

"One Loved and the Other Unloved"

Here's how we're going to tackle this passage for today. First, we're going to think about the sin of favoritism as seen in this passage. We'll see how our sinful partiality can cause us to discriminate against the rights of others. That will be our first point. Second, we're going to think a little bit about the idea of the firstborn and see how that's applied to the church in Scripture. We'll see how this concept of the firstborn is used in Scripture to describe the spiritual relationship of God with his people. So that we'll be our second point.

But before we dig into these two points for today, let me give one important side note to start. This passage obviously assumes the existence of polygamy at the time. It assumes that some men might have more than one wife. Let me make it clear that just because it assumes the existence of polygamy doesn't mean that it advocates polygamy. It doesn't say that men should go and take multiple wives. In fact, from the beginning of Genesis, the pattern in the Garden of Eden was one man and one woman being joined together as one. That's the strongest statement in the Old Testament against polygamy, namely God's original design as shown so clearly with Adam and Eve in the oneness of marriage. The New Testament makes this principle more clear; that we should not have multiples wives or husbands.

Much of the Old Testament, however, evidences the reality of polygamy. A number of men of God in the Old Testament had multiple wives. And yet the Bible never commends that aspect of their lives. Instead the Bible repeatedly shows how that choice caused them many problems. Abraham and Sarah had problems and tensions in their marriage when Sarah gave Hagar her maidservant to be with Abraham. King David's several wives and several children from those wives bred not only sibling rivalry, but even worse things like rape and murder within the extended family. We'll talk in a few minutes about the issues that arose in Jacob's life with his two wives. Though there are a number of examples of polygamy in the Old Testament, never is that lifestyle commended. Rather there are repeated signs of the problems associated with it, and it seems to go against the very plan for marriage God originally instituted in Genesis which clearly describes the union between one man and one woman.

And so when you read here about this law concerning a man who has two wives, we have to be careful not to read into it more than it says. It's not advocating having two wives. Rather, this law is similar in one sense to the law we studied two weeks ago. Two weeks ago we looked at a law that, for example, seemed like it might have tolerated divorce for any reason. When we looked at that law we quoted Jesus from Mark 10 in which Jesus explained a similar divorce law in Deuteronomy. Jesus had said that Moses wasn't advocating divorce for any reason, but that Moses had given the law because of the hardness of men's hearts. Because men at that time did sometimes sinfully divorce their wives, the law was given to provide some protection for the women in the midst of their husband's sinfulness. I think this law here falls into a similar vein. This passage doesn't advocate taking multiple wives, but if men in their hardness of hearts do take multiple wives, then this law will provide protection against a common temptation in that situation. The common temptation in that situation would be to

discriminate against the rights of the firstborn just because he was born to a less loved wife in a family with multiple wives. So this law doesn't advocate polygamy; it advocates protection to the rights of the firstborn, even in a polygamous situation. This would have probably been of some support to the unloved wife as well who found herself in such a terrible situation.

And so let's turn to think about the sin of favoritism as seen in this passage. Essentially this is what's being described here, even though that language is not used. This law is a provision against discrimination. It looks to prevent discrimination against a firstborn child due to favoritism that the father had for one wife over another. Look at verse 15. This is the general context. A man has two wives. One loved and the other unloved. Literally in the Hebrew, one loved, and the other hated. The Hebrew's stark contrast of love versus hate is probably intended to show the most extreme situations only to make the same point in the less extreme situations. Any degree of favoritism or greater love and affections for one wife over another must be irrelevant with regard to the rights of the children.

And yet starting right there, you realize there's a problem. Here we see the inherent problems to polygamy. Before we even consider the ramifications of this to the children, recognize the problems between the husband and the wives. The marriage relationship is to be a matter of oneness. Genesis 2:24, "A man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. Ephesians 5 applies that to husbands and commands them to love their wives. It says that the oneness of marriage would make it absurd and foolish to hate your wife. Ephesians 5:28 says, "So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it." See, in this passage in Deuteronomy the husband has already failed, even before you bring the children into the situation. The moment he has loved one wife and hated the other, he has failed. He has sinned. Marriage demands complete union. Marriage demands complete love. For the husband to love one wife over another in any way, inherently breaks the marriage bond. The husband has already committed the sin of favoritism before he takes any actions about the inheritance of the children if he loves one wife more than another. Now I don't know how you could love two wives fully and the same if you had more than one. I think that's part of the problem inherent to polygamy. And so here the husband already sins in favoritism by not loving his wife as himself in the case of the unloved wife. Already the husband sins against his wife by depriving the love that is rightly hers as the wife. The first ramification of the favoritism is against the unloved wife in this passage

Of course then the passage goes on to show how this favoritism can affect the children. This passage protects the right of the firstborn child, even when that child is born of the unloved wife. Specifically the protection given here is over the inheritance rights. Verses 16-17. Now this may be something you are not familiar with, but back then the common practice in Israel was that you divided your estate and gave an equal inheritance to each of your sons, with the exception of your firstborn. Your firstborn received a double portion. So if you had two sons, the first born would receive 2/3 of the estate and the other son would receive 1/3. If you have three sons, then the estate would be divided up into four equal portions, with two portions going to the firstborn, and one portion to the two other sons. That was the social convention and right of the firstborn back then in Israel. That's how they did it. And so this law basically says you couldn't take

away that double portion from the actual firstborn, just to give it to the eldest son of your most beloved wife. Your sinful favoritism among your wives could not be cause to discriminate against the rightful firstborn. Now there were other situations that legitimately could cause a firstborn to lose their inheritance rights, but sinful favoritism of the father was not one of them.

Of course this principle would apply in general too to parents, even when there wasn't a case of polygamy. Even if there was just one husband and wife, it would be wrong for the parents to show favoritism among their children to the detriment of their children. A classic example in Scripture is that of Isaac and Rebekah. Genesis 25:28 says that Isaac loved Esau but Rebekah loved Jacob. We won't go into the details now, but needless to say this caused much family strife, including the fighting for the birthright and blessing of the firstborn, despite the fact that God had already said this was to go to Jacob. So this is a specific reminder to parents that we need to guard ourselves against favoritism among our children.

So I'd like to think about one example in Scripture that comes to mind when you read a passage like this. It's not an exact match for the situation envisioned here, but there are some common elements. I'm thinking of the patriarch Jacob. Jacob had two wives, Leah and Rachel. Genesis 29:30 tells us that he loved Rachel more than Leah. In other words, Rachel was clearly his favorite wife between the two. The next verse in Genesis 29 goes on to say that God saw that Rachel was unloved; literally that God saw that Rachel was hated; and so God opened her womb; while Rachel remained barren at first.

If you read the rest of Genesis 29 and into chapter 30 you see a sort of race going back and forth between Rachel and Leah to have as many children as possible, even employing their maidservants to raise up children on their behalf. But in terms of actual physically born children from her womb, unloved Leah had four children: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah. Rachel only later in life had two children, Joseph and Benjamin. Joseph was the firstborn from Rachel, and Reuben was the firstborn from unloved Leah. Joseph, Rachel's firstborn, would have been younger than all the other four children born to Leah.

Now when the time came for Jacob to pass on the birthright and blessing to his children, he gave it to Joseph. Now at first glance it might seem like Jacob becomes the perfect example of why a law like this would be needed. Shouldn't the birthright have passed to Reuben, the real firstborn; the one born first from unloved Leah? Well, before we blame Jacob too much we have to know a little more of the story. 1 Chronicles 5 helps explain this for us. It reminds us that Reuben had sinned against his father, defiling his father's bed with his father's concubine. When Jacob passed on his blessings to his twelve children, he explicitly said that this was the reason he wasn't getting the blessing he deserved. So 1 Chronicles 5 clearly states that the birthright was given to Joseph instead. You see, back then this sort of sin by Reuben would have been an acceptable reason to remove the birthright from him.

And yet that still raises some questions to me. You still might think Simeon, Levi, and then Judah, would be next in line still over Joseph. Well, Simeon and Levi both had incurred a bit of displeasure from their father as well. That incident is recorded in Genesis 34. They had righteous anger acted out in a very treacherous way. Jacob's blessing upon them acknowledges this and predicts that they would live scattered among God's people. So,

it's understandable in part why he didn't give the birthright and blessing to them either. But you might still assume that you would have given it to Judah over Joseph. Well, in fact, Jacob did give a mighty blessing to Judah. In Genesis 49 when he was blessing the children, he blessed Judah with dominion and rule over his brothers. But yet the greatest blessing and explicit double inheritance was still bequeathed to Joseph and Joseph's sons. Was this right or wrong for Jacob? It's hard to say based on the Bible's limited interpretation of it. 1 Chronicles 5 does seem to justify it a bit; while at the same time you could also wonder if it should have come to Judah.

But I bring up Jacob's example because it nonetheless helps make the point here. Favoritism among wives caused quite a bit of problems for Jacob's larger family. They had strife in the family, competition between the wives, and competition among the children when Jacob clearly loved Joseph more than the others. Certainly there are these questions raised about who should have received the birthright. And yet praise be to God how he was able to raise up a holy people nonetheless in the midst of all this. That's what's so great about our God. In the midst of our mistakes and sins, he's able to redeem us and sanctify us and grow us.

Of course we see God's love for the unloved here in this example of Rachel and Leah. This passage in Deuteronomy shows God protecting the unloved. We see God did that through the example of unloved Leah as well. Not only did God open up the womb of unloved Leah over her sister. But it would be through the offspring of unloved Leah that our savior would come. Jesus was from the line of Judah, who of course did bring fulfillment to Jacob's blessing on Judah; for from the line of Judah Jesus came to reign over his brothers as the King of kings and Lord of lords.

I'd like to step back now and turn to our second point to consider a little bit about the idea of the firstborn and see how that's applied to the church in Scripture. You'll notice in the outline I've labeled this the "Firstborn of God." If you see that title, you probably are quick to think of Jesus. Well, that's a good initial instinct. Jesus, even before he was born of the Virgin Mary existed for eternity as the only begotten Son of God. Jesus as the only begotten Son of God is eternally begotten of God the Father. He is the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made. These things were all true even before he became a man in the incarnation. So in this sense, we can rightly call Jesus the firstborn of God in the most ultimate sense.

And yet that's not the sense in which I'm using the term right now. You see, the first place in the Bible where God speaks of his firstborn is in reference to Israel. Exodus 4:22. God instructs Moses to say to Pharaoh, "Israel is my son, my firstborn." Now this is probably intended a bit metaphorically. But think of what God's saying. God is a spirit of course. Israel is spiritually his firstborn son among the peoples on the earth. Israel is God's chosen people on earth. Israel at that time represented the visible church; the people of God. God intended to give Israel as his firstborn an amazing divine inheritance. That of course would be typologically given in the Promised Land, but ultimately it would be given in a heavenly inheritance. In other words, for God to refer to Israel as his firstborn, it tells us essentially that God's people were to receive an inheritance from God, the inheritance of the firstborn; the double portion so to speak.

And yet later we see in Psalm 89 another reference to God having a firstborn. Psalm 89:27. There God is promising to King David that one of his offspring would be made God's firstborn, and that he would be made the highest of the kings on earth. Of course, here God is talking about the Messiah that would come through David's line. So here we are again with Jesus being described as the firstborn of God. But he's not talking about the divinity there about Jesus in that Psalm. It's talking about how the earthly descendant of David in the office of the Messiah would be *made* God's firstborn. We see that explained in the New Testament. That label of firstborn is also applied there to Jesus. Revelation 1:5 for example refers to Jesus as the firstborn from the dead.

And so realize how this label is being used of Jesus here. It's not being used of him in terms of his divinity. It's not in his divine nature strictly speaking that it's talking about his firstborn status. It's in his being firstborn from the dead. The first to rise from death into resurrection life, to live forever more. This is a label that particularly applies to his incarnate state. Not so much in his God-hood, but in his humanity. He is the first to rise from death, even as a human, into the divine inheritance of eternal life. Romans 8:29 then says that he is the firstborn among many brothers. That's you and me if we are in Christ. What he has done in conquering death and rising to eternal life is a picture of our future and our divine inheritance as well.

And so stepping back; the label of firstborn is applied generally to Israel in the Old Testament at first. Then the label gets applied specifically to one of those born of Israel, Jesus Christ. He shows himself to be the one who truly is the firstborn. And through the birthright he has received in conquering death, we now all can share in his divine inheritance. If we have believed in him, if we have trusted our life to him; if we have identified with him; then we have identified ourselves with the firstborn of God. We then share in his inheritance. We receive along with Christ divine inheritance. We are united in the inheritance of the firstborn. That's why Israel could be called the firstborn of God as they were ultimately connected by faith in the firstborn from the dead to come. We too, as we are united with Christ, are spiritually the firstborn of God, co-heirs with Christ, possessor of all the benefits of this divine birthright. My friends, believe in Christ and receive this birthright today.

As we close out our sermon for today, let me end with two final points of application for us. First, let me urge what I hope is obvious to us. Let us beware the sin of favoritism. We ought to give each his proper due. We know that different relationships have different responsibilities. We honor some for their positions. We love our spouses as our own selves. We have responsibilities toward our children. Different relationships have different demands and obligations on us. Let us look to give to each what is rightly due to them.

This is not to say that we won't have natural preferences in life. You are going to connect better with some people than with others. That's okay. It's okay to have best friends. You should have a love for your husband or wife that is in the right sense exclusive and does actually forsake all others. The problem with favoritism, however, is when you sinfully discriminate against someone; when your partiality is for sinful reasons. James uses the example of treating the rich person one way at the expense of the poor. You can dishonor a poor person because you think it's more

personally advantageous to you to show kindness to the rich person. You take the chair from the poor person and give it to the rich, and James says you've sinned against the poor person. Paul in 1 Timothy 5:21 warns pastors that they must not execute their God given duties in partiality. There are plenty of ways I could see something like that happening in a church setting. Certainly in families as we've discussed there are temptations to show sinful favoritism to certain children or siblings or parents. The prophets warned Israel a lot about accepting bribes as a form of partiality; your partiality can be purchased. Again, this can have lots of applications in everyday life when your friendship and loyalty can be bought in one way or another, often at the expense of others.

But let's not just keep the letter of the law here. It's one thing to not engage in sinful favoritism. But let's strive to go a step further. Let's look to find those who have suffered the blunt of favoritism. God opened unloved Leah's womb and ultimately brought forth the Messiah from her. How can we especially look to show undeserved kindness and love to those who have felt the negative consequences of someone else's favoritism. Be on the lookout for people who fall into this category. Look to show them the love of Christ. Maybe you know someone who in certain social settings never has anyone to talk to. Why not go befriend them? Maybe it's some other example. Jesus singled out the tax collector Zacheus to reach out to; that's not what most people would have done. Let's follow our Lord's lead and look to love the unloved.

My second application applies to our relationship with our Lord and Savior. Scripture at times uses the marriage relationship to describe our relationship with Christ. We know that Christ will always show us not only the love we deserve as his bride, but even the love we do not deserve. We would never be an unloved wife. God loves us with a steadfast love. When others around us break faith, and show partiality to others at our expense, God will never leave us or forsake us.

And so my second application is for us to seek in turn to have this same undivided love for our Lord and Savior. We've said today that we must not show sinful favoritism that takes away what is rightly due to someone. Husbands and wives are meant to love each other. Well, what does the church rightly owe Christ? Christ is the husband and lord of the church. We owe our all to him. All our devotion, all our love, all our honor and praise and glory. There's nothing he doesn't deserve from us.

And yet how we can show sinful partiality in discriminating against our Lord? If he deserves our complete adoration, why would we put other things before him? We can say in words that we love him with all our heart, but then we find that we actually give our love away to something else in discrimination of him. In other words, we can show sinful favoritism by favoring the things of the world over Christ. I'm not saying that we can't love others, or enjoy the good things of life. In fact loving what Jesus tells us to love is actually an expression of loving Jesus. Jesus tells us to love our neighbors, so loving our neighbors is a way we love Jesus. What I *am* talking about is the *sinful* things we do because part of us loves spiritual uncleanness better than following Jesus. If you flip on that Internet site that you shouldn't be looking at, what are you saying to your Lord? Part of you is saying that following Jesus isn't enough.

You see sinful favoritism in our relationship with Christ can manifest itself by taking some of the whole-hearted devotion to Christ and giving it to some

other idol of our heart. We can live double-minded, partially indulging in sin, while partially honoring God. We can favor sin over Christ. What we should endeavor for is singleness of mind and whole-hearted devotion to God.

I don't remind of us these things to leave us feeling guilty or condemned, for there is no condemnation of Christ. Rather I remind us today of our need to continue to cling to Christ and his love. It's his steadfast love that is our firm foundation in the midst of our ways we show ourselves still partial to sin. He's the one who can deliver us from our body of death! He's the one who sets us free. And he's the one who's growing us in faithfulness amidst our fickleness. Let's look to cling again today to our loving Lord who loves us who have deserved to be unloved. He will not disappoint. Amen.

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