

Leaders Instructed

HN 26/12/04 pm

Reading: Leviticus 19:1-18, James 2

Study: Deuteronomy 1:16-18

Psalms: 11, 33:1-5, 99:1-5, 9:7-10

One afternoon we invited a group of village children to our home for games and snacks. A poor village woman who had recently become a Christian brought the children all the way from her village. Not only was she poor but had the stigma of being from a low caste – all Hindus are born into a caste and remain locked into this all their lives. Though Christ had set her free from such bondage, people still looked down upon her.

Any way as she was returning to her village with the children a man came running towards her shouting that one of the children was wearing a shirt stolen from his house. He was accusing this woman of stealing and threatening her. Seeing this I went over to explain that the children had been guests at our house and that the children were not all hers. If one was wearing a stolen shirt then she did not know and was not responsible. I suggested he come to the village with me and then he can talk to the parents of the child wearing the stolen shirt. He grumbled at me for intervening and standing up for ‘these low caste people’ and then stormed off.

In the new nation of people belonging to God favouritism or partiality was forbidden. *You shall not be partial to the poor nor honour the person of the mighty. In righteousness you shall judge your neighbour* (Leviticus 19:15). All people are made in the image of God whether they are rich or poor, royal or common, male or female, black or white. Such a command was unlike any other nation, then or now. As our own nation departs from the commands of God we see partiality under the law increasing.

The people of Israel had just been delivered from slavery, from being unjustly treated by the Egyptians simply because of their ethnicity. In this new and holy nation such partiality against the alien or the poor was not allowed (1:16).

To judge between people on the basis of appearance, or status given by man, is contrary to God’s command. God does not look at the outside but at the heart. His judgment is always fair and without partiality. And he commands his people to likewise ‘judge your neighbour in righteousness’.

Moses told the people at Sinai to choose wise and knowledgeable men whom he appointed as leaders over various size groups within the nation. As leaders these men were to act as judges. There does not appear to be a separation of duties at this stage in their history. Moses himself was leader and judge. As judges Moses gave them some basic rules by which they were to judge cases brought to them. He knew what pressure would come upon them, what temptations, and what fears they would face.

Many a man has started out as a good leader but fallen prey to the temptations of high office. We see it around us all the time, even in the church. Moses commanded the leaders of Israel to judge righteously, to judge without partiality, not to fear men and to refer hard cases back to Moses himself.

Find Righteously

God is a righteous. The Lord is righteous, he loves righteousness, his countenance beholds the upright wrote the Psalmist (Psalm 11:7). He loves the truth and hates lies. Judges are prone to be influenced by men and by money. But *cursed is the one who takes a bribe (27:26)* and a *bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous (16:19)*. The judge must not pervert justice.

Moses reminds these leaders that the judgments actually belong to God – *the judgment is Gods*. They actually judge on behalf of God, they judge according to his law not theirs. To pervert justice will be offensive to God. Let them remember this. And let us remember also that God loves truth and justice.

Righteous judgment is based on truth and justice that comes from God. Those who ask for wisdom will receive wisdom from above. Solomon asked for wisdom; and see how he was able to judge most difficult cases – judging between two women who both claimed a baby as their own (and that without DNA testing!).

Paul condemned the church at Corinth for going before the law courts of the unrighteous for judgment. *Do you not know that the saints will judge the world (I Corinthians 6:2)?* Even a speck of wisdom from God far outweighs all the wisdom of the world when it comes to righteous judgment. Believers of course must make sure they are judging with Godly wisdom and not wisdom of the world.

Favouritism forbidden

The caste system in India is a great blot upon the nation and its people. That people are judged differently under the law simply because of their birth is an abomination. But it is not only in India that we find such partiality, such discrimination. What about the aristocracy in Britain. What about the rich in the USA and in our own country?

We can be thankful that often justice is done without partiality but not always. We often hear of the rich being treated with favour. Maybe bribes are not paid to the judge as is common in other countries, but great amounts are paid to lawyers to defend the rich against the poor.

Moses commanded no partiality, no favouritism in judgment. The small and the great shall be heard equally. God himself is the defender of the poor, of orphans and widows who were so vulnerable to injustice. Remember the widow in the story Jesus told, who

went again and again to the king to get justice. That was what it was like when the king failed to judge righteously.

Favouritism even within the assembly of God's people is a sin (James 2:9). Favouritism of course can start in the home; it flows into the assembly and then into the courts. At whatever level judgment must be without partiality.

James strongly condemned the church where the rich, well dressed man was ushered into a good seat while the poor, ragged man was left standing at the door. *Have you not become judges with evil thoughts* he wrote (James 2:4). He does not specify what their evil thoughts were, but most probably they were thinking about their own prestige or their budget.

I wonder what James would say about churches today that get celebrities up the front all the time. The rich and the famous it is thought – evil thought – will advance the cause of their church. Or what about the bishop or archbishop? What about the Christian politician? Are they treated differently when they come to the house of God to worship? I recall a church in Nagaland in North East India. Almost all the population was Christian, so the Members of Parliament would also come to church. But they had seats reserved for them in the front row!

Fear no man

You shall not be afraid in any mans presence (1:17). Righteous judgment may be perverted by favours and favouritism. It may also be perverted by threats and fear of men. Being a judge in a place like Columbia would not be easy. Some have been gunned down after giving judgment against the wicked. Of course it may not necessarily be the fear of death.

When the judiciary is separate from the monarchy or the executive as we know it today, the king or political leader may seek influence the courts. Some of our church fathers had to stand against the power of the throne which sought to influence the courts of the church.

It is not easy to stand against the rich and powerful. It is not easy to stand against the corrupt and violent. But the leaders in Israel, the leaders of the people of God, were commanded not to fear any man as they administered justice – for *the judgment is God's*.

Feel not alone

A good leader knows where to go when he needs help or advice. We saw how Moses himself heeded the advice of Jethro and delegated some responsibility to other men. Similarly the leaders Moses appointed were not to feel that everything rested on their shoulders. This we saw was a feature of bad leadership. Moses said *the case that is too hard for you bring to me and I will hear it*.

I found it wise to refer to a committee whenever I was pressured to do something as leader. I was only a coordinator but still at times I would be asked to give favours in various matters. Sometimes I would simply state the rules under which we operated (even though rules were so often bent), but at other times I would take the matter to a committee to avoid such pressure.

Moses does not elaborate on just what were hard cases but clearly the knowledge that they were not alone and that there was a place to get help was important for these leaders. It is important for any leader even the one at the top.

Just as we can thank God for the leadership structures we have in our church and in our nation, we can thank Him for the leaders who have ruled according to these commands of Moses. I know full well what it is like when favouritism and fear of men prevails, so let us learn from Moses how to be good leaders and how to evaluate and choose good leaders in the church and in the nation.

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