

Don't Play Favorites

James 2:1-13

Key Verse: 8

“If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right.”

All of us have things we like, that are our favorites. We have our favorite song, or our favorite food, or whatever it is. I have my favorite sweat shirt and pants that I really like because they are so soft and warm and fit me so nicely that I wish that I could them all the time. I am comfortable with them. However when it comes to people, the Bible is clear that we should not play favorites.

In last week's passage James urged the readers not to just read God's word but to also do what it says. Imagine that, we actually have to do it, what a novelty. Then he concluded by saying that we should keep ourselves from being polluted by the world. This means that we are to be in the world without being stained by it. From there he dives right into an example that's as relevant today as it was centuries ago. Let's take a look at verse 1. “My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.” James says the favoritism the world practices has no place in the body of Christ. There was no middle class, in those days, and no social climbing. You either had money and status or you didn't. Some wealthy people would sponsor many things for the poor, like roads, public baths, temples, and even pay their taxes. Why? Mostly for the glory and honor they would get for doing it. When they passed people on the streets, they would be treated special and flattered by them. Plaques would be hung in prominent places and seen for years after, naming them as the generous donor. They considered displaying their wealth almost as important as having it. Even in the book of Acts we see this happening. There was a wealthy couple, Ananias and Sapphira who sold some of their land and gave the money to the church. Although they gave generously, their motive in giving was not quite right. (Acts 5)

Displaying wealth, social status, power, style, beauty, or talent is important in our society. More than that, people are treated according to the impression they give. If they appear to have something we value, we treat them differently. James goes on to give us an example. Take a look at verses 2-4. “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.”” In his example, James reveals one of the obvious acts of favoritism, rich versus poor.

Apparently the believers receiving this letter were guilty of showing favor to some people more than others. They were judging people based only on externals—physical appearance, status, wealth, power etc. And as a result, they were giving special privileges to these people and letting these externals influence them. They gave the rich person a good seat where everyone could see him and probably talk about them. And they gave the poor person standing room only or a seat by their feet, like someone lower than them. He is given neither dignity nor comfort. Do you remember what their feet were like back then? They were disgusting, dirty from the road,

with mud and animal droppings. They didn't have nail clippers back then so they were probably long with nasty things underneath them. It would have been a terrible insult to have a guest sit on the dirty floor by their feet. James is probably exaggerating here but he wants to get his point across. Favoritism in the world isn't pretty. Favoritism in the church is worse. Favoritism among Christians is one of the pollutants of the world that James warned us about. As believers, we are called to be like Jesus, and Jesus never would have shown favoritism. Jesus loved all people – the rich and the poor and he rebuked both of them. Not only that, Romans 2:11 says that God doesn't show favoritism.

Why is favoritism so bad? Living in Chicago, favoritism doesn't seem so bad, in fact it's almost a way of life. Take for example the former mayor – Daley, he gave all the lucrative city contracts and the highest paying city jobs to his favorite people: his family. And what about President Obama, a Chicago native, when he won the election, he brought all his favorite people with him like Rahm Emanuel and Arnie Duncan to name a few – all his friends from Chicago. It happens so much that we don't really think about it. Even we do it all the time probably without thinking. If two people walked in here today and one was well dressed and well groomed we would treat him differently than if the other person came in with a bunch of tattoos, piercings, and a hair style that we were not accustomed too. Or what if two girls came in, one was pretty and wearing a nice dress and the other looked more like a man how would you treat the two? Or what if a student in a PhD program came in with facilities worker came in, would you treat them different? On the surface you might not but if we are being honest, before God, we would hold differences in our heart. We like to say that we don't play favorites but because of our sinful nature we can help ourselves. I have even heard so many sermons where the pastor praised his favorite 4 or 5 people over and over again until it made the people listening sick. Maybe I've even done it myself? Sometimes we are not even aware that we are doing it.

Let's look at verse 4 to see what the Bible says about those who practice favoritism. Verse 4, "have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" From this verse we see that when we discriminate like this, we have evil thoughts and are being guided by wrong motives. James condemns this behavior because Christ made us one body. (Gal 3:28, 1 Cor 12:27) Why is it wrong to judge a person by his or her economic status? Wealth may indicate intelligence, wise decisions, and hard work. On the other hand, it may mean they were born into a wealthy family. Or it can even be a sign of greed, dishonesty, and selfishness. When we honor someone because of their outward appearance or status, we make appearance more important than their inner character. And verse 4 says that this is an evil thought. Do you remember when we studied the life of King David and how God chose him? In 1 Samuel 16 we see why God chose David. God had sent Samuel to David's father to reveal whom he chose to be the next king. As all 7 of David's brothers passed before Samuel, he thought for sure that one of them had to be the next king because they were handsome and tall. They looked like kings. And so when God had rejected them all Samuel was confused. "But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. 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 Sam 16:7) When they went through all of 7 of them Samuel was still confused so he asked, "Are these all the sons you have?" David's father said, "There is still the youngest, He is tending the sheep." Even David's dad didn't think that David would be chosen so he didn't bother presenting him. However when God looked at David he said, "I have found David son of Jesse,

a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.” (Acts 13:22) We can never know what’s in a person’s heart, only God can. Therefore we can never make judgments only God can.

Take a look at verse 5-6a. “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.” When they were playing favorites, discriminating against the poor, they never took into consideration what God’s will might have been. Maybe God had chosen the poor. Jesus’ first followers were common people. God chose the poor in this world to be rich in faith. Christianity has a special message for the poor. In a social system that gave the poor very little, Jesus’ message to them was really good news. The poor people may not have mattered in that society, but they mattered very much to God. The poor will inherit the kingdom God promised to those who love him. The poverty of poor believers is only poverty in the eyes of the world, but they are rich in faith and will inherit the Kingdom of God. However this doesn’t mean that the rich are excluded from God’s Kingdom; just as the poor are not “chosen” just because they are poor. However, great riches can stand in the way of a person recognizing their need for God. (Mk 10:23, Lk 12:34) On the other hand, the poor, have nothing to boast about so they recognize their need of God. (1 Cor 1:28-29)

The reason we treat impressive looking people better than someone who looks poor is because we would rather identify with successful people than with apparent failures. The irony, as James points out, is that the supposed winners may have gained their impressive lifestyle at the expense of Christians. Take a look at verses 6b-7. “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?” James is not trying to bash the rich and say the poor are great, but usually the case is that they poor people did not have the means to persecute the Christians while the rich did. If you remember the riot in Ephesus, where Paul preached, was caused by the wealthy because when people began to believe in Jesus, they stopped buying the silver idols of the god Artemus. (Acts 19) So why should the believers be so excited when a wealthy person came to worship service?

So that question is, how do we avoid showing favoritism? Believers should show no partiality with regard to people’s outward appearance, wealth, or power. The law of love must rule all our attitudes toward others. Let’s read verse 8. “If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right.” Love is the source from which our attitudes toward others should flow. This royal command is a law given to us by King of kings. Jesus said, “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.” (Jn 13:34-35) [“Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment.³⁹ And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”] (Mt 22:37-40)] This law is God’s will for his followers: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” In the Old Testament (Lev 19:18, Prvb 14:21) one’s neighbor would be a fellow Israelite; but Jesus’ application included everyone with whom we might come into contact with. James was calling his readers to obey the royal law of love that would forbid them to

discriminate against anyone who entered their fellowship. We are to show favor to everyone, whether the person is rich or poor. We are called to love unconditionally just as Jesus loved us.

Take a look at verses 9-11. “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.” Back in James’ day, the religious leaders had a concept of some laws being more important than another, or some sins being more bad than others. And we have that is our time too. Most people don’t think that they are that bad. They’ll say, “Well at least I didn’t kill anyone. I just took a pen from work.” But James’ point here is that if you broke one part of the law, you might as well broke all of them because even if you only broke one of them, you are still considered a law breaker. People thought that if I can uphold one of the laws really well, then maybe my “good deeds” will cancel out my “bad deeds.” But it doesn’t work that way. If a person goes to jail for embezzling millions of dollars it doesn’t matter that he was a really faithful husband to his wife. He will still be considered a convict. So the sin of favoritism is just as bad as adultery and murder. Did you realize that?

So what should we do? Take a look at verses 12-13. “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.” What James was saying was that our speech and actions must match God’s command. We should love God and loves others. When he says “speak and act,” that pretty much covers everything we do. (Act 1:1. 1 Jn 3:18) Believers will be judged on the basis of their obedience to God’s will as expressed in his law. Although God has accepted those who believe in him, we are still called upon to obey him. But his law is not a burden; instead, it sets us free because we are obeying out of joy. We are grateful that God has given us freedom from sin’s penalty and the Spirit to empower us to do his will. We should be merciful toward one another and not judgmental. Mercy is exactly what the believers weren’t showing when they insulted poor people. If they continued to discriminate, they would be in danger of facing their own judgment without mercy. Here we find a good picture of New Testament ethics: What we do to others we actually do to God, and he will return it to us. We stand before God in need of his mercy. We can’t earn forgiveness by forgiving others, but when we withhold forgiveness after having been forgiven, we show that we don’t understand or appreciate God’s mercy toward us. Not showing mercy places us under the God’s judgment alone, but showing mercy places us under God’s judgment and his mercy. We will always deserve God’s judgment because we can never adequately obey God’s royal law. But our merciful actions are evidence of our relationship with Jesus and it’s that relationship that saves us. For Jesus’ mercy is greater than his judgment. The world is looking for evidence that God is merciful. Being people who have experienced mercy and who express mercy will catch their attention. If we really want to win people over to Jesus, we must be merciful and not judgmental. And we can’t play favorites as to who we are merciful to, we must practice the law of love for everyone.