

“My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory, with respect of persons. For if there come into your assembly a man with a gold ring , in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; and ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing and say unto him, sit thou here in a good place and say to the poor, stand thou there , or sit here under my footstool, are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?” James 2:1-4

RESPECTING GOD’S PEOPLE

by Craig Marlatt

When I was a young boy I ran with a street gang. We all wore engineering boots with leather jackets, and about two pounds of hair grease on our heads (I guess that was to make us feel ‘slick’). We were quite a sight, no doubt, hanging out on the corner with ‘fags’ (cigarettes) hanging out of our mouths, puffing up a storm, and wearing chrome chains around our waists to let everyone know that we were ready for trouble if anyone wanted some.

Although I was only eleven or twelve at the time, I distinctly remember how much I wanted to be accepted by those around me. Oh, I was a tough guy on the outside, but inside I just wanted someone to accept me and love me for who I was.

I remember a particular incident that really made an impact on my life at that time. My brother Terry and I were walking down the street one Sunday and as we passed by a big church we decided to go in and see what was happening in there. It was a huge cathedral type building and when we opened the big doors to go in everyone turned to see who had come in during the middle of the service. Needless to say, two young thugs wearing leather jackets and greased up hair-do’s was not exactly the type of thing they were expecting to darken the doorway, and they let us know it too! Before we could find a seat the priest told us that we could not come into the house of God dressed like hoodlums, and someone quickly ushered us out.

Obviously that made a big impression on both of us. After that incident it was over seventeen years before we went to church again (except an occasional Easter service with mom). But there was no doubt in my mind: the church was full of hypocrites, and if I ever needed some help, I certainly wouldn’t look there.

After I became a Christian I made a vow to myself and to God never to reject his children, wherever and whoever they are. Because God is no respecter of persons, neither can I be if I am to be his servant. If there’s no room for prejudice or exclusiveness at the foot of the Cross, neither can there be any in the heart of a believer in Jesus Christ.

It is true that God cannot receive us in our fallen condition, but He does not cast us out, rather He has made us acceptable in Christ. I was lucky I guess. But for the grace of God I could be in the streets, or in a prison somewhere for venting my bitterness upon the world around me. But the streets are full of people who didn’t fare as well as I did.

Everyday I see a parade of broken lives marching before my eyes like an endless

line of zombies: dirty, sickly, drunken, bitter people without hope, who are just waiting to die. Their thoughts are not on heaven or hell, but focused totally upon the task of existing just one more day. A handful of food here, just enough to dull the pain of hunger; a bottle of wine to deal with all the other hurts and pains hidden deep within their hearts and minds. Humanity in its lowest form, but humanity none the less. Each one a child of God, created to bring glory and honor to His Name. Each one possessing a living soul as valuable to God as the greatest of men; so valuable that God himself came to sacrifice His life, that they might know the joy and peace of our loving Father.

Yet there is a great fear in my heart as I see the church becoming more isolated and exclusive: isolated in a world of religiosity, surrounding themselves with others just like themselves. There's no room for the man in vile raiment. But we must make room! He may be our only real connection with the "true religion" that was once delivered to the saints. We must open our hearts, and our doors, to let the Lord Jesus come in. And it is him to whom we are reaching out when we reach out to the unloved. "When you have done it unto the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me" (Mt. 25:40).

The gap that now exists between the Church and the world of pain and suffering is growing wider. We must resist the attitude of aristocracy that is tempting us from the pit. Yes, we are children of the King, but we must follow the example of God's first-born Son who left all to seek and to save that which was lost. Only then can we know the true riches; that which can never perish: the Love of Christ which is far better than gold.

There's no big stir in the ghetto. Occasionally visitors pass through for a brief encounter, but the pain soon drives them away. It's a lonely life panning for gold in this muddy river, but every now and then one manages to find an occasional chunk which makes it all worth while. "A jewel from the devils junkpile!". Once only a jagged rock, now a highly polished gem, fit for the Master's crown.

I've often thought of that big church that made such an impact upon my life as a young boy. How lonely they must have been, how empty, not knowing the real love of God which see's into the heart and not the outer garment only. I've learned to love since then, but only because He first loved me when I was in the darkness of sin. I pray that I'll never forget how much Jesus paid to purchase my salvation!

It helps me when I see those around me who are hurting, and broken, knowing that in my reaching to them, I'm really giving to Jesus. I'm learning to respect God's people, even those who are least, seeing the love of Christ shining through their need.