

"Personal Favoritism"

James 2:1-13

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Introduction:

I would imagine that all of us here this morning have a favorite. Perhaps you have a favorite color, or maybe you have a favorite grocery store, or maybe you have a favorite flavor. Most of you know that I love Coke more than Pepsi, and then, of course, down at Culver's, I prefer any flavor of the day that includes Reese's Peanut Butter Cup. It is hard to go wrong with chocolate and peanut butter together!

At the same time, we also know that having favorites has the potential for causing trouble. We know that when a parent favors one child over another, nothing good can come from that. Of course, in our family, I tell my son that he is my favorite son, I tell my daughter that she is my favorite daughter, and I tell my wife that she is my favorite wife. But in the Bible, we know what happened when Jacob favored Joseph over the other sons in that family. There were some huge issues in that family as a result of the favoritism. And as we can imagine, there are also some terrible dangers when it comes to expressing favoritism in the church. Of course, we hope that we do not favor certain people over others, but whenever any number of people get together, there is always the danger of favoritism.

This morning, I would invite you to turn with me to a powerful passage of Scripture in the book of **James**, in **James 2**. In our pew Bibles, the passage begins at the very bottom of **page 1888—James 2:1-13**. Most of us know that the book of **James** is a very practical book. In fact, it has been compared to the book of **Proverbs**, and one commentary on **James** has been titled, *What Christian Living is All About*, and that would be a very accurate description of the book of **James**. We know that James was a leader in the Jerusalem congregation, and we also know that James is the Lord's younger brother. As we are about to discover, the passage deals primarily with favoritism within the church, and yet we will discover some very important principles that will also apply in our daily lives. If you will, then, please look with me at **James 2:1-13**...

¹ 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.

As we look back over this paragraph of Scripture, I would like to emphasize the fact that personal favoritism is a *spiritual concern*. Perhaps we may be tempted to minimize what may seem to be a trivial concern, but the Lord's brother reminds us that personal favoritism is a spiritual matter that is deeply tied to who we are as Christians.

I. First of all, then, as we look back at what James has to say, we discover in the first four verses that FAVORITISM IS A SPIRITUAL PROBLEM.

In the very first verse, James just comes right out and says it, "***My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism.***" As I understand it, the reference to "***personal favoritism***" goes back to a single Greek word that refers to receiving someone's face. Well, that's a little strange, isn't it? But when we think about it, we see what James is saying to us. He is warning about the danger of accepting someone based on their face, or based on the way they look. To receive someone "***by face***" is to accept them based on some of those surface characteristics.

And to emphasize the fact that judging people based on how they look is really a spiritual problem, we find (in **verses 2-4**) that James tells us a pretty interesting story. Like his older brother, James can also tell an awesome story! And in the story, we learn about two men who come into the assembly of the church, and we find that the first man appears to be very rich. In fact, James says that the first man

comes in with, **“...a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes.”** The word used here for **“gold ring”** literally refers to a **“gold-fingered man,”** the word **“ring”** is not even in this verse, and so the idea is not that the man has a gold ring on his finger, but he perhaps has MANY rings on his fingers. He is a **“gold-fingered man.”** And then we find that he is **“dressed in fine clothes.”** The word **“fine”** is the basis for our English word **“lamp,”** and so the idea is that the man’s clothes are shining! As I understand it, the same word is used in the Bible to refer to the robe that Herod’s soldiers placed on the Lord before His crucifixion, and the same word was also used by Cornelius to refer to the clothing that was worn by the angel that appeared to him. And so the idea is that this rich man stands out because of what he is wearing.

But then on the other hand, **“there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes.”** The root of the word for **“poor man”** goes back to a word that refers to crouching, to bending over as a beggar would do. The word for **“dirty”** refers to something that has some kind of filthy stain on it. One commentary refers to this as being the same as the Greek word for **“earwax.”** And so we have the picture of a poor beggar in earwax-stained clothing who also comes in to the assembly of the church.

Now, please notice what happens in **verse 3**: In this hypothetical story, the church pays **“special attention”** to the man who is wearing the fine clothing, they invite him to sit in a **“good place,”** but then they tell the poor man to either stand or to sit down on the floor by someone else’s footstool. And at this point, we can almost see James getting angry, because he asks the question, **“Have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives?”**

Notice: James takes this scenario and defines it as a spiritual problem. He cuts right to the heart of the matter and accuses certain people in the early church of being **“judges with evil motives.”** He defines this as *evil behavior*. It is an issue of the heart—it is a spiritual problem. And the reason is, we have put ourselves in God’s place. By showing personal favoritism, by preferring one man over another, by accepting someone based on their face, we have made a judgment about a person’s character that only God can make.

Years ago, I took a class in cross cultural communication down at UW Whitewater, and in that class we learned about something that nearly all of us do when we meet a new person. Whenever we meet someone, we almost always try to find something that we have in common. We are seeking common ground. In our culture, what’s the first thing we want to know? Usually, we ask, **“What do you do?”** That is, we want to know what that person does for a living. In other words, when it gets right down to it, we are looking for what we might have in common financially. But then from there, we try to get down to something that we have in common. **“Oh, you’re a carpenter? Well, I also like working with wood.” “Oh, you like to fish? I don’t fish, but I do like canoeing.” “Oh, you’re from Chicago; well, I grew up down that way.”** Over and over again, when we meet new people, we very quickly get down to what we have in common, and that’s okay—that’s just how we get to know people.

But here in the book of James, the early Christians were also boiling it down, but then they used that information to treat these people differently. And James says that they had become judges with evil motives. He defined this personal favoritism as a spiritual problem.

II. As we look at the next few verses, James goes even further, and he shows them that making judgments based on a person's finances was especially offensive to God because it represents A SPIRITUAL CONFLICT, A CONTRADICTION.

Perhaps we are tempted to favor the rich, and yet we know that some of the most ungodly people run around in some amazing clothes. And we also know that some of the most God-fearing people have some of the most ordinary clothes. There is a conflict between how people look and how they behave, and really, there is no connection between the two.

We think of Jesus Himself. Jesus was poor. We know from the Scriptures that His mother offered the sacrifice of a poor person when the Lord was born. The Old Law said that when a child was born you had to offer a lamb; or, if you could not afford a lamb, you could offer two doves. Mary offered the doves. Jesus was born into a poor family. It all goes back to my favorite verse in the entire Bible (2 Corinthians 8:9), ***"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich."*** During His time on this earth, as far as we know, Jesus never owned a house, He never owned any land, He never owned a boat, He never owned an animal, and there is no reference to Jesus owning anything other than the clothes on His own back.

We think about the early Christians—generally speaking, they also were poor. Most of the first disciples were fishermen, and even they dropped everything in order to follow the Lord. They basically had nothing. I have read that in the year 178 AD, the Roman philosopher Celsus made fun of Christians for their poverty. He said, ***"They are vulgar, like a swarm of bats or ants creeping out of their nests, or frogs holding a symposium amid a swamp, or worms in a convention in a corner of mud."*** Early Christians were like a convention of worms! There were a few exceptions, some followers of the Lord were wealthy, but the Lord treated them all the same. He spoke to the blind man by the side of the road with the same respect as the Rich Young Ruler. He spoke with the lame and the poor with the same respect as He spoke with Zaccheus, a wealthy tax collector. In fact, as brother James read for us earlier from Luke 4, when Jesus began His ministry, He started with that prophecy from the book of Isaiah, ***"THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR."*** The Lord's purpose in coming to this earth was to reach out and minister to the poor.

And so when the early church made a superficial judgment, giving the rich man a seat of honor and telling the poor man to either stand in the back or sit on the floor, I think we can see why James (and the Lord) would be incredibly upset by that. It

represents a spiritual conflict, a contradiction. The Lord did not settle for the poor, but He chose the poor. He loves the poor and wants them to be included in the church. And so when we make those superficial judgments based on the way a person looks, we are actually contradicting the Lord's choice and we are working against the Lord.

James goes on to explain another contradiction here, and that is: Generally speaking, the rich are those who abuse the church! And so the problem is: The church was honoring and giving preference to a class of people who were primarily responsible for the persecution of the Lord's body. Generally speaking, the rich are those who mock the Lord. Jesus was murdered by the rich and ruling class. Perhaps we can make some kind of parallel with Hollywood. Imagine a famous actor coming in here, and we get all excited and give that person a place of honor—but generally speaking, those in Hollywood would like the church to just disappear—they don't care what we think. And so James is saying that there is a spiritual contradiction here, that giving preference to the rich simply does not make sense and actually goes against everything that God is for. So, there is a spiritual problem, there is a spiritual conflict...

III. ...but let us now consider THE SPIRITUAL SOLUTION.

As we look down at verses 8-13, we find that James brings it back to the *"royal law."* In fact, the word *"law"* is used five times right here in just a few verses, and so it must be incredibly important. We find that it is referred to as the *"royal" law*; that is, the law we are considering here has been issued by a King. It is a royal command. You know, if I don't plant the right kind of bush in just the right spot in my yard, I may violate some rule from the neighborhood association. If I do not park where I should, I might offend the City of Madison. If I refuse to pay my property taxes, I might get Dane County or the State of Wisconsin mad at me. If I do some horrible thing at a Post Office, perhaps I have committed a federal crime. And the higher up the crime goes, the worse the penalty is. But we are talking here about so much more—James is referring to the Royal Law. This is not a rule about how high you cut your grass, but this is a law that goes all the way to the top. He is referring to a law that has been issued by the King. It is the *"royal law,"* and the royal law says, *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* That is a law that came from God Himself. We first read about it in the Old Testament, in the Law of Moses, and then it is repeated by the Lord in the New Testament. You might remember that on the night before He died, the Lord spoke to His disciples and said, *"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another"* (John 13:34-35). James is saying here that if we show personal favoritism (in this case, if we favor the rich over the poor), if we do that, then we have violated the royal law.

Now, at this point, James seems to anticipate several objections. James can imagine people saying, *"Oh, come on! It's not like I've murdered anybody! It's not like I've committed adultery!"* And so James is ready with a comeback, *"It*

doesn't matter!" James is saying. Think about it this way: If you are using a chain to pull a car out of a snow bank, how many links of that chain need to break for that chain to be useless? Only one! How many rocks to you need to throw through a window for the window to shatter? Only one! How many fatal diseases does it take to kill a man? Only one! Or think about it this way: When a sheep decides to jump over a section of fence, how many sections does he need to jump over in order to escape from the pasture? Only one! In the same way, we do not need to break all of God's commandments in order to be lost.

And so what's the harm in showing just a little preference towards those who are rich? What's the harm in just quietly stepping away from a visitor who is just a little socially awkward? What's the harm in only eating out with the same all the time, all the while ignoring other members who may not fit in with our little rules concerning who we will associate with? The harm is: It violates the royal law! It offends the King! It offends the Lord who came to this earth in a poor man's body!

Let us realize that without the love of God, we are just as offensive in the sight of God as that teenager is in our sight, who appears to have lost a fight with a nail gun! Without the love of God, we are just as offensive in the sight of God as that homeless guy is in our sight, with the earwax-stained clothing.

And so when we look around us, do we see clothing, and hair, and jewelry, or do we see souls that have been made in the image of God? The point is: Even if we think we may be doing well in other areas of life, if we stumble into this temptation by showing personal favoritism, then the rest does not really matter. If I am called before the judge for a speeding ticket, I cannot defend myself by claiming that I mow my grass every week. It doesn't work that way. And so James tells us that there is a spiritual solution for this problem. The solution is to realize that making judgments based on outward appearance is a spiritual problem, and we correct the problem by adjusting the way we think about people. When we honor the rich, when we honor any group of people over another, it contradicts God's choice, and it violates the royal law.

Conclusion:

As we close, there is the obvious application that we are to honor and respect all members and all visitors to this congregation, without regard to whether they are like us, without regard to their gold rings, or their beautiful clothing, or the stains that they may have on their clothing.

But even beyond the obvious, let us also recommit as a congregation to reaching out to those who are poor. In just about two months, we plan on coordinating the third clothing give-away to ever be hosted by this congregation. Last year, we had more than 100 local families stop by and help themselves to all kinds of clothing that had been donated primarily by members of this congregation, but also by outsiders. Sister Patsy has done a great work with this. In the bulletin this morning there is an insert. I would suggest that you take this and give it to a friend or a neighbor. Tell

your neighbors that while most churches have garage sales, we are giving it away, and if they have any leftover clothing from a garage sale, we will take it, and we will give it away! The church here is to be commended for that. If you are looking for a way to get involved, talk to Patsy or Juanita. Come by during those first few weeks in August to sort clothing. Come by on Saturday, August 14, to help with the crowd. Like Jesus, let us also reach out to the poor.

If you are not yet a Christian, regardless of whatever you may be wearing this morning, the Bible teaches that we respond to God's gift of Jesus on the cross by having a change of heart concerning sin, by publicly stating our belief in Jesus as the Son of God, and by allowing ourselves to be buried with Christ in baptism. If you have something we need to pray about as a congregation, let us know. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org