends on *how* you count up the references.
- b. The second of Moses's addresses, which we are still in, began in **Deuteronomy 5** with Moses recounting the Lord giving the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai. Thus far, in this second address Moses has issued a number of warnings, admonitions, and reminders, along with specific instructions.
 - i. In the passage we will be reading from today, Moses talks about qualities of character that their future judges and leaders (including future kings) should have.

- ii. There are many very practical things we can learn from these instructions, to help us in situations in the church today.

II. Judges Must Be Impartial, Not Swayed by Money

a. Read **Deuteronomy 16:18-22**.

- i. This directive addresses selecting “judges and teachers”. (Some Bible translations read here: “judges and officials”.)
- ii. When they entered Canaan and conquered the territory for each of the tribes, they were to set up judges in each city.
- iii. The people selected to be judges must be men of integrity who are devoted to justice.
 - 1. They must be impartial, not showing favoritism.
 - 2. They must be honest and not take bribes.
 - 3. This is similar to what Moses said when he had appointed judges among the people about 40 years earlier, as they were departing Horeb (Mount Sinai).

a. Read **Deuteronomy 1:14-18**.

- i. The men selected to be judges must not show partiality in their judgments. They must judge all people (the great and the small among men) with the same objective measure.
- ii. They are to act as agents of God, who must give an account to Him. They must be God-fearing men.
- iv. This may seem like a very simple, common-sense directive. However, it is amazing how much trouble was caused in Biblical times and throughout the centuries, up to today, by human judges and church leaders who have ignored these simple principles.
 - 1. The classic statue depicting ‘Lady Justice’ that might be found outside a courthouse is often a woman who is *blindfolded*, holding a set of balancing scales and sometimes also a sword.
 - a. The blindfold represents lack of partiality. She cannot see whether the person before her is rich or poor, famous or obscure. She also cannot discern the color or racial/ethnic backgrounds of those involved in a dispute before her.

2. The early church used this passage in **Deuteronomy 16** for practical purposes, as can be seen in the *Didaskalia Apostolorum* (meaning ‘*Teaching of the Apostles*’). This work was likely composed in the late 200s, in northern Syria. It is not included in the Ante-Nicene Fathers set, but is similar to the *Apostolic Constitutions* (which came later). The *Didaskalia* is especially interesting in that it explains how the church was organized very early in its history. That includes how the church *understood and applied* the standards for bishops, elders and deacons as outlined in **1 Timothy**, **Titus** and other places. It also explains what those officials in the church were expected to do.
 - a. One of the main responsibilities of the bishop (as well as the elders) was to resolve disputes that arose between Christians, and to apply church discipline on those found to be in sin.
 - b. This required the bishop to *make judgments*, to maintain good order in the church.
 - c. The church drew from Old Testament principles to understand the characteristics needed for this role, including from this passage in **Deuteronomy 16** (and the similar one from **Deuteronomy 1:17**, regarding judging disputes without showing partiality). This comes up in several places in the *Didaskalia Apostolorum*. One example, taken from chapter 10 of that work, regarding making judgments and applying church discipline:
 - i. “...Be not ready to amputate speedily, and do not rush in a hurry and run to the saw of many teeth, but first use scalpels, and cut the ulcer, that the cause of the evil which is hidden inside it may be seen openly and be known, that the whole body may be kept from being affected.
 - ii. “But if you see a person who does not wish to repent, but has completely cut off hope of himself, then with grief and sorrow cut him off and cast him out of the Church. For if you find that that accusation of calumny [= *malicious false statement; slander*] is false, and you pastors with the deacons have received the falsehood as truth, *because of the accepting of persons, or because of*

offerings which ye have received; and you change judgments, because you wish to do the will of the Evil one, and him who is accused, being guiltless of this accusation, you put out and cast him from the Church, you will give an account in the day of the Lord;

- iii. "for it is written, '*You shalt not respect persons in judgment,*' and again the Scripture has said, that 'a bribe blinds the eyes of seers and perverts righteous words.' (**Deuteronomy 16:19**) And again it says, 'Deliver the oppressed, judge the orphans, justify the widows' (**Deuteronomy 10:19**); and 'judge righteous judgment in the gates' (**Amos 5:15**).
 - iv. "Take heed then that *you be not respecters of persons and be condemned by the word of the Lord*, who has spoken thus, 'Woe to those that make bitter sweet, and sweet bitter; and call light darkness, and darkness what is bright, and justify the wicked for his reward, and pass over the righteousness of the righteous.' (**Isaiah 5:20-23**)"
1. (Source: *Didaskalia Apostolorum*, chapter 10)
 2. The Didaskalia lays out that church leaders must judge impartially, showing no favoritism. Furthermore, they must never let money (whether in the form of a bribe, a person's wealth or financial gifts to the church) influence the judgments they are called to make.
3. In our own times, judges showing partiality (or the strong suspicion they are doing so) have been center stage all over the world recently.
 - a. Recently, in Romania, France and Brazil, judges (who are supposed to be neutral and objective upholders of the law and the truth) have nullified elections and excluded popular officials from even appearing on ballots. This has left millions angry, with the perception that the judges are showing political favoritism.

- b. Here in the U.S., there has been more conflict on this issue recently than at any time I recall seeing in my lifetime.
 - i. The recent Supreme Court election in the state of Wisconsin was the most expensive in U.S. history. At stake: gerrymandering congressional districts (determining boundaries of those districts, which in turn would impact who was elected).
 - 1. Everyone knew the race was a pure power struggle between two political factions, rather than a sincere quest to select the wisest and most impartial person!
 - ii. 'Lawfare' accusations held by half the country in recent US presidential race run-up. Threats to 'stack' the Supreme Court with judges who would lean one way or the other on key political issues.
 - iii. Venue-shopping for trials in areas where (allegedly) conservatives could not get fair trials.
 - iv. Accusations that activist judges were inserting their own political agendas and hatred for certain people into their rulings. Judges are routinely described as 'Obama-appointed' or 'Biden-appointed' or 'Trump-appointed'.
 - v. Clearly, for whatever reason, the idea that justices in our courts are impartial arbiters of truth and the law, irrespective of persons, is no longer the prevailing assumption in the US and internationally.
- c. That is what we expect in the world. Nothing new, considering history. However, what about in the churches?
 - i. Last week, ex-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick died at the age of 94. For many years, he was one of the most powerful leaders in the US Roman Catholic church. He served as Archbishop of Newark and later Washington, D.C.

1. For decades, there had been credible allegations of his sexual abuse of young men (seminarians) and even children.
 2. Why did the church leadership cover this up for so long before they were forced to deal with it? McCarrick was a gifted fundraiser in the church! Also, there was a pattern of top church leaders looking out for their peers rather than the flock.
- ii. Another noteworthy example, in evangelical Protestant circles, was the case of Ravi Zacharias, a famous preacher and apologist who died in 2020.
1. Only after his death did it come out that he had been an immoral person and a sexual predator, leading a double life.
 2. Despite some credible accusations during his lifetime, he was able to get away with his evil behavior for years by manipulating people who threatened to bring this into the light. People were afraid that if Zacharias' corruption was exposed, the stream of money and any positive influence from his ministry would quickly disappear.
- iii. This double standard in the church (treating those who bring in or contribute money or power differently than everyone else) is certainly not limited to Roman Catholic and evangelical Protestant churches. I have seen plenty of examples of this type of cover-up across a broad spectrum of Christian ministries.
1. Those who are wealthy are treated differently than others.
 2. Those who can add worldly prestige to the church by their presence are treated differently than others.
 3. Those who are popular preachers who draw crowds to the church or make many

converts (and bring in money) are treated differently than others.

4. Those who are closely connected to leaders are treated differently than others.

b. Here is a time-tested way to be a corrupt church (or cult) leader and get away with it (for a time). This simple plan should work for those from *almost any* religious background!

- i. **First**, set up the church organization in a way that the people who make judgments are individuals who are more interested in taking care of themselves than in pleasing God. These are people who have no real fear of God. (Since there are so many people like that, they should be relatively easy to find.)

1. It will not matter whether the church structure is set up to be led by a minister, evangelist, bishop, 'apostle', elders...whatever. This 'playbook' will work regardless.

- ii. **Second**, control the flow of money to the critical leaders, or to the church in general. This can be from you personally paying their salary or expenses. Or, more commonly, you can accomplish the same result by controlling the *flow* of the money, which comes from others.

- iii. **Third**, whenever an accusation comes up, make sure it is 'swept under the rug' by the leaders you control, so that you will never be challenged. The 'judges' in the church structure are all compromised, being respecters of persons (always favoring you). They are swayed by their financial concerns (whether looking out only for themselves, or on behalf of their friends, or for what they perceive to be what is best for the image of the church).

1. **WARNING:** This plan will be effective only until the *Day of Judgment* arrives. When the Chief Shepherd returns, He will call all the compromised leaders to account!

2. **Question:** Why on earth would I tell you how to set up a corrupted church organization or a cult?

- a. **Answer:** I want to explain how the trap works to equip you so that you don't get caught in this trap!
- b. Please keep in mind that the people who *explain how the trap works* are most likely not the ones who are scheming to trap you!

- c. Note that God's plan is that there be no favoritism shown toward *anyone* in the church. *Even an elder* who sins is to be publicly rebuked!
 - i. "Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses. Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear." (1 **Timothy 5:19-20**, NKJV)
 - ii. When a church leader is in sin, you don't just sweep it under the rug or call in a public relations firm to make sure the church's image is not tarnished.
 - 1. It is more important to expose the problem and bring it into the light, so that the other leaders are sobered as well. Exposing the sin of leaders can help clean out the church and warn other leaders that they will not be able to get away with this, either!
- c. This call to be an impartial judge may test us in the future.
 - i. When disputes come up, someone in the church needs to make the tough call. I see three attributes that we should be looking for in leaders who will be called to make important judgments in the church.
 - 1. **First**, it must be someone who is an impartial truth seeker, who fears God, and does not show favoritism. This is someone who sees his role as an agent or steward who is answerable to God for his actions.
 - 2. **Second**, it must be someone not afraid to make a carefully considered judgment. As we read in *the Didaskalia Apostolorum*, it should be someone who is not quick to use the saw of amputation. However, this person definitely needs to be someone with the courage to make a judgment, after considering all the facts. He needs to be willing "to call the balls and strikes", for example:
 - a. In a dispute between two Christians, who is lying, and who is telling the truth?
 - b. Has the person whose sin has come to light truly repented?

- c. What level of discipline is most appropriate? Does the situation call for the surgeon's precision scalpel, or the (more extreme) saw of amputation?
 - 3. **Third**, it would be extremely helpful if that person also has great God-given *wisdom*, like King Solomon or the apostles.
- ii. There are a few areas where making an impartial decision may be especially challenging for many of us.
 - 1. When we are called to make a determination in a dispute involving children (for example, when both children happen to be our own, or when one or more involved belong to others).
 - 2. What if some wealthy or famous person wants to join our fellowship in the future? In that case, we would have to resist any temptation to treat them differently.
 - a. We must never treat them more favorably than other members of our group.
 - b. "My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality. For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, 'You sit here in a good place,' and say to the poor man, 'You stand there,' or, 'Sit here at my footstool,' have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brethren:
 - c. "...If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you do well; but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors." (from **James 2:1-9**, NKJV)
- d. **Question:** God does not want us to show favoritism. However, does God Himself show favoritism?
 - i. **Back Story:** This came up in pushback that David Adams received on a recent sermon he gave. David was making the point that *God shows favoritism*. However, some who heard that message took exception to this point he was making! So let us revisit that question here.
 - ii. **My Answer:** The answer depends on *what one means* by that question!

1. God is impartial in the sense that *He does not arbitrarily show favoritism* to one person over another. He is just.
2. On the other hand, God *does treat different types of people differently* (depending on the spiritual characteristics they have decided to embrace). For example:
 - a. “God opposes the proud but gives grace (favor) to the humble” (**Proverbs 3:37, 1 Peter 5:5, James 4:6**)
 - b. “For the eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, And His ears are open to their prayers; But the face of the LORD is against those who do evil.” (**1 Peter 3:12**, NKJV, quoting **Psalms 33/34:16-17**)
 - c. “The just shall live by faith, but if anyone draws back My soul has no pleasure in him.” (**Hebrews 10:38**, quoting from **Habakkuk 2:4**, LXX)
 - d. “But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.” (**Hebrews 11:6**, NKJV)
 - i. This statement in **Hebrews 11:6** occurs immediately after citing the example of Enoch, in **Genesis 5:21-24**, who was held up as one who was “well-pleasing to God”.
3. God does treat certain people special, different from others. However, it is not on an arbitrary basis.
 - a. It is because they have chosen to *be humble, to fear God, to avoid evil, to seek the Lord, to live by faith and not shrink back*.
 - b. It is *available for any of us* to be among God’s favorites, like Enoch and David (early in his life).
- e. **In Conclusion**, let us imitate the character of God, in being impartial judges who never show favoritism on the basis of outward appearances, arbitrary features, or to advance our own personal advantage in any way. Let us all seek and strive to be impartial in our judgments; and make sure we appoint men as church leaders with this character!