

What is a pariah?

A pariah is an outcast or someone to be avoided. The word is not used in the Bible, but the concept is there.

In the traditional Hindu caste system, the pariahs are members of the lowest caste, called the Paraiyan, and were untouchable by members of the other castes. The word pariah has been loaned to other languages, and it seems that every society has outcasts. Often, in modern societies, outcast status is less clearly defined than in India, and a person has the opportunity to grow beyond it. For instance, a person who is the member of an ethnic minority living in poverty may be considered an outcast by the wealthy elite, but if that person becomes a successful athlete, entertainer, author, scientist, politician, entrepreneur, etc., he or she may actually be accepted into elite society. However, this is not because the elites have changed their standards to become more inclusive but because the outcast has shed the characteristics that identified him as a pariah to begin with. There are other things that might cause someone to be an outcast or pariah. Being accused of a horrible crime, even if there is no conviction, might bestow pariah status. Likewise, the children of someone accused of a crime or serving time in prison might be shunned by their peers. Sometimes, politically conservative actors will say that, socially, they are treated as pariahs in Hollywood.

The Old Testament speaks of outcasts who are considered ceremonially unclean. There were people who, because of an uncleanness of some type, were treated as pariahs for a limited time; others were isolated from society for their whole lives. The most prominent example in the Law is people who had leprosy.

In the Bible, leprosy is any type of skin disorder that looked like it might be

contagious. It was identified in various ways, such as white discoloration or scaliness. Leviticus 13 gives an extensive list of skin symptoms that would cause someone to be “unclean.” If anyone was diagnosed with such a skin disorder by the priest, he or she would have to live outside the camp until the condition abated. At that time, the victim would show himself to the priest again to be declared “clean.” In some cases, the skin condition never improved, and these persons were permanent pariahs: “Anyone with such a defiling disease must wear torn clothes, let their hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of their face and cry out, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’ As long as they have the disease they remain unclean. They must live alone; they must live outside the camp” (Leviticus 13:45-46). These people were true pariahs; they might be able to associate with each other but not with people in healthy society.

To modern ears, this treatment of people suffering from an illness or disease sounds especially harsh. But it should be noted that, in the absence of modern medicine, such precautions were necessary for controlling contagious diseases. Even today, with more exact science, we still quarantine people for similar reasons.

More importantly, there was theological significance to the practice of putting the “pariahs” outside the camp in Israel. God was the one who defined who was in and who was out. This is also a notion that is troubling to many in modern cultures because the idea of a sovereign God who passes final judgment runs counter to the modern ideas of individualism, libertarian freedom, personal autonomy, and personal fulfillment. We should also note that modern societies still have pariahs, only for different reasons. A disease is not considered a reason to shun a person, but his beliefs are. More and more, Christians are considered to be “intolerant” and therefore worthy of being shunned. Political correctness makes pariahs of people; enforcers of progressive orthodoxy are

adept at identifying people who qualify as outcasts.

In the New Testament, we see Jesus tearing down the walls between the “clean” and “unclean.” Those regulations served a purpose at one time, but, with His coming, the time for them was passing away. Thus, Jesus declared all foods clean (Mark 7:19). He healed lepers and in the process touched them (Matthew 8:3). He ate with tax collectors and “sinners” who were the social/spiritual pariahs of the time (Mark 2:16). He ministered to Samaritans who were also pariahs (John 4). Ultimately, believing Gentiles were brought into God’s kingdom on equal footing with the believing Jews. Heaven will be full of former pariahs.

Ephesians 2:11-18 explains: “Therefore remember that formerly you who are Gentiles in the flesh and called uncircumcised by the so-called circumcision (that done in the body by human hands)—remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has torn down the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing in His flesh the law of commandments and decrees. He did this to create in Himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace and reconciling both of them to God in one body through the cross, by which He extinguished their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through Him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.”

In Christ, there are no pariahs. The divisions between Jew and Gentile have been broken down. Previously, a Jew was not even permitted to eat with a Gentile (Acts 10:29). But

Acts 10 clearly connects the abolition of food laws with the entrance of Gentiles into the kingdom. All those who have faith in Christ are “accepted in the beloved” (Ephesians 1:6, KJV). “Through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 3:6).

Christians should have no pariahs. We are to reach out to everyone with the good news of Jesus Christ. However, God still decides who is in and who is out. Ultimately, anyone who does not come to know Christ will be rejected by God (Matthew 7:23; Revelation 20:15). In the meantime, we are to love our neighbors as we love ourselves (Luke 10:27), and we are to take the gospel to all kinds of people regardless of ethnicity or status (Matthew 28:19-20) or what sins they might be involved in. When Christians forget that we are saved by grace—when we start treating other people as pariahs because of their sins—we fail to follow the example of Jesus and we have forgotten that at one time we were in the same position.

Titus 3:3-7 reminds us, “At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.”