

PLAYING FAVORITES BEFORE THE LORD OF GLORY

JAMES 2:1-13

INTRODUCTION OF TEXT

We are continuing our series in the book of James entitled "Faith for Real Life." I trust you are being encouraged and challenged by God's word as we soak in these truths together. This morning we will be looking at chapter 2 verses 1-13. Like much of James, this section comes at us like a giant wave on an unsuspecting body surfer. As we seek to ride this one into shore we may find ourselves tossed and tumbled and thrown up on the beach. But that beach is the beach of God's grace and truth and though it might hurt a bit, we will be much better for our experience. So as we prepare to encounter this massive wave of truth, let's pray for God's help.

TEXT

¹ My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. ² For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, ³ and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," ⁴ have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? ⁵ Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? ⁶ But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? ⁷ Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called? ⁸ If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. ⁹ But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰ For

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whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. ¹¹ For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. ¹² So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. ¹³ For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment. James 2:1-13 (ESV)

MAIN IDEA : THERE IS NO PLACE FOR FAVORITISM BEFORE THE LORD OF GLORY

1. THE CONTRADICTION OF FAVORITISM

James starts out this section with the command to hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ without favoritism or partiality as the ESV puts it. And it describes Jesus as the Lord of Glory. Another way to phrase what James is saying is "what a contradiction it is to show favoritism on one hand and profess to walk with Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory, on the other?"

1.1. A ridiculous scenario

James then goes on to illustrate this contradiction. ***² For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, ³ and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," ⁴ have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil***

thoughts? Now in those days and in these days in many parts of the world there is a huge difference between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots. In the greater Palestine area many people had lost their family land and farms to wealthy landowners and were reduced to tenant farmers and day laborers. ^{1, 2}

¹ Via NIGTC, In pre-70 Palestine, then, and to a large extent in post-70 as well, one finds a cultural situation in which the majority of the population consists of peasants subsisting on a small plot of land. The size of their plots and conditions favoring a growing population forced all males but the eldest son into trade (if they were lucky) or unskilled labor. Even the resources of the eldest son were so small that given the occurrence of drought or similar

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The situation was very much like the current situation with migrant workers laboring on large farms or in factories while living in almost 3rd world conditions, except that almost everybody was either a migrant worker or a landowner or merchant. There was no middle class, only an upper and a lower class. Folks, do you know this is the situation in many places still? Who here has visited Latin America? Now, there is a substantial middle class but in many places the contrast between the haves and have-nots is very stark. I remember being in Panama seeing all beautiful stucco villas with bars on the windows and gated walls around their yards while out on the streets poor children ran about with ragged clothes and dirty faces. This is the sort of situation going for James original audience. So when a rich person showed up at church it was a big deal. Now, as Americans, no matter whether we are upper, middle or lower class Americans we are all pretty rich. To have a home to live in, regular food on the table and clothes on your back is considered pretty rich in many countries, never mind having a car, a TV, DVD & CD's, a computer and almost every material possession imaginable. We are very rich and in some ways can't relate to the situation James is addressing. But it might be like what would happen if Curt Schilling was a member of our church. It would be very tempting to focus our attention on him more than the rest of the congregation. That seems to be what was happening in James. Rich people were showing up and the folks in the church were giving them greater honor than other members of the Church.

calamity he was often forced to mortgage his fields to survive. (Religious regulations compounded the economic pressure upon him.) Continued poor harvests and the economic power of the wealthy landowner (who had loaned him seed or money at rates favorable to the landowner) would frequently force him off his land. Many of these landless peasants became hired laborers or tenant farmers — often on the land they had once owned — who were open to continued economic exploitation by the wealthy. The rapaciousness of the leading political figures, including the family of the high priest, was notorious during this time. The weight of heavy taxation and misgovernment added to the other economic burdens.²

² For the details of the taxation cf. Klausner, 179–184; Grant, 64–68; and Heichelheim, 146–150, 164–165.

1.2. The foolishness of the choice

Now James points out to them how wrong what they are doing is. He calls this sort of behavior "***judging with evil thoughts***". Not only is it evil but it is nonsensical! He says in verse 5, "***has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom?***"

God's favoritism, if he can be said to have any, is not toward the rich and famous but toward the poor and lowly. Ultimately, God's choice is based on his solemn promise to oppose the proud and give grace to the humble.

Now, this isn't favoritism but goodness. Nevertheless, God's choice is not to honor those who are self-satisfied and self-reliant but those who are desperate for help and realize that they are spiritually bankrupt before him. So these folks are favoring those whom God, by and large, has rejected because of their pride. They are acting in direct opposition to how God sees things. It is extremely foolish to show favoritism to those that have something to give because that is polar opposite to how God does it!

Furthermore, these rich folks, generally speaking, are not only self-satisfied, but the enemy of the poor in their midst. They are oppressing the poor, taking advantage of their desperate situation to buy their land off of them at a ridiculous price and then use their political clout to drag them to court when they want something more out of them. And, in general, this self-satisfied class of people mocked the name of Jesus. Most likely considering him a poor beggar and charlatan, the friend of thieves and sinners and the son of an illegitimate birth.

So the favoritism the church was showing the rich was a tremendous contradiction to everything they professed and experienced. And it was time for them to wake up, so James slaps some sense into them with this poignant passage!

1.3. Our scenarios

Now before we excuse ourself from what James has to say because we don't have the same socio-economic conditions as in his day, let's take some time to think about how this applies to us.

1.4. A different sort of haves & have-nots

While we still experience socio-economic disparity and we will talk more about this, for I believe we have the same responsibility as they did, nevertheless, most of the disparity we encounter is not so much in terms of wealth. Sure, we can be tempted to prefer friends with big homes, boats and swimming pools over those without much to offer us, but we don't face this temptation as frequently. We will address this, but my concern lies more with those who differ with us in other ways.

1.5. Charisma, Familiarity, Identification, Health, Confidence, Race, Ethnicity, Trade

Fundamentally, what was going on in the churches in James day was that people were preferring those whom they thought had something to offer them over those who did not. In their case it was money. But in our cases it is more often other things, things like comfort, camaraderie, familiarity, entertainment, preferences, prestige or popularity. Do you know what I'm talking about? Let me illustrate by rephrasing James 2:2-4 a little bit.

" For if a family with five pristine home-schooled kids come in, each with blonde hair and smiling faces wearing the latest LL Bean fashions comes into your assembly, and a single guy dressed in a polyester suit from the goodwill store also comes in, ³ and if you pay attention to the family who wears the fine clothing and say, "Come over my house after church," while you say nothing much to the guy in polyester, ⁴ have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?"

And I think we can change that single disheveled man into someone of a different personality, maturity level, education level, background, ethnicity, occupation or whatever. Do you find yourselves ever being attracted to certain types of people while being repulsed by others? And have you found yourself discriminating on that basis? While it is perfectly okay and healthy to enjoy the blessings of a gracious friend, we must never as followers of Jesus base our relationships on selfish narrow interests. To

follow Jesus is to love those different from us, it is to love those who may not have the advantages we do. It is to love those who have little or nothing to offer us, the unlovely or unlikely. When we base our relationships on only befriending those who have something to offer us we fly in the face of the very nature of God and the integrity of our faith.

This not only applies to those in our midst on a Sunday but also our communities both locally and beyond. Yes, it is okay to have friends like yourself and friends that help you out. But is that the only type of friend you have? Do you know anybody less fortunate than yourself? Do you know anybody from a different culture, a different segment of society or a different ethnicity? Are you close to any of these folks? I am not saying that we must only relate to those different than ourselves. What I am saying and what I believe James is saying is that our circle of friends must not be comprised of only those who can make us feel better or are just like us. To be a follower of Christ is to unreservedly love the unlovely and reach out to the unlikely. Let's continue to learn as we follow this passage.

2. THE COMMANDS AGAINST FAVORITISM

James continues. He says, "⁸ ***If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. ⁹ But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. ¹¹ For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.***"

We are all familiar with this command to love our neighbor as ourselves. I would venture to guess that we all think it is a good command. I know I do. I like the idea of loving my neighbor as myself and I like the idea of my neighbor loving me as himself. I like the thought of a neighborhood full of people who really love each other and enjoy each other.

I like the idea of a church full of people like this. It is a compelling picture of the love of God. But you know what? Most of the picture I have of this community of love are composed of folks just like me. In my minds eye this ideal neighborhood or church is full of middle class Euro-American folks. I don't see many ethnicities in the picture, I don't see many different types of folks or families.

And so James speaks to me and anyone else who has such a narrow understanding or practice of this command. And he says that if you show partiality or favoritism you are sinning, plain and simple. Not much room for arguing here. And if you only fulfill this command partially, that is, only with those you prefer, than you are not a partial obey-or of the command, you disobey the command. The law of God is a organic whole that can not be divided because it proceeds from one being who is indivisible and whole. He is goodness itself and the law of God is a reflection of that goodness as one interconnected whole. To fail on one part, to only partially obey is to disobey and be convicted as a law breaker. And so, if you are like me, so often showing favoritism in your love of your Christian brothers and sisters and showing favoritism in your love of the lost around you, you are a law breaker and you have no room to feel good about your obedience to God. That is what James is saying.

So, do you? Do you fail to love your neighbor without favoritism? Do you fail to love fellow church members without favoritism? Is there anyone you avoid? Is there anyone you pursue to the exclusion of others? Think for a minute who that is.

Now, is there anyone outside of the church who you exclude from the list of folks who you would pray for and reach out to? Is there any practice or mindset you have that puts one class of people over against another? Have you created an insulated circle of friends with whom you are most comfortable? Do you expose yourself to diverse peoples and seek to bless those who don't have with what you do have? Do your finances reflect

justice for the poor and equity for all peoples? What are the employee relations like with the companies in which you hold stock? What are their ethical practices?

These are the sort of questions we must ask ourselves if we are serious about God's rule and reign in our lives. To belong to Jesus means to become like Jesus and judge ourselves by no lesser standard. It says in James 2:12-13 **"¹² So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. ¹³ For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment."**

If we belong to him we must become like him. If we have been shown great mercy than we must also display mercy.

Now, if you are like me, you probably feel fairly devastated at this point, at least I hope you do. And now that we realize what a mess we are, let's talk about the cure.

3. THE CURE FOR FAVORITISM

The cure for favoritism is in the very first verse in this section. It says there, **"My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory."**

3.1. The Lord of Glory!

This is not only the cure for favoritism in that it saves us from the penalty of the sin of favoritism but also that it rescues us from the power and presence of the sin of favoritism. And the entirety of the cure is bound up in the phrase, "The Lord of Glory".

3.1.1. Glorious in Goodness

He is the Lord of glory in how he deals with the unlikely and the unlovable. He touched the lepers, the outcasts of society. He met with tax collectors and sinners. He stopped to talk and rescue the Samaritan woman. He let the forgiven prostitute wet his feet with her tears and wipe them with her hair. He took the little children on his knee. He associated with rural rustic impetuous Galileens. He walked among the squalor of humanity even though he was infinite in holiness. It says about him that **"though he was**

rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich." He associated with sinners to the point of bearing their filth and shame on the cross and taking their full blame on himself.

If there was ever a disparity between two people it is the disparity between my Savior and me, between your Savior and you! He is infinite in goodness, we are permeated with corruption. He is just, we are bias. He is faithful, we are fickle. He is gracious, we are greedy. He is patient, we are impetuous. He is glorious, we are petty. There is no greater disparity than that between this man and me and yet he lived and died for me, for you. He identified with me in my sin and weakness and earned me the right to eternal life through his righteousness. There is no more dramatic condescension than this – that the Lord of glory would give his all for us, that he would love us, live and die for us, that he would choose us and hold us in the palm of his hand and make us more and more like him until we are brought home to him safely.

And so, he is the cure to favoritism in that he exemplifies the opposite of my sinful foolish and petty favoritism.

3.1.2. *Glorious to Save& Sanctify*

And that is only part of the cure. He has died to pay for the just penalty I owe for my favoritism. He offers me complete forgiveness before him as a free gift to be freely received based on faith alone. And as one who has freely received this amazing gift, I now stand clean in him and forgiven. You now stand clean in him for your favoritism. We need not despair, for the Son of God's blood speaks a better word than our sin and it says, forgive this one, and indeed we are forgiven. He is fully able to save us from our sin.

John Owen has said, "***There is enough grace, mercy and pardon in one of God's promises for the sins of millions of worlds, if they existed, because the promise is supplied form an infinite, bottomless reservoir. [in Christ]***"³

³ John Owen , Communion with God, Banner of Truth Trust, 199, p. 62

And what more, he has ascended and given to us His glorious Spirit, so that Christ himself, in all his glory and righteousness, dwells within, to grant us power to become like him in every way. He grants us holiness and the same heart he has. And His Spirit wars against the flesh and sin that dwells within so we do not continue to go our own way. He will have his way in us. He is the Lord of Glory. And he will have a people who are not only forgiven and accepted in his presence, but who are like him. He is making glorious followers who show the same glory he does in their kindness and compassion, in their mercy and justice, in their patience and pursuit of the unlikely and unlovable.

3.2. Mercy Triumphs Over Judgment!

James says at the end of this section, "***Mercy triumphs over judgment.***" First and foremost this is seen in our Lord of Glory in what he has done for us. And secondly, from this strong foundation, we too are to exercise the same mercy towards others. Our lives are to be marked by mercy from beginning to end. And so, my dear brothers and sisters, let us show no favoritism as we hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory. Let's pray.