

God Doesn't Play Favorites (James 2:1-13)

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It's every elementary school kid's worst-case-scenario: getting picked last by a team captain on the playground. I won't try to elicit your sympathy by telling my own stories as the guy who hovered around 5' tall until I was 16. Suffice it to say, I can relate. The whole logic of picking teams is built on the concept of favoritism.

As a team captain, you're supposed to do what? Evaluate the merits of the masses in front of you according to athletic prowess, assign more worth to some, less value to others, and choose your team accordingly. And woe to the dad who appoints himself team captain and violates the rule by choosing one of the little kids too soon in the name of "kindness."

You could argue choosing teams on a playground is harmless enough. Stop being so sensitive and just enjoy playing the game! The trouble, of course, is that the underlying instinct, our pernicious tendency to judge people, assign a relative worth or value, and treat them accordingly wreaks havoc in countless areas of life.

It's the problem of prejudice, the sin of favoritism. Why is it that we respect people who agree with us politically and count them as our friends, but deride and relationally distance ourselves from those who think differently? Why do we choose to spend all our time around people who talk like us, dress like us, or share our skin color, and keep a healthy distance from those who don't? Why do people who are new to a neighborhood community feel like it's hard to break into existing circles of relationship? Why does someone who knows somebody get the promotion even though you're more qualified?

Favoritism destroys morale in the workplace. It sows bitterness among siblings. It fractures nations, divides cities, triggers wars, and is one of the oldest enemies of the church of Jesus Christ. It's the reason Jews disdained Gentiles and despised Samaritans in Jesus' day. It's the reason white and black people tend to worship in separate churches in our own day. It's a personal issue. It's a social issue. It's a "Why do you have to go meddling in my business, Pastor?" kind of issue. And it's the very issue Lord addresses head on in James 2:1-13. Hear the Word of the Lord:

"My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. 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, 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,' have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? 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? But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you,



and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?

If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. 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. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment."

James has just finished exhorting us at the end of chapter 1 to be obedient doers of the Word by expressing compassionate, personal care for the weak, for people in messy situations where love in anything but neat and tidy. It's what living as a spiritual new creation, a redeemed man or woman made alive through faith in Christ, looks like in action.

As a pastor, James' heart is filled with affection for his hearers. They are (verse 1) his "brothers and sisters." He's also deeply concerned for the condition of their souls and wastes no time in delivering a word of admonition. Verse 1, "My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory."

In other words, if you're going to hold fast to faith in Jesus, if you're going to be a Christian, there's something else you can't hold onto at the same time. You can't hold on to practicing favoritism. You have to stop externally judging people and valuing them differently as a result.

Now to the ears of postmodern culture, that doesn't sound remotely controversial. Of course you should be tolerant and give everyone the respect they deserve! Favoritism, discrimination, and intolerance are the cardinal sins of our day and age. We know it's wrong and HR departments are bending over backwards to make sure we don't forget. Is a sermon on partiality really necessary?

I think it is, friends, because our society, for all our affirmations of tolerance, isn't becoming more unified, loving, or compassionate. If social media tells us anything, we're actually heading in the opposite direction. That alone should cause you to question whether training on "tolerance" in our attitude toward other people is really getting to the root of the partiality within us and around us. James 2:1-13 says it's not. Why not? Because the driving force behind every expression of favoritism isn't our attitude toward men, it's our attitude toward God.

Our tendency to show partiality toward one another on a horizontal level isn't going anywhere until we give attention to our relationship with God on a vertical level, which is exactly what James does in these verses. He reveals just how big a deal our tendency to favoritism really is by pointing out four of the underlying vertical problems, and by implication, the only true solution.

1) FAVORITISM DENIES THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL

In verses 2-4, James summarizes what's happening in their church community. A man who is successful or "rich" by the world's standard comes in and gets treated with respect and honor. A man who is unsuccessful or "poor" by the world's standard comes in and gets treated with disdain to the point of being humiliated. Seating at a dinner or gathering of any sort in the ancient near east was a big deal, reflecting, in this case at least, an economic hierarchy of personal worth or value. Our culture might be different, but the same sort of prejudice is alive and well today.

EXAMPLE #1: "Hello sir! So good to see you today. I don't think I've met you before! Your whole family's looking pretty sharp if I do say so myself. And all your kids are carrying Bibles? My oh my. I see you put a high value on biblical discipleship. We do too. Why don't you come up and sit with my family? Oh, excuse me for just a minute."

"Hey, could you guys move back a row or two? My family usually sits here, and we have some visitors joining us today. Thank you so much." I can't believe their kids are playing video games in church. And did you hear how disrespectfully that girl just spoke to her mom? I bet she's the girl who gave the 7-8-year-old class so much trouble last Sunday. I wouldn't want that rubbing off on my boys. And where's their dad anyway? I bet they're divorced. So unfortunate.

EXAMPLE #2: "Did you see a Mexican family moved into that house down the street?"

"How do you know they're Mexican?" "Well, they're obviously not Americans. They're probably not even legal if you catch my drift." "Well I was thinking we could walk over tonight, introduce ourselves, and invite them to the CG cookout we're hosting this week." "Really? But they don't speak English and we don't speak Spanish. Awkward! I'm just hoping they do something about that front yard. The whole place has been falling down for years. Odds are they won't do anything about it unless I get the HOA involved."

Is it wrong to notice ways people are different, including whether someone is rich or poor, or black or white, educated or less educated? No. There's nothing wrong with observing a difference or recognizing some of the unique challenges in relating to someone who's different than you. The problem comes when we assign worth or value to people on the basis of those differences and respect or reject them accordingly. That's what James means in verse 4 when he says you have "made distinctions among yourselves." You've created a hierarchy of significance. You're practicing favoritism.

But there's an even deeper issue in play. Look back at verse 4. You have "made distinctions among yourself and become judges with evil thoughts." You've adopted a posture of superiority, taking on a role that's not yours. How so? Because the rightful judge isn't you. It's God. And though you might think you can do his job for him, your thoughts are the polar



opposite of his. No matter how many other people think the way you do, God doesn't, and that's what makes your thoughts and judgments evil.

So what makes God's thoughts and judgments different than our own? Verse 5, "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?" Jesus doesn't extend his hand of mercy and salvation to the self-sufficient or self-assured, those who think they have something with which to commend themselves, whether materially or spiritually, and are esteemed accordingly by everyone around them.

He doesn't favor those who are "rich" in the eyes of the world, whether your "world" defines riches as material prosperity, voting for the "right" party, acquiring advanced degrees, practicing philanthropy, having a specific skin color, living in the right neighborhood, or reaching a certain level of Christian maturity. Jesus chooses, Jesus grants the gift of saving faith, and Jesus eternally rewards those who come to him with empty hands, with poverty of spirit, who despair of earning anything from him and cast themselves wholly on his mercy.

It's easier to do that if you're financially poor than if you're financially rich. So while being poor doesn't automatically earn anything from the Lord, Jesus' words in Matthew 5:3 remain true, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." It's the great reversal, the upside-down logic of the gospel.

Whenever we practice favoritism, whether silently or verbally, we're functionally saying the exact opposite. We're denying the truth of the gospel. We're evaluating people as if our worth and value comes from what we do or don't do instead of from what God has done for us in Jesus. The Lord will have none of it because he is jealous for his glory. He doesn't honor the rich; he honors the poor. The sad and sobering reality is that the sort of people we often disdain or avoid as Christians are the very sort of people the Lord delights to save.

2) FAVORITISM REVEALS THE INSANITY OF SIN

In verse 6, James adds a second reason for showing "no partiality." "Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?"

You guys are crazy! You're fawning all over the rich people who show up to your worship gatherings, currying their favor, attempting to ingratiate yourselves, all the while forgetting that most of the trouble you're experiencing in life right now is caused by the same sort of people. They're not benefiting you. They're harming you.

If you're going to show partiality, if you're going to give preferential treatment to someone, it would make sense, at least in the world's eyes, to favor someone who will scratch your back in



return, right? You guys are doing the exact opposite! Even from the pragmatic viewpoint of the world, your favoritism makes no sense.

It's a powerful illustration of the insanity of sin. Think about it. What sort of glory are they (and we) readily enamored by? It's the "glory" of man. The glory of worldly riches. But is that supposed glory really and truly glorious? Not at all. In fact, it's the exact opposite. It won't satisfy the soul with joy and life. It will eventually kill you.

Think about it. If you live in awe of the glory of man, craving, seeking, and thirsting for the approval of other people, what happens? You end up enslaved to an endless cycle of personal achievement and trying to measure up. And you never actually win, you never get to slow down or let up, because as soon as you gain a bit of approval one moment, you have to double down your efforts to avoid losing it the next. Therein lies the great deception of sin. There's no rest for the weary, only endless striving.

There's only one thing that will break you out of the insanity of the fear of man is developing a deeper and stronger fear of the Lord, choosing to love the glory that comes from God more than the glory that comes from man. James hints at as much twice in this passage. Who's name in verse 7 is "honorable"? Who is the true "Lord of glory" in verse 1? It's not you or anyone around you, friend. It's Jesus. He's the glorious one, perfect in beauty, spotless in perfection, which means only his glory can truly satisfy your soul. Chase any other "glory" and it will be the death of you. Fix your gaze on Jesus, behold Jesus, be captivated by the awesome splendor of his person and work, and all the people and riches and "glories" of this world will grow strangely dim.

You won't see anything clearly, the deathly mirage of human glory included, until you see Jesus. If James' hearers had been more captivated by God's glory, they wouldn't have been deceived into fawning over their rich persecutors. Favoritism is a big deal because it reveals the insanity of sin, the folly of chasing the glory of man.

3) FAVORITISM VIOLATES THE LAW OF LOVE

Look at verse 8. "If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors." The Scripture James quotes, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," is from Leviticus 19:18, where Moses warns Israel against the injustice of being "partial to the poor" or deferring to "the great" in a court of law.

Love is the opposite of favoritism, but we don't often think of it that way. We tell ourselves we're good at loving this kind of person and just need to grow a little in loving people who are, you know, a little different. That sort of thinking masks the severity of the issue. The problem with favoritism isn't that you're only loving the people who measure up to your standard. The problem with favoritism is that you're not loving anyone other than yourself.



If you selectively favor someone, you're not doing that for their sake. You're doing it for your sake, because of the way they make you feel or what you think they can do for you. That's not love. That's selfishness. Genuine love gives itself to others for their sake, regardless of their ability to repay you, whether emotionally, relationally, or financially. As Dan McCartney says, "Selective love of neighbor is not love at all; it is a cover for the attempt to gain advantage or benefit."

In Matthew 22, Jesus says the entire law of God is built on the foundation of two commands, which are really two sides of the same coin: love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself. It's the "royal" law, as James says in verse 8, because it's the law of our King, the standard of righteousness in his kingdom.

He's reminding us that favoritism isn't just a misinformed judgment. It's a violation of the law of love. It's a failure to give a group of people the honor and care they are due as image-bearers of God. That means the opposite of being a "judge with evil thoughts" in verse 4 isn't just "not judging" or "not assuming," it's positively loving, actively caring, and aggressively moving toward the weak, the despised, the messy, and everyone who is radically "different" than you because that, Christian, is precisely what God in Christ has done for you.

According to James 2, poor visitors to the church failed to measure up to the standard of respectability set by James' hearers, the "law" they created to distinguish what was good and worthy of honor from what was not. Yet by that very act of judgment they were failing to measure up to the law that ultimately matters, transgressing the law of God himself.

But I can hear the objection because I've heard it in my own mind. "I'm not a law-breaker (relatively speaking). I'm a law-keeper. I mean, I'm sure I need to grow in being a little nicer to people who are inferior, or excuse me, different from me. But let's be honest. If we're going to talk about transgressors of the law, we should probably start with them.

I mean, do you know what they've done? Do you know what they're doing? I've never done that. I would never do that. If anyone is the transgressor around here, it's not me. It's them. Friend, it's the "relative to me" part of your attitude that's the whole problem.

4) FAVORITISM EXPOSES THE ABSENCE OF HUMILITY

Think about the inner logic of partiality. By definition, it treats people differently according to our assessment of their worth or value. So where do we get the criteria for our assessments? Without fail, it's relative to us, isn't it?



If you're poor, it's because you make less money than I do. If you're rich, it's because you make more money than I do. If you're well-behaved, it's because you act at least as good if not better than I do. If you're badly behaved, it's because you act worse than I do. If you're a good parent, it's because you're doing what I do. And if you're a good leader, it's because you're making the choices I would make.

The underlying problem in all those scenarios is exactly the same. I'm the standard. My characteristics, my achievements, my combination of strengths and weaknesses, the color of my skin, the neighborhood I live in, the kind of job I have, the kind of church I go to, whatever I am, possess, or do, that's the definition of all that is good and right.

Why is that a problem? Because I'm not the judge. I'm not the lawgiver. The standard of righteousness isn't who I am. It's who God is. Right and wrong are relative to him, not me. And that means what? In the courtroom of heaven, we're all lawbreakers. James 2:10, "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it."

When I was 15 years old, that was the verse God used to open my eyes to see just how much I needed a Savior. I was a very self-righteous young man. I thought of myself as a good kid and viewed most other people, on balance, as coming up short. Live like me and I would extend my favor. Fail to live like me and I wouldn't call you out, I would just find you wanting in the quiet of my own mind.

What was missing? The humility that recognizes all of us come up short in the courtroom of heaven. The humility that recognizes I'm not righteous. Only God is righteous. I'm a sinner who needs a Savior. Favoritism toward men is ultimately rooted in a self-righteous absence of humility before God.

Remember, it doesn't matter how many individual laws you've broken relative to other people. Even if you've only broken one of them, what are you? You're a lawbreaker. You're a transgressor. God doesn't grade on a curve. It's pass/fail. And if you are even one degree off from the mark of his infinite perfections, you fail.

Douglas Moo's insight is helpful on this point. "If we view the law as a series of individual commandments, we could assume that disobedience of a particular commandment incurred guilt for that commandment only. But, in fact, the individual commandments are part and parcel of one indivisible whole, because they reflect the will of the one Lawgiver. To violate a commandment is to disobey God himself and render a person guilty before him."

I'm not the judge and nor are you. God is. So instead of speaking and acting as if we are (and bestowing our favor accordingly), we must speak and act (verse 12) as those who are going to "be judged." How does a person who knows they are going to "be judged" speak? With the humility that comes from recognizing we need God's mercy just as much as they do.



It works like this. If you don't recognize your need for mercy before the judgment seat of God, it is invariably because you have exchanged his perfect law for an achievable substitute of your own. When that happens, you will invariably practice favoritism, you will have to look down on some group of people for one reason or another, because it's the only way you can maintain the illusion that you're superior, that you're sufficient, and that you measure up.

In contrast, what does the gospel say? Two things. First, none of us measure up to the law of God, the law that ultimately matters. We all need a Savior! Second, Jesus is the Savior we all desperately need. He lived, died, and rose from the grave to restore the joy of relationship with God that we lost on account of our sin. And he doesn't save us because of who we are or what we've accomplished. He saves us because he is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

Favoritism says your worth and value come from who you are or what you've accomplished and judges people accordingly. The gospel says your worth and value come from who Jesus is, what he has accomplished and loves people accordingly. Not until you're resting in the righteousness Jesus has given you will you be freed from using other people to validate your own.

He who has been forgiven much, love much. He who has received mercy delights to lavish mercy. The opposite of favoritism, love for your neighbor, can only grow in the soil of humility before God.

CONCLUSION

You could summarize James' entire message this way: Love replaces favoritism when our hearts are humbled by the truth of the gospel. But if we refuse to humble ourselves before the judgment seat of God, confessing our need for his mercy and lavishing on others the mercy we have found in Jesus, the warning in verse 13 stands. "For judgment (the judgment of God on the final day) is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy." Jesus says as much himself in Matthew 25. For that reason, friends, do not show partiality.

God doesn't play favorites; nor should we. Favoritism denies the truth of the gospel. Favoritism illustrates the insanity of sin. Favoritism violates the law of love. Most importantly, favoritism exposes the absence of humility. A day of judgment is fast approaching when we will all be humbled whether we want to or not. Humble yourself now or be humbled later. The choice is yours.

I urge you, don't wait. Confess your need for God's mercy, rejoice in the mercy he has lavished on you in Jesus, and then love all the people around you accordingly – black and white, rich and poor, easy to love and hard to love. Practice that kind of mercy for that reason, friend, and you can be confident of the Lord's vindication on the final day.