

# GOD HAS NO FAVOURITES!

Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> January 2017

Acts 10:34-43



Donald Trump is well known for a lot of things. As President-Elect of the United States, this flamboyant, controversial character regularly stirs the nest through his controversial twitter account with pronouncements concerning anything from fixing ISIS, chastising China and making America great. Trump is actually a complex character and one thing he is really known for is his relationship with Ivanka, his 34 year-old daughter.

Once commenting *“if Ivanka weren’t my daughter perhaps I would date her”*, Trump seems to be quite besotted with his second eldest sibling. On the night he received the Republican nomination for the presidency, it was Ivanka who delivered the speech introducing Trump as the presidential nominee. When hosting parties in his Florida mansion, Trump would socialize arm-in-arm with Ivanka.

Meanwhile, Ivanka is now the clear heir apparent to the massive Trump Organisation. She is, without doubt, *“Daddy’s little girl”*, a favourite sibling who stands out among a family of two boys and two girls.

Researchers tell us we all have our *“favourites”*. According to a study in California some 70% of fathers and 64% of mothers were said to exhibit a preference for one child or another. For fathers it is most often the youngest daughter. For mothers it is most often the oldest boy.

Now, I don’t know about you, but the idea of having *“favourites”* does jar a little. But I think it’s probably true. An oldest child is often favoured because they are the first-born.

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In the case of a male, they are traditionally seen as the family-heir. Meanwhile, a youngest child often wins favour because they are the “baby” of the family needing protection from the antics and pranks of their older siblings.

Whatever the case, we probably do have favourites. And, here, possibly the greatest scenario concerning sibling favouritism is played out in the tragedy penned by William Shakespeare. Here I refer to King Lear, a priceless classic that I have seen performed a number of times.

Lear is an aging monarch who decides to divide his kingdom among his three daughters. Cordelia is his favourite and Lear is keen to reward her in a particularly generous way.

The opening scene presents Lear addressing his three daughters. He commands them to say which of them loves him most, promising to give the greatest share of his kingdom to that daughter.

Goneril and Reagan respond to this test with flattery and adulation. But his youngest and his favourite, Cordelia, refuses to speak. It seems as though Cordelia does not need to engage in such “sweet-talk” as her love for her father simply stands for what it is.

But Lear is enraged by this response. The tragedy unfolds as the siblings go on to plot against one another and the self-obsessed, vain, narcissistic king degenerates into raging state of madness. It’s pretty sad stuff and there are clearly no winners.

Having favourites can cause a lot of angst. Indeed, how many grievances have spiralled out of such a scenario? We have all been confronted with claims such as “teacher’s pet,” “golden boy” and “boss’s favourite.”

And then there are those who claim God furnishes them with special favours or blessings granting them an elite, despotic status within a community or congregation. Meanwhile the so-called “prosperity Gospel” suggests God favours those who are faithful and righteous by rewarding them with good health and financial success.

This raises the question. Does God have favourites? Does God reward certain people while neglecting others?

I will never forget an experience I had when serving in Timor, an isolated and rather poor part of Indonesia. A fellow minister who lived just down the laneway from me lost his young wife due to breast cancer and was struggling to raise his three young children, one of whom had a perpetual chest infection. The family lived in a simple bush material house with an earthen floor. The residence was furnished sparsely, the electricity was intermittent and bathroom facilities were primitive.

In a conversation with him one day, Matius commented that my wife and I must be very good people, not like himself who suffered many hardships and setbacks. Somewhat bewildered I asked him to explain.

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*“Oh, he said, look at you and your family. Your children are healthy, you have enough money and your family back home care for you.....God has looked favourably on you. God has rewarded you with all that you need!”*

I was somewhat troubled but, given Matius’s difficult plight, was really quite unable to defend myself.

Does God have favourites?

Sadly, history demonstrates some people think so. For example, white supremacist movements maintain the idea that God chooses so-called “respectable” European people as God’s own while Blacks, Jews, homosexuals, communists and others are excluded.

Meanwhile, certain religious cults claim exclusive chosen status while extremist cult leaders like David Koresh, cult leader of the Branch Davidians, believed he was gifted with the god-given ability to crack biblical codes and unleash the apocalypse.

But you see, God does not have favourites. This is stated quite emphatically today in our reading from Acts.

Here the Apostle, Peter, is called to the house of Cornelius, a Roman military officer who lives in the seaside city of Caesarea. Cornelius is a God-fearing person and is prompted to invite Peter to come and share the Good News of Jesus with him and his family.

What follows is of immense importance. For up until this point, a commitment to follow Jesus always took place within the confines of Judaism and the requirements of the Jewish law. In other words, the Jesus movement was a radical development within the Jewish context - faith in Christ meant being a good Jew.

But this all changes - Peter’s preaching in Caesarea unleashes a most remarkable happening as Gentiles or non-Jews respond to the word and are baptised as followers of Jesus.

This created some controversy among those followers of Jesus who resided in Jerusalem and eventually there was a sad and quite difficult breach. This came between the Gentile followers of Jesus and those followers of Jesus who believed in maintaining their Jewish heritage.



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Friends, the crucial turning point in all of this is bound up in those remarkable words of Peter which state *"I truly understand that God shows no partiality."*

Here Peter says God does not play favourites. Here Peter says it doesn't matter who you are – whether you be Caucasian, Negroid or Mongolian, whether you be Jew, Greek or Roman, whether you be male or female, slave or a free person.

Jesus Christ was born, Jesus Christ died, Jesus Christ was raised from the dead and Jesus Christ ascended to be one with the Father – for all people – no matter who they are!

And, at this point, Christianity became the universal faith that it is today!



Now, in Peter's time this was a pretty radical truth. And, you know, such a truth remains so. I say this because it's easy to fall into a sense of false security where one believes we are better than others and are, therefore, particularly special to God. Indeed, it is so tempting to lunge into the trap of believing we have, somehow, been favoured by God.

But you see, God doesn't actually favour us. God doesn't single us out as God's favourites. There no "insiders" or "outsiders", there are no "deservers" or "non-deservers", "privileged" or "non-privileged" in God's order of things.

And, because of this, none of us is guaranteed a life free of challenges, disappointments, suffering or failure.

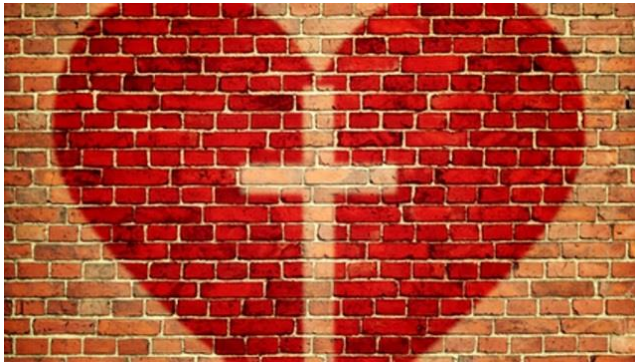
I am sure many of you identify with what I am saying here. You are good Christians, you are faithful followers of Jesus. But you still get sick, you experience difficulties and you are confronted with challenges. Indeed, our physical bodies are in decline and we will die.

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This may seem a little confronting and rather harsh. But the focal message of the Gospel is not about being favoured, rewarded or indeed being sought out for special treatment. Rather, the essence of the Good News is all about being loved.

Yes, it's all about being loved!

For, you see, here God loves us. God loves us unconditionally. God does so without favour and without claiming we are somehow more deserving or more important than anyone else!



None of us are deserving. None of us have the right to demand anything of God. None of us can claim rewards from God. This brings into focus the pitiful King Lear who, in his favouritism towards Cordelia, endeavours to fortify such an indulgence with a vast amount of shallow flattery that simply serves to caress his ego and make him feel good. And the consequences are, as we see, tragic.

Friends, God is not like this. God, in God's unconditional love for each and every one of us doesn't seek rewards. God doesn't seek our flattery and or our adulation. God doesn't offer us special favours in return for our allegiance or our devotion.

Rather God loves us unconditionally with the simple command to love ourselves and to love others as God loves us. God reaches out to us without conditions with the fundamental call to serve others and to serve God as Jesus served others and served his Father.

Do you have favourites? Our frail, somewhat vulnerable human condition suggests we do. But today Peter tells us God doesn't have favourites. God is not partisan. God is not partial to anyone.

For, we are all acceptable to God, we are all loved by God, we are all restored and made new by God - without favour, without patronage and without partiality!

Brothers and sisters in Christ, God has no favourites. God doesn't dish out favours in order to gain our allegiance or indeed, demand our acceptance. Rather, the heart of the Gospel says God accepts us. God loves us. God values and cherishes us. God promise to never abandon us.

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And all of this is offered to us as a free, no-strings-attached, gift. It is offered to each and every one of us – no matter who we, no matter where live or where we come from.

Friends, God shows no partiality. God has no favourites. In Christ we are all accepted, we are all free, we are all offered a future.

What a wonderful gift. On this second Sunday in 2017 let us rejoice and give thanks to the God who shows no partiality - as God truly loves each and every one of us now and always!

Amen.



**John Barr**