

Playing Favorites
James 2:1-13

Notes

The gospel should cause believers to treat every person with dignity, honor, respect, and love

I. INTRODUCTION

Prejudice Comes from an Unclean Heart

I like this thought posted by Mike Atkinson.

If you can start the day without caffeine; if you can get going without pep pills; if you can always be cheerful, ignoring aches and pains; if you can resist complaining and boring people with your troubles; if you can eat the same food every day and be grateful for it; if you can understand when your loved ones are too busy to give you any time; if you can overlook it when those you love take it out on you when through no fault of yours something goes wrong; if you can take criticism and blame without resentment; if you can ignore a friend's limited education and never correct him; if you can resist treating a rich friend better than a poor friend; if you can face the world without lies and deceit; if you can conquer tension without medical help; if you can relax without liquor; if you can sleep without the aid of drugs; if you can say honestly that deep in your heart you have no prejudice against creed, color, religion, or politics; then, my friend, you are almost as good as your dog. (Mike Atkinson, Mikey's Funnies, 6-26-02, www.mikeysfunnies.com)

I like that, because it makes you think about yourself in relation to what many consider to be a dirty animal.

Some people are like that, as well. Those we might consider "dogs" may actually demonstrate a strength of character far greater than any of us.

For a dog, it matters not who you are or what you have done, you are treated the same.

As James concludes Chapter 1 reminding us to be unstained by the world, he opens Chapter 2 with a warning not to show favoritism.

In Chapter 2 James begins to deal with the nitty gritty of our lives.

You see, favoritism, even in the best circumstances, displays a misunderstanding of the gospel, and in the worst, displays a selfish heart that is acting out of prejudice for personal gain or favor.

As we consider our text today, may we be intentional about examining our hearts and making sure we do not play favorites when it comes to people, picking and choosing based on race, creed, ethnicity, social status, or beliefs.

Instead, may we graciously view all individuals as created equal in the image of God and treat each person with the same compassion Christ has treated us.

May we never look down on someone for what they do not have, but show extra care for those in our society who are considered poor or downtrodden.

My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. ² For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, ³ and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, "You sit here in a good place," and you say to the poor man, "You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool,"⁴ have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives? ⁵ Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? ⁶ But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? ⁷ Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called?

⁸ If, however, you are fulfilling 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 and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all. ¹¹ For He who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not commit murder." Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. ¹² So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. ¹³ For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

There are several principles present in our text today.

1. God does not show favorites, neither should we (1)

My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism.

We don't know the details, but apparently the churches James was writing had some instances of favoritism, specifically in regard to the rich and the poor.

James comes and shows the strongest possible connection between faith in Christ and impartiality.

The word "favoritism" means to judge the face. We only judge what is on the outside and not the inside.

Her hair is too short

He shouldn't wear that in church

Does he have tattoos?

Their house is too big

Their car is too new

They're too poor

They are not smart enough

The world's love shows a special respect for those based on their high social standing and is opposite the Christian standard.

Instead of showing favoritism, be captivated by the glory of the gospel.

When we are captivated by the glorious grace of Jesus, we see all persons equally in need of grace.

We also are not to show favoritism because this is not what God has modeled for us.

God offers atonement for all. While all will not come to faith in Christ, the death of Christ has made atonement for all sin.

We also see God's impartiality, in the church specifically in that the Holy Spirit is given to all who believe, and each person is given gifts for the benefit of the church.

2. Showing favoritism displays a judgmental heart (2-7)

² For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, ³ and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, "You sit here in a good place," and you say to the poor man, "You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool,"⁴ have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives? ⁵ Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? ⁶ But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? ⁷ Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called?

James illustrates his point in verse 1 with a likely scenario.

Showing favoritism displays a judgmental heart and this is exactly what a lost world does.

In James' story a lost rich man and poor man comes into the church and the rich man is brought up front and even given a footstool.

The poor man is not even given a footstool but told to sit beside the footstool of the rich man.

Right now, in our culture there is a growing divide between conservative and liberal and I do not mean this from a political standpoint, but a worldview and moral standpoint.

The world absolutely plays favorites when it comes to who gets the "blessings" of belonging.

If you say the right things, believe the right things, support the right things, post the right things, and complain about the right things then you are part of the “in-crowd” and are given preferential treatment.

On the other hand, if you uphold a biblical moral and ethical view you are shunned in society and even your very livelihood may be in jeopardy.

The church should not, in any way, adopt the practice of playing favorites when it comes to how we treat one another, especially those in need.

Lev. 19:15 says, “You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbor fairly.”

The church in James’ illustration shows a judgmental heart based solely on selfish motives, thinking the rich person can benefit them.

Since the rich man can benefit the church or even individual believers, he is given preferential treatment. The poor man is not given a second thought.

What about you? Have you ever done something for someone solely because you thought that person could benefit you?

Have you tried to talk to someone at a party, school, work, or church and intentionally avoided others because you wanted something from someone?

What is so scary about this situation is that just a few verses earlier James gave advice on the motivation and mindset of the poor and rich.

We also see in verses 2-7 that...

3. Showing favoritism misunderstands the gospel (2-7) (CR: 1:9-11)

God himself has used the poor, the foolish, the downtrodden, and cast away to display his mercy, grace, and glory (1 Cor. 1:27).

When we show favoritism, especially based on a motivation of personal gain, to the detriment of others, we defame the gospel.

What makes matters worse for the church James has in mind is that they were playing favorites with someone who did not even like them.

In verses 6-7 James says it is not only a misunderstanding of the gospel to show favoritism, but in their particular circumstance, they were showing favoritism to the rich who were not only lost, but who were persecuting them, and even denying Christ.

We have seen this over the past two decades here in America.

The church in America has over and over again capitulated to societal pressure and changing cultural norms in the hopes to gain the favor of the world.

Instead, what has happened is the church has watered the gospel down to where it is no longer the gospel; they have stained their witness; they have avoided sharing truth to the very ones who need it—all in the name of love, diversity, and inclusion.

When we play favorites, we misunderstand the gospel because we forget or just flat out deny the grace of God for all people.

For many of us this subtlety is displayed in one of two ways:

- We pick and choose who we will share the gospel with
- We pick and choose who we will serve in the church with based off their perceived response to our service

But, in showing favoritism we see a hard biblical truth.

4. To sin in one way is to be guilty of all the law (8-11)

⁸ If, however, you are fulfilling 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 and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all. ¹¹ For He who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not commit murder." Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.

James moves on from his illustration and shows us contrasting truths here.

James shows how the sin of favoritism or partiality actually breaks the royal law of love.

We are called to love our neighbor as ourselves.

If we fulfill this royal law as given in Lev. 19:18, we will not fall guilty of committing the sin of favoritism.

Who is our neighbor? Believers? Nonbelievers? Those we agree with? Those who hold different views than us? Those who are poor? Those who are wealthy?

Yes. All the above.

If favoritism is going to be avoided and the righteousness of God promoted, James reminds us that we must love and serve everyone in need regardless of who they are and what they can offer us.

This is fundamentally what Jesus did.

Mark 10:45, *"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."*

He loved us with his own love so much so that he sacrificed himself for us.

We are also reminded of the importance of the love of neighbor and the definition of neighbor with the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37.

Then, in verses 9-11 James displays to us what we are often guilty of doing.

Those in the churches James was writing to may say to themselves, "I am not guilty of murder or adultery, so favoritism is not that bad."

The problem with this is that righteousness has no exceptions.

We cannot try to excuse our failure in one part of God's law by pointing to our keeping another part of the Bible.

ILL: I didn't take out the trash and when Kristin gets on me I say, "Yes, but I did change the oil."

My service in one area does not off set my irresponsibility in another area.

We cannot pick and choose when we are confronted with the word of God.

We cannot excuse our failure to observe one part, by pointing to our keeping other parts of the Bible.

We can never claim righteousness because we have kept part of God's word.

Yet, we often think this way when it comes to our walk with Christ.

With this in mind we must be reminded that we...

5. Don't mistake the sin of favoritism as a small thing (8-11)

The reason James provides such extreme examples of murder and adultery is he is showing that favoritism is not small sin.

When we show favoritism, it shows a misunderstanding of the gospel.

James uses the two examples to display that God's judgement is for all who break his law.

The law of God exposes sin's true nature: every sin is opposition to God.

Sin is never a question of breaking a single command, but of violating the integrity of the whole law.

You see, the entire word of God reveals to us the character of God and God is not separated into parts or pieces. We cannot disobey one command that we think is small and avoid those we think are big and still be ok.

This is not how the character of God works.

To sin is to break the entire law of God, and this makes the sin of favoritism or any sin we consider "small" a serious offense.

Whoever refuses to love neighbor; whoever refuses to reject favoritism comes under God's judgment.

James says, instead of living this way realize...

6. We are called to live according to the gospel (12)

¹² So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty.

Since we recognize that favoritism is no small thing and that we are called to be impartial in our love, we also recognize that our commitment to live without partiality is a call to live according to the gospel.

The law of liberty is the law of love, the gospel.

Jesus has come to set us free from sin and much of that sin is not only personal but also communal.

Favoritism and partiality are part of the fabric of a lost world, but they have no place in the gospel.

Christ's atonement has not shown favoritism, but his free gift of salvation is offered to all (John 3:16, 2 Peter 3:9).

We are to let scripture and not our habits or cultural norms, be our standard of living.

We must not try to hide behind flimsy excuses for favoritism, prejudice, or racism.

We, as individuals who have been called by a holy God to spread his glory to the world, we are called to love with the same unbridled love he has loved us with and we cannot do this if we live with any sense of favoritism or prejudice.

What does it look like to live according to the law of liberty?

It means that we allow the gospel to dictate our lives. We recognize that we have been set free from the bonds of sin and death.

We know that we have been forgiven of sin and we have an advocate for when we do.

We know that there is not temptation that is stronger than the Spirit within us.

We know that when temptation or improper motivations arise, we can go to the Lord right then and ask for strength to overcome for his glory.

We know that because we have been shown this glorious grace, we are called to show the same grace with others and we cannot do that if we show favoritism or prejudice.

If we fail to live by the law of liberty, we display that we have not encountered Christ and that...

7. There is no mercy for the merciless (13)

¹³ For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

When a person lives without mercy to others, he shows the fact that he has not encountered the God of mercy.

That person displays a hard heartedness that will finally be rooted out by the judgment of God.

And for that person there is no restraint to the wrath of God on the person who does not know Christ.

The only way to avoid the judgment of God is to encounter the person of mercy, Jesus Christ.

But, James says...

8. Mercy triumphs over judgment (13)

The importance of mercy in our relationships is so essential because mercy is a direct indicator of our repentance toward God.

We hope for mercy from others because of the mercy we have received from God. And we expect mercy from others because of the mercy they have received from God.

Mercy triumphs over judgment.

For the sinner who deserves death, God will not give you the judgment you deserve, but if you have placed your faith in Christ, you will be shown mercy.

May we be believers, followers, disciples of Jesus, display the same mercy to others that has been shown to us.

Are you allowing the gospel to impact how you treat others?