

Playing Favorites

³³ *And they sat before him, the firstborn according to his birthright and the youngest according to his youth; and the men looked in astonishment at one another.* ³⁴ *Then he took servings to them from before him, but Benjamin's serving was five times as much as any of theirs. So they drank and were merry with him. - Genesis 43:33-34*

Joseph was second in command in Egypt, in charge of managing and distributing Egypt's abundant grain supply. The surrounding region was enveloped in severe famine and it drove travelers from far and wide to Egypt's door in search of food. Joseph's brothers had returned for a second grain purchase, having already come to him once for such provision. As they arrived, they were one brother short and one brother added. Simeon had been detained during their initial visit as Joseph feigned suspecting the men of being spies. To prove their innocence, they returned to Egypt with their youngest brother Benjamin. Benjamin was Joseph's only brother born to his mother Rachel, and held a very special place in his heart.

As the wearied men gathered at Joseph's house for lunch, they were seated, to their surprise, in birth order, from the oldest to the youngest. They looked about, a bit bewildered, trying to reason how Joseph could possibly have known which brother to seat in what order. In the midst of their temporary confusion, Joseph ordered lunch to be served. The server began with the first born, Reuben, and worked his way down the line until he stood before the plate assigned to Benjamin. Each of them received one serving, that is, all except Benjamin. Benjamin received five times as much as any other brother. That's when it became apparent that Joseph was playing favorites.

Joseph was modeling before his lunch guests, one of God's most gracious traits: God loves to bless us with favor! To the uninformed, it could appear that Joseph was somehow slighting his other guests, but he was not. Each received a fair and reasonable portion. It's just that when he came to Benjamin, Joseph, like our loving Father, chose to lavish him with the favor of a 5-fold blessing! Since favor is one of the things God loves to bestow upon His children, we would do well to consider and appreciate a few things about favor and how we ought to respond to it in our lives.

What is favor and why should I want it?

One dictionary defines favor as "excessive kindness, preferential treatment" and "the state of being approved or held in high regard." I would say that divine favor is a special outpouring of God's grace upon us that attracts people, resources and opportunities to us. If the grace of God is oil to the machinery of our lives, His favor is buckets and buckets of oil drenching us from head to toe. If God has an "A list", favor is being on it! The favor of God can change our circumstances faster than we can say "the favor of God."

God's favor works on our behalf without regard to our position, preparation or possessions. Queen Esther lacked the position needed to approach King Xerxes without being summoned, but the favor of God was upon her life. Moses felt inadequate in his preparation for the task he had been given, but the favor of God was also upon him. As the Israelites left hundreds of years of Egyptian captivity they had few possessions to their names however God's favor fell upon them and caused their former masters to send them away with choice silver and fine gold. Without regard to age, race, gender, educational achievement or professional accomplishment, the favor of God has the power to change our lives!

Having a proper attitude toward others when they enjoy the favor of God – Rejoice in it!

There's absolutely no reason to envy anyone else's favor! Exodus 20 outlines ten guidelines for healthy living and the last of them tells us that we should not "long for anything that belongs to your neighbor." (Ex. 20:17 NIV) Restated from a more positive bent, we should be satisfied with what we have, without measuring our neighbor's haves against our have-nots!

To look over at someone else's favor with envy, as though we have been slighted somehow by God's generosity toward them, is to demonstrate a gross lack of faith regarding God's faithfulness toward us. It's not as though God has a limited source of blessing. If this was the case, my neighbor enjoying God's favor would mean God withholding some of those blessings from me. But God is able to bless us exceedingly, abundantly, above all that we can ask or imagine (Eph. 3:20) and still remains El Shaddai (Gen 17:1), the Almighty God, who is and has more than enough!

When it becomes apparent that someone we know is experiencing the drenching of God's oil, the most loving response we can have is to follow the "golden rule" (Matthew 7:12), celebrating with them just as we would want them to celebrate with us! Such occasions are opportunities for us to live out Romans 12:15 as it calls us plainly to rejoice with those who rejoice!

Responding appropriately when God's favor has been poured out upon me – Receive it!

Sometimes our challenge is not *rejoicing in* the favor given to others, but *receiving* the favor God has poured out upon us. In Numbers 13, Joshua, Caleb and ten others were dispatched to spy out the land of Canaan and return with a reliable reconnaissance report for Moses. All but Joshua and Caleb advised strongly against proceeding into the as-of-yet-unconquered land, indicating that it was inhabited by "giants". Supporting of their claim, they cited that "...we were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight." The problem here was not the size of the giants, but their own self-perception.

Sometimes we too, see ourselves as grasshoppers instead of the giants God has called us to be. And out of this sense of insecurity and inferiority, we initially resist, and when that fails, we try to pay God back for the favor we have been freely given. When we are blessed with the favor of God, we have but one obligation: to say thank you. In Luke 17, Jesus healed ten lepers and only one returned to acknowledge the goodness he had received. Let us, as God pours out his abundant favor upon us, be as this one and remember to pause and say thank you. This is the most loving way to respond to God's drenching oil in our lives – receive it and just give thanks!