

May 20, 2007
 The Sins of Flattery and Showing Favoritism
 Romans 2:1-11 / James 2:1-4 / Job 32:1-22

Today we get to meet someone new! His name is Elihu, and from what we can discern from the text, he has been sitting in on the dialogue between Job and his other three friends for quite a while.

He apparently came upon the group as they were sitting amidst the broken shards of pottery and smoldering ashes in the town dump (as we saw when we looked at chapter 2, verses 7-8). He must have sat down quietly (saying nothing because of his young age, as was customary in those days) — the older and wiser people spoke first, and the younger people who hadn't gained the wisdom of age waited their turn in silence (vv. 4-5).

He has sat there quietly for some time, but now he can't remain quiet any longer. "I am full of words," he says in verse 18, "and the spirit within me compels me; inside I am like bottled up wine, like new wineskins ready to burst. I must speak and find relief; I must open my lips and reply."

What kind of man is Elihu? He was young (as we've already noted) — younger than the other three — maybe in his mid to late-twenties.

He also appears to be very independent, doesn't care what others think of him, and is somewhat of a hothead who's angry at everybody! Three times in three verses we're told: "He became very angry with Job..." (v. 2). "He was also angry with the three friends..." (v. 3). And again, "When he saw the three men had nothing more to say, his anger was aroused..." (v. 5).

As Mike Mason says, "*He is the classic angry young man.*" (Angry at both Job and his friends)

But a hot temper isn't Elihu's only fault. As Mason goes on to point out he has some other glaring faults as well: *"he talks too much (in fact, he holds the record for the longest uninterrupted speech in the entire Book of Job—a chapter longer than God's speech in chapters 38-41!); he repeats himself; and he is enormously conceited. Worst of all, like the other friends he seriously misreads Job's problem as being one of unrepented sin (also either mishearing or misquoting Job on at least two occasions) and as a result he condemns a righteous man. Pastorally he misses the mark completely, so that rather than truly ministering to Job's suffering, he adds to it."*
 (parenthetical insertions my own)

Though when he gets to chapter 36:22 and begins his lavish praise of God for His incomparable greatness (which lasts for a chapter and a half) no one can fault anything he says. It's a flawless and extraordinary masterpiece of worship and adoration.

So Elihu is somewhat like us — To the onlooker he appeared patient on the outside, but inside his anger was building up until it exploded (vv. 1-5).

Like us he is earnest in his defense of truth and God, but sometimes lacks compassion for people. He is very prophetic, but not very pastoral, seeing this dialogue as his opportunity to finally chime in with his opinion and let Job have it, even seeing the whole interaction as a battle where the goal of everyone present was to gang up on Job and win the argument (v. 5) by proving Job wrong (v. 10-12). It's not to try and understand Job's perspective or consider that he might have a new insight on the truth, it's simply to win the argument!

He is good at expressing what he himself thinks and feels, but he's not so good at reading what others think and feel (vv. 15-22) / He's generally correct in what he believes, but some-times incorrect in the way he applies it / And although he tends to come off as a know-it-all, it doesn't take long to realize that though he does know quite a bit, he hasn't been around long enough to know as much as he thinks he knows!

So, that's Elihu. Yet despite his faults, he does make some very good points.

The **FIRST** comes in verse 2 where he says it was wrong for Job to "justify himself rather than God." And he's right: God is NEVER wrong in anything He permits or ordains — NEVER! "Whatever He does is just and right," says Psalm 99:4. In fact, what makes it just and right is the fact that God has ordained it, as we read in Rev. 16:5.

After the three angels in that passage have poured out their bowls of wrath upon the earth in immediate succession, the archangel says of God: "You are just in these judgments, You who are and who were, the Holy One, because you have so judged..." It's that simple: What makes anything just or right is the fact that a just God has ordained it!

But that's not all. The **SECOND** thing Elihu is right about is when he basically says that *age is no guarantee of wisdom!* The young have often possessed more wisdom than the old, for wisdom, as Elihu points out, comes from God and not simply from the number of years a person has lived or their experiences in life (Solomon being a prime example of a person who was wiser in his youth than his old age).

 Yet, there are two other things Elihu says that are wise and insightful — the two I'll spend the remainder of our time focusing in on. They come to us in verses 21-22 where Elihu says: "I will show partiality to no one, nor will I flatter any man; for if I were skilled in flattery, my Maker would soon take me away." That is, judge me and even take my life for engaging in the sins of flattery and partiality (or showing favoritism).

So, let's look at these two SINS and consider exactly what they are, why the Bible condemns them, and then, like Elihu, seek to avoid them lest God judge us for them.

So **FIRST**, let's look at **PARTIALITY** since it appears first in the text. Partiality is a sin condemned in the Bible from beginning to end, and it essentially means "to show favoritism." Literally in the Hebrew "*paneh*" means "to place before" or "ahead of " or "to give preference to someone over another. "

And in the Greek it means "to judge for," or "judge with regard to one's face or appearance." That is, to make judgments not according to what is good, and true, and right, and fair, and just, but to make them in accordance with one's beauty, social standing, wealth, prestige, or whatever! Which is why Deut. 1:17 says; "Do not show partiality in judging." And again, "Do not pervert justice by showing partiality."

Justice is never served; it is always perverted, when a person's rank, beauty, or wealth; if their being a friend of the judge, or a person of high political status causes them to be treated more leniently than others who committed the same crime. Or worse yet, helps them get off "scott free," as they say.

And it's not just in courtrooms — it's across the board. In the church James can say in chapter 2:1-4: "My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism."

"If a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in — if you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, 'Here's a good seat for you,' but say to the poor man, 'You stand there,' or 'Sit on the floor by my feet,' have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?"
 (In other words, is not showing favoritism evil?)

And then in verse 8 he says: "If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right. But if you show favoritism you sin, and are convicted by the law (that is the royal law of love) as lawbreakers."

And it's not just the church either. It has ramifications for all of life. For instance, the sons of congressmen and senators should not get special treatment when drafted into the military, nor should their fathers be able to "pull strings" and get their sons exempted from serving on the front lines.

Likewise, no one should be able to get "political immunity" or a "get out of jail free card," as they call it. The fact that such a thing even exists is sin or evil and a blatant perversion of justice. If a diplomat or even the president of the United States commits a crime, they should go to jail just as surely as the person of no reputation would. Partiality is evil.

So is racial prejudice, or attributing more value or worth as persons to professional people vs. non-professional people; highly educated people vs. less educated people. It's sin. My grandfather was one of the wisest and most honorable people I've ever known (and he died 26 years ago — twice the man I'll ever be). Yet he was merely a milk man who owned 8-9 cows, and a few chickens, with no college education at all, and maybe not even a high school diploma.

 And because partiality is sin or injustice, it hurts and offends. And I know this is a trivial example, but I once took my little Ford Fiesta down to the gas station to get it inspected. It had about 140,000 miles on it at that time. The floor under the drivers side mats had rotted through and been welded back on (for a while it was like the Flinstone Mobil!). And since my salary at that time (serving as a full time pastor in Massachusetts with one child and one on the way) was \$9600 a year, we were trying to keep it running as long as we could!

So I pulled in to the station and it failed the emissions test. At which point the owner and the other young mechanic told me I should take it out on the highway at 60 miles an hour for ten minutes and then come back and see if it would pass. If not I'd have to have the engine worked on. So I took it out and ran it up to 60 for 10 minutes just like they told me, and returned.

But when I did there was this young shapely blonde lady there having her older car inspected too — except there was one big difference! When I walked around the corner of the shop and entered the garage the computer was hooked up to her car, but the emissions sensor was stuck in the tailpipe of a newer car right next to hers! "Those stinkers," I thought! Just because I'm not pretty, blonde and shapely I get the run around, while she gets the royal treatment! It's exactly what the Greek word for "partiality" means "to judge (and thus treat people) with regard to their face or appearance."

Needless to say, I DID get my sticker! But I never went back to that shop. Such partiality irks people, because its sin (not to mention against the law)!

Now, in this regard Elihu displays wisdom and shows that he's a person of integrity. He is going to spare no one, and be easy on no one — neither on the basis of their age, or social status, or wealth or friendship. If he feels they are wrong he's going to tell them so, regardless of who they are — refusing to show any particular preference to anyone — not Job, or Eliphaz, or Bildad or Zophar. They are all being treated on the same basis — as it should be!!! And all the moreso when the issue is truth.

Ultimately truth can never really be discerned, or discovered or known if one avoids saying what needs to be said because they're catering to special interest groups, guarding friendships, cowering before people of wealth and power, or taking a position in order to get support, money or favors from one particular group.

The Bible is clear — God does not show partiality or favoritism (Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11; Eph. 6:9; and Col. 3:25), and thus God's people should not show it either.

That's why Paul (speaking of the treatment of pastors or elders) can say in 1 Timothy 5:19-21:
"The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching... (and then he goes on to say)... Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. Those (elders) who sin are to be rebuked publicly so that the others may take warning." And then he finishes by saying: "I charge you in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favoritism."

It's not an easy balance to achieve! Show honor to everyone, but not partiality / show honor, but never play favorites! That's what God calls us to do (hard as it is)!

Then **SECONDLY**, Elihu goes on to say: "Nor will I **FLATTER** any man, for if I were **SKILLED IN FLATTERY**, my Maker would soon take me away." (He would strike me down for my sin).

To "flatter" is "to purposely stroke the ego of someone in order to get favors from them in return." In the Hebrew the word "flatter" means "smooth," or "slippery!" And interestingly both Spanish and English use the same word to it. Men who are womanizers are called "*swavey*" in Spanish, or "smooth talkers" in English — men who use "flattery" or "praise" to get what they want with a woman.

In fact the Greek word for flattery is the same word translated “to praise” or “to speak a blessing.” It’s the oldest trick in the book — praising someone in order to stroke their ego; make them feel good about themselves, and thus make them feel more inclined to give you what you want. We are told as much in Jude 1:16: “They...flatter others for their own advantage.” (That is, to manipulate them.)

That’s essentially the difference between honest praise and flattery. **TRUE PRAISE** is for the sake of building someone up or edifying them. It’s purpose is to give them confidence, encouragement or an emotional shot in the arm.

It’s done for the good of the person we’re praising without any desire to get anything in return (except maybe the blessing of seeing them blossom, grow strong, overcome a sense of inadequacy, gain confidence, and mature as a person).

FLATTERY (on the other hand) is praise used as manipulation. It’s always (without exception) given with an ulterior motive behind it. The desire is always to get something from the person in return — money, sex, a favor, a vote, a donation, devotion to a cause, or their allegiance. Politicians and sales people and philanderers are often experts in the art of flattery.

They praise people (that’s what the Greek word means) but they do it to their own advantage and not the advantage of the people they are praising. They do it because they want something from the person, and they use praise, or stroke the person’s ego, or inflate their pride, in order to manipulate them into giving it to them.

And although it’s a common and often acceptable method in any sales pitch, Paul and James and Jude saw it as nothing but sheer selfishness, contrary to the royal law of love, and nothing but manipulation!

That’s why Paul could tell the Thessalonians (2:5) “You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed — God is our witness.” In other words we refused to tickle your pride, or stroke you ego, in order to get you to give us money (as many people in his day and our day still do).

And why did Paul add that last statement — “God is our witness?” Because he did praise people. And the only way to tell true praise from flattery (or emotional manipulation) — the only

real difference between the two — is the motive in the heart of the person giving the praise. And, of course, only God can be a witness to that.

Praise to build another up is an expression of love, and flattering in order to get something in return is mere pragmatism and sheer selfishness. The first we are called by God to do, the second we are called never to engage in!