

James: Favoritism: A Contradiction of Christian Living

James 2:1-13

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to James chapter two as we continue to work our way through this great book together. We have looked at the first chapter together now, and it has become apparent to us that there are two grand themes that are being dealt with, two great topics that are being explored in the first chapter of James. In verses two through eighteen, James is dealing with the Christian and trials, and he is especially concerned that we would respond to trials christianly, that we would respond to the difficulties, the tragedies of life, the hardships, the obstacles, the trials of life in a biblical way, in a way that glorifies God, and in a way which is helpful to our own selves as we grow in grace. And he stresses in those verses that God's providence over our trials, and God's use of our trials for our own growth in grace, are to have a controlling impact on the believer so that when the believer does go through trials he says, "Well, Lord, this is what you've been preparing me for, and You're going to use this trial to make me into that which I am not now—that is, into the very image of Your own dear Son." And it makes a complete change on the part of the believer when he looks at trials in that way.

Then, it seems as if James changes the subject completely and utterly when he gets to verse 19, because in verse 19, all the way to the end of the chapter to verse 27, James speaks about the reality that there are some people who profess to be Christians, and yet do not live as if they are Christians. He argues that your Christianity ought to permeate every area of life, and yet, there are some Christians who profess a personal piety and who do not display a public morality. And he takes the example in verse 27 of how we love, how we care for, how we show mercy to widows and orphans as an index of our spirituality. In other words, he says, if you claim to be a Christian, and yet do not show practical, tangible love to those in the covenant community who are in need, who are vulnerable, and not your own family members, because it's easy for you to turn a blind eye, that if you don't show love in those relationships, then it doesn't speak well for the claims of your profession. Hard hitting words.

And you wonder how in the world does that fit with trials? Well, in both cases how you undergo trials and how you display love in public social relationships like

that, you reveal the truth of your profession. Many people, in the midst of trial, show that they've never really been trusting in the lord Jesus Christ. So also, many people, by their social behavior, their public behavior, their lack of Christian behavior in social relationships show that they do not know the Lord Jesus Christ.

And then when we get to James chapter two, he gives us a negative example of public behavior, and he challenges us with that particular sin. So let's turn to James chapter two, verse one, and hear God's holy word.

James 2:1-13

If you wanted to deny the faith, how would you do it? You wake up one morning and you decide you want to deny the faith. How do you go about doing that? Do you renounce your membership? Do you write a book or a pamphlet criticizing the central tenets of the Christian faith? Do you join the local atheist club? Well, James, in this passage, tells you one way that you can deny the faith. Try showing favoritism towards some and bias towards others. James counts that as fundamental denial of the gospel. Think of it. To show favoritism is a denial of the faith and of gospel. If that is true, we better find out what he means by favoritism. In this passage, James, in verses one through seven, teaches us that the Christian faith is utterly incompatible with favoritism. And then, in verses eight through thirteen, teaches that Jesus' royal law is incompatible with favoritism. And I'd like to look at those two things with you from this passage today.

I. In our outreach and life as a congregational family, we must manifest the principles of the gospel.

First, allow your eyes to fall on verses one through seven. Here, James makes it clear that the Christian faith is incompatible with favoritism, and so in our outreach, in our life as a congregational family, in our witness, we must manifest the principles of the gospel, not the spirit of partiality and favoritism. James states his first principle in verse one. This is the caption for everything else he's going to say all the way down to verse thirteen: "My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism." He's saying that the Christian faith is utterly incompatible with petty favoritism and shallow prejudice.

And James uses several terms for this in this passage in order to indicate what kind of behavior he's talking about. Here in verse one, he speaks of personal favoritism, or, if you're using an older version, it may say *respecter of persons*. But if you'll look forward to verse three, he speaks about paying special attention to some while ignoring others. In verse four, he talks about making distinctions. In verse nine, he speaks about showing partiality, and in verse thirteen he even uses the language of showing no mercy towards the person. All of these are the

words that he uses to indicate the kind of behavior that is a fundamental and functional denial of the Christian faith. So, we'd better ask, "What is that? What does he mean by personal favoritism?"

Well, let's start off with what he doesn't mean first. What does James not mean by personal favoritism? Well, among other things, he doesn't mean that it's wrong to make appropriate distinctions. It would be totally wrong to condemn, let's say, an usher who met an elderly person at the door who was on crutches or in a wheelchair and at the same time a healthy nineteen year old strapping lad was coming in, there would be nothing wrong with that usher bringing that person who was older and infirm into a convenient place to sit during the service. That would be a manifestation of love, even though he's making a distinction. The distinction doesn't come from bias or shallow prejudice. It comes from a manifestation of love. There is a need that the elderly person may have that the young person doesn't have. And the response of love is to make a distinction in that circumstance.

James doesn't mean that we shouldn't show due deference to people. If the President of the United States showed up in worship or the governor of the state showed up in worship, there would be nothing wrong with us showing a due deference to such people as God has put in authority over us. James is not arguing about some sort of radical egalitarianism here that wipes out all social distinctions and says that you cannot show due respect to people in authority. That's not James' point.

What does he mean, then, by personal favoritism? What does he mean by partiality? Well, he means this: he means a self-serving discrimination that is based upon shallow externals. Look at what he says in verse four: "When you do this, when you make these kinds of distinctions, you have become judges with evil motives." What evil motives? Well, here's how you see that self serving discrimination based on shallow externals. In the case of the rich man, the rich man arrives at the door and everybody goes, "Boy, could he be a big giver to the congregation. No more budget troubles here. Come on, we've got a seat right up front for you." Or, in that case, right in the back, move over everybody on the back row. We've got the spot for you.

Whereas, when they see the poor person, the response is disdain. We wouldn't want a person like that, that bag lady, that tramp, that person from the wrong side of the tracks, we wouldn't want a person like that in our fellowship. I wouldn't want my children to play with his children or her children. We have a disdain for that person.

And so, on the positive side, we would be looking at the rich visitor from the standpoint of what he can do for us. Whereas, on the negative side, we would be disdaining another as unworthy of our attention because he or she is different from us or perhaps in our own view, beneath us. My friends, one way to test your

grasp of God's mercy is to ask how you treat other sinners. How do you respond when you encounter people who are different from you—different in ways that you don't like or aren't comfortable with or are beneath you. How do you respond? Usually our response is favoritism—a shallow, superficial discrimination based upon externals. But that is not the response of someone who knows God's mercy. One who knows that he or she is only a poor sinner saved by grace.

Now, James applies the principle of verse one in verses two through four. He gives you a concrete illustration. It's the illustration of the rich man and the poor man showing up at the back of the sanctuary at the same time. And it's an illustration of petty favoritism and shallow prejudice where we favor one person over another based merely upon externals, and my friends, it's an illustration that could be applicable in any generation. You could cross 2,000 years of church life, and you could find just that kind of petty favoritism in the church. In this case, James' illustration is the illustration of how we might prefer someone who has wealth and influence over someone who is poor and obscure and untidy and not like us. But James could have illustrated this petty prejudice and shallow favoritism in other ways. He could have spoken about race or color or the language that a person uses or their background or many other things.

But his point is this: we show petty favoritism when we allow those kinds of mere externals to dictate our mistreatment of some and our flattery of others. And James in verses five through seven wants us to put this kind of behavior in light of God's redemptive plan. Look at what he says, "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 loved him?" James wants us to think about our treatment of other people, and I want you to notice he's talking about our treatment of non-Christians here. This isn't just how we treat one another in the body. These people are strangers to the church. They are visitors. They don't know where to sit. They have to be ushered to the right place to be seated. Both the rich man and the poor man, perhaps seekers, but not members of that local congregation.

James is talking about our attitude even towards those who are outside the community of faith. And how is that attitude to be governed and controlled? By looking at the principle of God's redeeming plan. One of the glories of that redeeming plan is that in God's grace He chose us in spite of ourselves and in spite of our sins. He didn't look at us and say, "You know, they have a lot to offer Me. I think I'll save them." He looked at us, and in spite of ourselves, He drew us into His family. And James is saying, in the way that God drew you by mercy into His family, that must be controlling for how you look at people in the world who are different from you, who you may instinctively think of as beneath you, or with whom you do not want to fellowship. As Christians, for us to reject the despised and the downcast and the overlooked and to receive certain persons because they are considered inherently more worthy of respect is a fundamental contradiction of grace. God is saying, "I didn't look at your worth, or else you'd be

in hell.” My grace, My mercy was the controlling dictate in My treatment of you, and therefore as you treat others, My mercy is your example.

And this is an Old and a New Testament theme that you’ll find over and over again. We can’t do it justice, but let me take you a few places just to remind you of it. In Deuteronomy 7:7-8, God will go out of His way to make sure that the children of Israel don’t misunderstand the doctrine of His choosing them, of His electing them. He says to them in Deuteronomy 7:7, “I did not set My love on you or choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples. For you were the fewest of all peoples. But because I loved you and kept the oath which I swore to your forefathers.” In other words, the reason that you are Mine resides in Me, not in you. I didn’t look at you and count you worthy. I looked at you and I loved you just because I loved you. And therefore, I made you My own. And we are to treat others with that same spirit of mercy.

Luke 1:46-55: Mary has just been told that she will bear the Messiah, and what does she say? “Lord, you have done mighty deeds with your arm. You’ve scattered those who are proud in the thoughts of their hearts. You’ve brought down the rulers from their thrones. You exalted those who were humbled.” Here she is a little teen-aged girl in the countryside of Galilee, and she’s going to be the bearer of the incarnate Son of God, which just totally turns upside down the world’s systems of values. We wouldn’t have expected that God, the God of heaven and earth, the God who had a Son who was reigning on high with a kingly crown, to bring Him into the world through that teenage Jewess, and that is precisely what He did. Jesus, when He quotes the Scripture from Isaiah 61:1 and 2, when He’s in His own hometown synagogue in Nazareth, you remember what He reads to them? “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He appointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He sent Me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of the sight to the blind, to set free those who were oppressed, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord.” And He says, “Today the Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” And James is saying, in light of what God is doing in His redeeming plan, it would be a fundamental contradiction of His grace for us to despise the poor and favor the rich. God’s not operating that way.

That’s why Paul could say to the Corinthians in I Corinthians 1:26-31, “Consider your calling, brethren, there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise and the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen. He’s chosen the things that are not so that he might nullify the things that are so that no man may boast before the Lord. And so if a man boasts, let him boast in the Lord.” See, grace is the leveler of our worthiness. And so for a Christian, then, to make his estimation of how he treats people in the world based on their inherent worthiness in his own eyes is a contradiction of God’s mercy to us. It’s just like that man who had been forgiven much going out and immediately demanding the return of his investment from the man who was even poorer than he.

How do you show that kind of favoritism towards other people? How do you show that kind of shallow favoritism or prejudice which is based on mere externals? I don't know. There are many ways to do it. But one way that we certainly struggle in is in the area of the color of person's skin. At the General Assembly in Birmingham this last year, Henry Louis Smith, the long-time Stated Clerk of Southeast Alabama Presbytery, introduced a personal resolution which was passed almost unanimously, and it read like this: This thirtieth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America calls upon all those under its care to search their hearts before the triune God, who is not a respecter of persons, and to repent of and renounce any racism and/or class consciousness, and further, this Assembly encourages its local churches to make known that the doors to its worship and the arms of its fellowship are open warmly to welcome all persons without regard to race, class, or national origin, and that it welcomes into its membership all who come with a credible profession of the faith in the great king and head of the church and Savior of the body, the Lord Jesus Christ." Is that where your heart is? Your heart of mercy towards people who are different from you? James is saying this is a test of whether you've really tasted the mercy of God. How do you view those that are different from you, or maybe even those whom you would instinctively think of as beneath you? Do you view them with mercy? Do you treat them with mercy? Do you welcome them in? That's James' challenge to us. But he doesn't stop there.

II. In our growth in grace, we must strive to seek to live out the whole law of God.

He goes on in verses 8-13 to say it's not just that the faith is denied when we show petty favoritism and shallow prejudice, but it's Jesus' royal law that is contradicted. It's incompatible with favoritism, and if we're going to grow in grace, we must strive to seek to live out the whole law of God, not just bits of it. James again, in verse eight, states the first principle. He reminds us of Jesus' call to neighbor love. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." That ought to settle it. If you're loving your neighbor as yourself, you're not going to show base, shallow prejudice based on the externals. Would you want to be treated that way? But partiality, he says in verse 9, is a denial, it's a violation of that very command, because Jesus' royal law is incompatible with petty partiality. Not only that, but violation of God's commands at this point makes one a law breaker because holiness is one, the law is all of one piece, and to break it in one place is to break it everywhere.

You see, James knows that he's writing to people who care about the Bible, and they do care about following the commands of God and they do care about holiness. But the problem is, they've got blind spots, and they spend a lot of time working on holiness in area "A" and they've left this gargantuan gap in area "B". And he says, look, you can spend all your time being holy over here and ignore

God's law over here, and you're breaking the whole law, and so he challenges them right in this area of favoritism, and he gives an illustration in verses 11 and 12: You can refrain from sexual immorality and commit murder and still be a lawbreaker, he says. You've been holy in one area of the law, but you've broken the law in another.

So also, he says, you can be pursuing godliness as you think in some area of life, and yet ignoring God's word in another area. And what are you? You are a lawbreaker. And if we realize the demands of keeping the whole law, what's it going to do to us? It's going to drive us back to God for mercy. Because we know if we stand before God and we're judged by our keeping of the law, what's going to happen? We're going to be condemned!

And so in verse 12 he says it throws you back on what? The law of liberty. The fact that when you stand before the throne you won't be judged according to your works, because if you're judged according to your works, you'll be condemned. But you're judged according to Christ's works, and you're accepted according to Christ's works, and you're declared righteous according to Christ's works. And you're invited into the kingdom of heaven because of Christ's works. That's the law of liberty. And he says, now, if you've received that mercy from God, if you've received that liberty, that freedom from the bondage to sin and condemnation through the mercy and grace of God, how are you going to treat other people? Isn't your heart going to overflow with mercy?

And if it's not overflowing with mercy, is that an indication that you've never tasted of his mercy? Now, shallow favoritism is sinning against the rule of Christ and the whole law of God, and it's inviting his strictest judgment. A vital faith will lead to our demonstrating mercy in accepting others, especially those who are different from us, those who make us uncomfortable, those who are less fortunate than we are. And it would transform our Christianity, and it would transform our Christian witness if we really began to live this out.

But I want to say, my friends, it's painful to live this out. There are people in this room who've lived it out, and it's cost them. But that's the cost that Jesus calls us to. May God start here changing our hearts, and may He be pleased to use it for revival. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, search us out to see if there be any unclean thing in us. Banish from us an unmerciful spirit of shallow favoritism, and make us to be those who in their relationships, even with strangers, show the love of Christ and the welcoming embrace of a beggar showing another beggar the one who has redeemed us from the pit and given us the bread of heaven and invited us to his banquet and accepted us as his brothers. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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