



Few people ever intend to be prejudiced. In fact, most of us make intentional efforts to treat people around us respectfully, equitably, and fairly. Yet, our fallen state and the constant effort required to understand and empathize with others, especially those different from us, leaves prejudice as a persistent problem. Looking at the story of Jonah it is easy to understand how one might be prejudiced against a nation that has terrorized your country. Yet God has higher expectations of us, and he says as much throughout Scripture. Leviticus 19:15 tells us not to favor either the rich or the poor, and both James (2:1-13) and Paul (1 Tim. 5:21) remind the church not to show partiality. Even Jesus is the brunt of prejudice when Nathanael wonders if anything good can come from Nazareth (John 1:46).

The early church had its own struggles with misunderstanding and prejudice. In Acts 6:1-7, the first deacons in the church are selected as a result of prejudice within the church. At this time the church is still entirely Jewish, but people are grouping around two distinct cultural identities, the Hebraic and Greek Jews. The Hebraic Jews generally speak Hebrew or Aramaic and continue to observe most, if not all, of the Jewish customs of the Law. The Greek Jews, on the other hand, generally speak Greek, don't observe all of the Jewish customs, and have a different view of the world than the Hebrews. If nothing else, the language difference complicates communication between the two groups, and they have little to do with each other.

Limited contact because of language barriers is understandable, so no one voices any concern until the Greek widows are "overlooked in the daily distribution of food." As we see in Acts 2:45 and 4:32-37 the church is collecting resources and helping the poor among them. The apostles are generally responsible for this, but it is a big task. They are focused on preaching and teaching, but are trying to distribute these resources at the same time. With little time to spare and language barriers getting in the way, the apostles are overlooking the Greek speaking widows. While probably unintentional, the result of the apostles' cultural associations (since they are all Hebrew) is favoritism for the widows in their group over those outside their group.

With complaints of favoritism adding up, the apostles call everyone together and suggest including some Greek Jews in leadership. It isn't explicitly stated, but note that the names of all seven of these new leaders are Greek names and Nicolas wasn't even born a Jew. They are selected because they are "full of the Spirit and wisdom," not because they are Greek. Nevertheless, the fact that they can communicate well with the marginalized widows is certainly a factor. Addressed in a godly fashion, this organizational favoritism is not only addressed, but its resolution also becomes impetus for the spread of the gospel. With the apostles preaching and the new leaders serving the poor, "the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly."

Discussion Questions

In our own church comments have been made in the past expressing discomfort at homeless people attending services. What other groups of people do we sometimes overlook (like the apostles did the Greek believers), avoid, dislike, or even hate (like Jonah hated the Assyrians)?

How are we tempted to excuse our ignorance, avoidance, or even hatred of others?

Society's answer to favoritism or prejudice is often to create new forms of favoritism to "balance the scales." In light of God's words in Jonah, the apostles' example in Acts, and Paul's words in Romans 1, what can we do to treat all people impartially and advocate for the marginalized both individually and corporately?