

The Problem with Playing Favorites (James 2:1-13)

Sunday, February 23

Faith Evangelical Free Church | Manhattan, KS

For the past few weeks we have been working our way through the Book of James in order to see and hear and hopefully start doing some things in light of what this unique and challenging book of the Bible has to teach us *about how* our faith in Jesus affects (or at least should affect/impact) the way we live our everyday lives.

The Book of James has some of the most blunt, hard-hitting, and convicting passages in all of Scripture. It has no fewer than 54 imperatives -- FIFTY FOUR different commands directing its readers toward a more Christlike way of life. Throughout church history James has given fits to great theologians and interpreters who struggled to reconcile their grace-bestowed faith with this demanding letter overflowing with expectations.

And that's the real brilliance of the Book of James: it helps us bring together the incredible gift of salvation freely given to us by our loving God, right alongside the sort of change, transformation, and new life we want to see in ourselves -- and in every follower of Jesus. James is a book that gives us precious insight into the conduct befitting those who have really come to know the Lord. It doesn't tell us everything we need to know about the Christian life, but what it does say is worthy of your time, attention, and obedience.

I offer this preface to today's message because it is going to take exactly ONE verse for James to say something -- require something of us -- that is really, really hard. Possibly convicting. Most definitely challenging no matter who you are.

It's the sort of thing that most of us, maybe even all of us, have experienced as both the victim and the perpetrator. It's a problem that is global in scale, insidious by nature, and as James makes clear, it is called out as sin by our Holy and Righteous God.

In 2:1 James will call it "favoritism" or "partiality", which may not sound all that bad in our modern vocabulary. But these terms are synonymous with things like bias, discrimination, prejudice, and even racism (classism, elitism, ethnocentrism, etc).

In 2:1-13, when James calls out the favoritism he fears is occurring in the lives and hearts and community of his readers, he isn't slapping their wrists for simply harboring some unfriendly preferences. His concern is that these Christians -- witnesses to the world about the character and conduct of Jesus -- are judging human beings who have been made in the image of God based off something as superficial and shallow as external appearance and circumstance. Such judgments, as we will see, are inconsistent with the way God sees the world and incompatible with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Before we get into the word itself, I want to make it clear that I am very aware how deeply personal and painful this subject may be to some of you this morning.

- It is entirely possible that you, or someone you love, or someone sitting to your left or to your right has been the victim of discrimination.
- It is also entirely possible that you, or someone you love, or someone sitting to your left or to your right struggles with (being guilty of) the sin of partiality and prejudice.
- My hope is that this morning, no matter the emotional or spiritual state this message meets you, that you'll be able to hear it in the same way James wanted his original readers to receive it: as a warning meant to offer correction, healing, repentance, and restoration.
- James wrote this letter to a community of believers. He knew this was a struggle for them, and yet he believed that thanks to the power of their faith in Christ they could overcome and break the chains of this particular evil. I pray the same is true for you, and true for me, and is true of Christ's church no matter where or with who it gathers.

With that in mind, let's jump into the Word of God before us today. We're going to break down James 2:1-13 into three parts that build on one another. The subject may be hard, but James presents his argument with blessed ease and clarity:

- What We (As Believers) Cannot Do (2:1-4)
- Why We Cannot Do It (2:5-11)
- What We Must Do Instead (2:12-13)

The first part of his argument lays out What We (As Believers) Cannot Do: ***Follow Jesus while Practicing Partiality***

I. What We (As Believers) Cannot Do: Follow Jesus while Practicing Partiality

Beginning at James 2:1, we read:

1 My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. 2 Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. 3 If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," 4 have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

James 2:1-4 (NIV)

James kicks off this passage by stating a basic, straightforward principle of the Christian faith: those who believe in Jesus "must not show favoritism." (Your translation might use the word "partiality")

The key term in this moral declaration, *favoritism*, translates the greek word "*prosōpolēmpsia*" (PRO-SO-POL-EMP-SEE-A), which literally means "to receive someone according to their face" or "to accept someone you know or favor". It pops up in a few other places in the New Testament -- and we'll circle back around to those instances in a little bit -- and is never used to describe the right way of doing things.

I really want us to just sit with V1 for a moment. Really consider what it is saying, and what it implies.

Brothers and sisters, everyone who believes that Jesus is Lord and Savior of the world must not judge anyone based on outward appearance or immediate circumstance. Favoritism and faith in Jesus, according to James, are incompatible and contradictory. They cannot work together.

We could use a couple other words to describe the attitude and behavior that James is warning us against here. When he says Christians must now show favoritism, he's saying we must not judge others based...

- On bias: "a bent, or tendency; an inclination of temperament or outlook, especially a personal and sometimes unreasoned judgment"
- Or discrimination: "the act, practice, or an instance of discriminating categorically rather than individually"
- Or prejudice: from the words "pre" + "judge": preconceived judgment or opinion; an adverse opinion or leaning formed without just grounds or before sufficient knowledge; an irrational attitude of hostility directed against an individual, a group, a race, or their supposed characteristics."

Favoritism caters to these dangerous forms of judgment and caves to the way the world values people and assigns them worth. The further we go in treating and judging people this way, the further away we get from the way God expects us to treat people.

After stating this principle, James applies it to the scenario described in 2:2-4.

A man dressed in fine clothes and wearing gold rings (James literally calls him a gold-fingered man) walks into a meeting of the church -- perhaps it was a time of worship, maybe a time of fellowship and learning, or they might have been gathering to settle a dispute. Whatever the meeting was for, the congregation immediately drops what they are doing and goes out of their way to welcome this visitor so clearly adorned in his status and wealth. It's important to note that welcoming this man isn't the problem... (it is perfectly acceptable to welcome the wealthy with joy and kindness)... the problem is that at the same time they show special regard for the rich man, a poor man adorned in "filthy clothes" walks into their meeting and is disregarded, disrespected, and discriminated against to the point of being told to sit on the floor in a place with no honor, at the very same moment a place of great honor is being prepared for the man who appears to already have all he needs.

After creating this scene -- which may have been hypothetical but likely included some elements and events James knew to have happened within the church community to which he was writing -- James calls out the obvious prejudicial, knee-jerk response and condemns it: (v4) *have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?*

Favoritism, discrimination, and prejudice are not the products of a pure heart or a moral mind. They come from "evil thoughts" -- corrupt motivations and selfish designs. The problem isn't that they cared for the rich man. The problem is that they cared for one person while neglecting to care for another. It's that in the rich man they likely saw an opportunity, a chance to get on the good side of someone with money and power and influence, someone who could be beneficial. And in the poor man they saw... little to nothing of value. They took one look at him and quickly dismissed him to stand to the side or sit on the ground by their feet.

They judged both men on their appearance and treated them according to what they believed each had to offer, according to who they assumed could help and who they assumed would need to be helped. Neither assumption was made in an effort to love. Favoritism isn't an act of love. It's an evaluation of what someone's immediate worth and value is to you... which leads you down a very selfish and un-Christ-like road.

The context that James was addressing required him to apply his principle to a circumstance of wealth vs poverty, of have and have not. And we may be very familiar with this sort of favoritism in our own lives. But matters of money are not the only place discrimination takes place. Other examples -- perhaps even examples that exist within our own church -- might be...

- Favoring the thoughts, opinions, leadership of those who have a lot of education, while dismissing or diminishing the contributions of those without PhDs, Masters Degrees, or diplomas from places of higher learning.
- Favoring people who look like us, talk like us, and dress like us, while looking down on people who look quite different, speak different languages, and have very different cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds than our own.
- Favoring our own race or ethnic group to the point where we also assume it is superior to another.
- Favoring the way we express our faith in Christ while dismissing the traditions and theology and teachings of someone outside our own denomination.
- Refusing to make friendships with people outside of our status, our social group, our religion, our skin color, our neighborhood (etc) because we've already decided it's not something we'd enjoy doing.

This list could go on, and on, and sinfully on. But as followers of Jesus, we're called to work hard to repent and grow and see the beauty that God sees in others.

It may help if we remember that Jesus was a tan-skinned middle eastern man, with an average education, who was often homeless, jobless... and from time to time, his clothes would have most definitely been described as filthy. God help us from being so hard hearted, so short sighted, so biased that if this road-weary Jesus were to walk into our midst we'd ask him sit on the ground so he didn't take a seat from someone we prefer because they look a little more like the kind of person we think we'd like more.

We cannot be believers and practice partiality or embrace immoral forms of discrimination.. We cannot follow Jesus and contribute to the prejudice that poisons this world. Because if we do, we drift very, very far from the way our faith in Christ should lead us to live, as James will explain in 2:5-11.

II. Why We Cannot Do It (Follow Jesus while Practicing Partiality)

5 Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? 6 But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? 7 Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong? 8 If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. 9 But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. 10 For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. 11 For he who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

James 2:5-11 (NIV)

There is a lot going on in this passage, but I want us to focus on two major points I believe James was trying to make.

When we show favoritism and partiality, when we wrongfully discriminate and allow prejudice to influence how we look on and feel about others, we get caught up in two dangerous, rebellious, sinful consequences:

- 1. Favoritism prevents us from seeing and valuing people the way God sees and values them.*
- 2. Favoritism causes us to break the greatest commandment: To Love God and Love Our Neighbors As Ourselves*

In v5, James reminds his readers that God has always had a completely different criteria than the sort we too often use when determining the value, worth, or usefulness of people.

Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?

This is a timeless truth that is proved again and again throughout all of Scripture.

God used a nomadic and elderly man named Abraham, along with his elderly wife Sarah, to begin the story that would lead to the eternal throne of Jesus and the salvation of the world.

He looked on a people group that were trapped in slavery and chose to deliver them from their bondage and forge them into the nation of Israel *not because* of their strength (He specifically reminds them they didn't have any) but because of His love for them and His plans for them.

Jesus didn't begin his ministry by recruiting the greatest philosophers, cultural influencers, or people with positions of power. He picked a bunch of fishermen, a couple of political radicals, and some women that he had helped out of some really bad situations and said "alright, these are my people!"

For whatever reason, God loves the little guy. The underdog, the dark horse, the overlooked, the marginalized, those who are poor in the eyes of the world. God sees value in a much deeper way than we do. That's why, when he sent the prophet Samuel to look for Israel's replacement king after it became clear that King Saul (who the Israelites had picked because he

was tall, strong, handsome, and looked like the kings of the other nations) wasn't going to work out, God told Samuel not to fall into the traps of favoritism or bias:

But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height...the Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

1 Samuel 16 (NIV)

It's not the poverty or the wealth that matters to God. His favor isn't based on things like power, prestige, family, race, finances, nationality, productivity, success, failures, or any of that.

God looks at the heart. He has promised everything -- nothing less than the entire kingdom of God -- to those who love him. For the people James was writing to, they needed to be reminded that this includes those who are poor. (This does NOT mean that it excludes the wealthy; it just means we cannot diminish people because of their struggles or circumstances)

When we use circumstantial criteria to determine whether or not someone is worth our time, compassion, care, or love...then we're using a system of merit that God rejects entirely.

Early I mentioned that "favoritism" is used in a few other places in Scripture. It can be found in Romans 2:11, Ephesians 6:9, and Colossians 3:25. Each time the Apostle Paul is in the middle of describing the character of God, and each time he states, in no uncertain terms, that GOD SHOWS NO PARTIALITY. If it's not a practice God Himself is willing to try...why in heaven or on earth would we deceive ourselves into thinking it's a good practice for us? (The rhetorical hint here is that it's not, so we shouldn't)

Favoritism prevents us from seeing and valuing people the way God sees and values them.

It also causes us to break the greatest commandment: To Love God and Love Our Neighbors As Ourselves.

In vv6-7 James touches on a particular issue that was affecting his original audience -- oddly enough, despite going out of their way to honor the rich at their gatherings, the poor people in this community were actually being further oppressed by some of them by being dragged into court (for both legitimate and perhaps illegitimate reasons). It also appears that at least some of the rich folks in their town were "blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong"; that is, they were discrediting and dishonoring the name of Jesus and the faith of those who follow him.

Now, someone from James' original audience could make the argument that they were simply trying to love their neighbor -- specifically and only their rich neighbor -- with the very actions that James has labeled as sinful.

But the problem is love for one's neighbor must extend to all relationships and to all people...not just the ones you hope to appease in order to improve your circumstances. Love for your neighbor is not a strategy for getting on someone's good side. It's meant to be the powerful moral foundation of the Kingdom of God. It transforms us into people who treat others equally, not with partiality. It allows us to see the joy and beauty of praising alongside people a lot like us AND quite a bit different than us, richer than us AND poorer than us, smarter than us, stronger than us, meeker than us, and everything in between and beyond. There is enough love in the Kingdom of God to go around -- and then some! -- and part of our calling is to be people who share that love abundantly.

So if we really want to obey the royal law of loving our neighbor -- royal in its preeminence being set above all other laws and alongside none other than the law of Love for God by King Jesus himself in Matthew 22 and Mark 12 -- if we really want to obey this royal law, we cannot allow favoritism to dilute our love.

This truth is actually established long before Jesus ratifies it in the Gospels. In Leviticus, the book that records the law God gave to the Israelites as they became a nation, God forbade the practice of partiality:

15 *“Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly.”*
Leviticus 19

And then, just four short verses later, we find the first record of the royal law that Jesus would make the chief ethic of his new covenant people:

18 *“Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.”*
Leviticus 19

James, one of the earliest writers of the New Testament and Christian Theology, is sticking so, so close to what he learned from Jesus. He holds Jesus’ teaching high (to love God and love others), understands it as obedience to God’s law given in the Old Testament (Lev 19:18 + Lev 19:15), and then combines all this to reach his conviction and offer his corrective, his antidote to the problem of partiality : *“If you really live out the royal law of Jesus in its full intent, the law to love your neighbor as yourself as the companion to loving God with everything you have, you will love the poor whom you have recently despised.”*

And I think you can take that last part and insert whatever category of favoritism you happen to struggle with. *“If you really live out the royal law of Jesus in its full intent, the law to love your neighbor as yourself as the companion to loving God with everything you have, you will love...*

- *the poor whom you have recently despised.”*
- *the rich whom you have recently despised.”*
- *the lost whom you have recently despised.”*
- *the enemy whom you have recently despised.”*
- *the race or people group you have recently despised.”*
- *the educated (higher or lower) have recently despised.”*
- *The people struggling with a sin, a way of life, an addiction, whom you have recently despised.”*

The correctie is love. The love of God, the love he has for us, the love he wants us to have for others, charts a path away from the sin of prejudice and into the obedience of loving your neighbor as yourself.

Friends, with every passing day I become more and more overwhelmed and captivated by our God’s command and desire for us to be people known for our love. We’re not told we have to be people known for having all the right answers for being perfect, for being flawless judges of everyone, everywhere, at all times.

The world will know we are Christians by the Gospel we proclaim and the love we share with everyone, everywhere, at all times.

But favoritism drags us away from that beautiful, amazing calling. It’s just one more way we become lawbreakers, transgressors, sinners in need of forgiveness. And just in case anyone is tempted to make the “well, my tendency to discriminate is not that bad of a sin, not that big of a deal” argument, James has a sobering warning in vv9-10: *Partiality is a really bad sin precisely because we don’t think (or try to convince ourselves) it’s “all that bad.”*

We cannot be selective in our observance of Jesus' commands. We can't say: I'm such a righteous person, God will overlook this one tiny area. No, we must accept partiality and prejudice as sins, and repent of them. They are evil in God's sight. We cannot hide behind our excuses. Favoritism is wrong, it objectively breaks the law of God, and it reveals the corruption and sin embedded deep within our hearts which is exactly where God looks when he evaluates who we truly are.

So we must not show favoritism because it *prevents us from seeing and valuing people the way God sees and values them, and causes us to break the greatest commandment: To Love God and Love Our Neighbors As Ourselves*

What then must we do instead? James offers one final piece of beautiful, Gospel-inspired advice: *Speak and Act As Someone Saved By Grace.*

III. What We Must Do Instead: Speak and Act As Someone Saved By Grace

12 Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, 13 because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

James 2 (NIV)

Followers of Jesus are people who are judged by a law that liberates. Our sins meet God's grace, and God's grace wins every single time. So James' encouragement is simply this: act like it! Live like people so overwhelmed by the grace of God that you don't have room in your heart to judge people with prejudice. To do so leads you further away from the resurrection life that God blessed you with by grace through your faith in His son, Jesus.

Theologian David Hubbard puts it this way: *"Anger and hatred are not freedom. They tie us in knots; they goad us to say and do things we do not really believe in. Love is liberating because it trusts God to be the final judge and encourages us to do good wherever we can."*

This law that gives freedom is not a checklist of obedience; it is the Spirit of God living within us, working on our hearts, and transforming us into people who truly understand and take joy in living in the light of the truth that mercy triumphs over judgment. The God of the universe wants you to be merciful. He sees no worth in being hateful, spiteful, or discriminatory. Everyone one of us is freed by grace to love the outcasts of society -- more than that, we're freed to BE the outcasts of society and not even care! We are liberated from the bondage anger, hatred, and poor judgment. The love of God has set us free from all this.

You are someone saved by grace, bestowed on you by a loving God. Speak and act like it. You've heard this word...now go and do it, as it has been done to you by Jesus Christ, your Lord.

So...what to do with all this? How can we take some steps in understanding where we might be guilty of favoritism, and some steps away from it and toward the law that gives freedom?

A potentially eye-opening and humbling exercise would be to ask yourself these questions throughout the coming week:

- Who do I **physically show partiality** to?
 - In a crowd, am I more comfortable being close to certain types of people than others?
 - Do I intentionally avoid some people based solely on their appearance?
 - Do all my friends look and sound and act very similar to me?
 - Does the way I interact with the people around me look like the way Jesus did? Why or why not?
- Who do I **emotionally show partiality** to?
 - Are there certain types of needs that I have less sympathy for?

- Am I quick to be cold to those whose circumstances are very unlike my own?
- Why? What is Jesus' example?
- Who do I **spiritually show partiality** to?
 - Do I assume who wants to be included or who should be included in spiritual communities based on external circumstances?
 - Do I know and love any non-believers? Do I love them enough to desire a friendship with them, even if they are uninterested in learning more about Jesus? Why? What is Jesus' example?

As you think about these questions, and answer them honestly, consider this: partiality only serves to separate us from people that God loves. It hurts the people we judge, and it hurts us, too.

Let's be people who treasure the words of our Savior:

34 "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

John 13