

The Sin of Favoritism

Text: James 2:1-4

Introduction.

Good morning everyone. Go ahead and open your Bibles to James 2:1.

This is the final message in our series entitled Pride, Prejudice and the Gospel. Last week, we took a look at the life of Peter to see how pride surfaces in our hearts to separate us from each other on the basis of things like ethnicity. Today, I want us to see how *prejudice* tends to separate us in unnecessary ways, not just on the basis of things like ethnicity, but on the basis of things like class as well. So let's read James 2:1-4 together and then we'll pray.

James 2:1-4

1 My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. 2 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, 3 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," 4 have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

Prayer.

Lord, Psalm 139 says "Search me...and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts. And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." Please search us as we study your word together this morning. Help us to see the things in our hearts that still grieve you. Show us one more time that those things are being taken out of the world forever. They won't be here anymore after you have made all things new by your Spirit.

And finally, lead us in the way that is everlasting by bringing us and our grievous ways to the cross of Jesus Christ, where you graciously make an end of all our sin. Amen.

Sermon.

First of all, what is prejudice? Webster's Dictionary defines prejudice as "a preconceived judgment or opinion," or "an irrational attitude of hostility directed against an individual or a group." At its heart, *prejudice is simply a prejudgment that is based more upon appearances and assumptions than it is upon actual knowledge of the person or thing being judged.*

You can hear the prejudice in Nathanael's voice when Philip first told him about Jesus.

John 1:45-46

Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him of whom Moses...wrote, Jesus of Nazareth..." Nathanael said to [Philip], "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Now, prejudice, *in and of itself*, is not necessarily bad. It can be good at times. I'll give you an example. Suppose I go downstairs in the morning to get a bowl of cereal, take the milk out of the fridge, and notice that today is the expiration date. You know how this goes. You take off the cap and *smell* the milk. If you still can't tell whether or not the milk is good, you taste it.

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Now, suppose the little bit of milk that you tasted was awful. What do you do with the rest? And no...the correct answer is not “put it back in the fridge so that your wife or your roommate can have the same awful experience.” You throw it out. I don’t need to personally experience the rest of the milk to know that *it’s* bad too. I’m prejudiced against the rest of the milk, and most of you would probably have no problem with my prejudice.

However, I think we all realize that it’s one thing for us to give in to our prejudice against the milk because of a bad experience with a little part of it, and quite another thing for us to give in to our prejudice against an entire group of people because of a bad experience with a little part of that group.

In any case, my point is to say that prejudice, in and of itself, is not necessarily bad. But the thing that most of us have in mind when we hear the word prejudice usually *is* bad.

Now, with the rest of our time, I want us to answer three questions:

1. How does prejudice tend to show up in our lives?
2. What are some of the biggest areas of challenge that we will face as a church?
3. Why is Jesus the key to overcoming our prejudice?

How does prejudice tend to show up in our lives?

Sometimes, prejudice expresses itself as hateful speech or physical violence. We’ve seen some examples of that over the past few weeks. But sometimes, prejudice is more subtle. Sometimes, prejudice against *one* group expresses itself as favoritism toward *another*. This more subtle form of prejudice is the one that I think is most likely to show up in your life and mine, and it is *this* form of prejudice that James deals with in our passage. Let’s go through it together.

James 2:1

“My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.”

The first thing that I want us to notice is that this command is addressed to the church. James says, “my brothers...” and then he gives his command to avoid favoritism. Why is that so important? It’s important because, when we get the urge to throw Bible verses at the rest of the world in response to their failure to live up to our standards, we need to remember that God is throwing those verses at *us* first.

Now, having said that, let’s move on to our second question:

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What are some of the biggest areas of challenge that we will face as a church?

You'll notice in our text that James, immediately after giving the command to avoid favoritism, moves straight into an illustration of a scenario that would have presented a considerable challenge to his hearers.

James 2:2-4

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?

Do we give preferential treatment to some because of their wealth? Are we partial to those who have put more money into the offering? What are some of the *other* things that we use to make ungodly distinctions between people in the church? Here are a few:

- Race (Acts 10)
- Level of Education (John 7:14-15; Acts 4:13)
- Zip Code (John 1:45-46)
- Physical Beauty
- Leadership Positions (i.e. the pastor's kids are the special kids)

For the sake of time, I will leave all of these alone and briefly mention two that I think will pose perhaps the *greatest* challenges for us here at Redemption Hill: **sexual orientation, and political affiliation.**

SEXUAL ORIENTATION.

Let me do what James did. Let me move straight into an illustration of a scenario that would present us with a considerable challenge. Before I do, however (lest we be misinterpreted here), I should say that the practice of homosexuality is clearly defined as sin in the Bible. For instance:

1 Corinthians 6:9-10

...Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

Romans 1:26-27

For this reason, God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

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So the Bible is clear. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, “men who practice homosexuality” are among those who will not “inherit the kingdom of God.” And in Romans 1:26-27, homosexuality is described as being “contrary to nature.” When God gave people up to their homosexuality, the Bible says that he gave them up to “dishonorable passions.” Men gave up “natural relations with women” and committed “shameless acts with men.” This, the Bible says, was an “error” for which men are “receiving the due penalty.”

The practice of homosexuality is sin, and anyone who tells you that Christianity teaches otherwise is not basing their so-called Christianity on the plain teaching of the Bible. They have made up their own version of the faith. However, the fact that homosexuality is a sin is no excuse for carrying out prejudice against homosexual people.

Now, then, here’s my illustration:

Suppose two couples came into our meeting: one a heterosexual couple; the other a male, homosexual couple. Both couples are relating to each other in ways that the Bible condemns as sinful, and they are also living together. As they are all sitting under the preaching of the gospel, both the heterosexual male and one of the homosexual males are convicted of their sin. They repent, turn to Christ for forgiveness, and desire to change their living situations immediately so as to avoid temptation. However, neither one of these men can afford his own place right now.

How many of us would welcome the heterosexual man into our home? Now, what about the homosexual man? How would you treat the heterosexual man if he fell into sin one more time with his girlfriend? How would you treat the homosexual man if he fell into sin one more time with his boyfriend? Do you consider one of those cases a gross sin, while you consider the other case an understandable mistake?

Have we not become judges with evil thoughts when it comes to the way in which we treat those who are tempted with homosexual desires? We have, haven’t we? And we have the same problem, in one sense, with the way we treat those who lean in a different direction politically.

POLITICAL AFFILIATION.

After the most recent Presidential election in 2008, two Christians (a black man and a white woman) expressed their frustrations with what appeared to be the racially-motivated voting trends of Christians from the “other” race. Here is what they said:

Black Christian Man.

“I just want to know how white evangelicals justify voting for those war mongers [like Bush and the rest of the Republican Party]. What ever happened to being pro-life? It sounds like you guys are just pro-birth. John McCain, by his own admission, has been one of the biggest supporters of the invasion and occupation of Iraq, a country that did not attack us or pose any legitimate threat to our national security--resulting in the death of thousands [upon thousands] of innocent men, women and children...”

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And he supported his view that genuine faith in Christ moves a person away from the Republican party with a Scripture:

Proverbs 6:16-17

"There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood..."

White Christian Woman.

"I just want to know how black Christians justify voting for those pro-abortion Democrats like Obama, especially since abortion disproportionately attacks black and hispanic babies. Why aren't more of them "values voters?" How can you be a Christian and support a man who kills babies?"

And she supported her view that genuine faith in Christ moves a person away from the Democratic party with a Scripture:

Proverbs 6:16-17

"There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood..."

Now, what's going on here? Both sides seem to be citing the same biblical value as the ground for their opposite political allegiances. Both are trying to rid the world of "hands that shed innocent blood." One is primarily focused on the innocent blood *inside* of the womb; the other is primarily focused on the innocent blood *outside* of the womb.

Do these people have a completely different set of values? Is one person completely *in line* with God's heart while the other is completely *opposed* to God's heart? I don't think so. What we have here is a case of two people who seem to hold, essentially, the same biblical values. What appears to be *different*, however, is the order in which they would rank the evils that plague our world and, consequently, the order in which they would go about ridding the earth of those evils.

Shouldn't these two followers of Christ be able to have a decent discussion about why protecting the lives of unborn children is the number #1 issues for one of them, but the #3 issue for the other? Should we give place to our prejudice against professing Christians who take their vote in a different direction than we do? Isn't it possible that God's love for a certain group of people (a group for which we have little concern, but for which *they* have plenty of concern) is their motive for moving in a different direction politically?

Friends, prejudice of the political sort does not need to split the church as much as it has. In my opinion, depending upon their motives, it is possible for the two Christians in this story to be equally pleasing to God while they cast opposite votes. And, in my opinion, it is *also* possible for us to overcome our prejudice and favoritism. However, if that is going to happen, only one thing can help us, and James tells us what/who that is in James 4:1. So let's answer our final question today: *"Why is Jesus the key to overcoming our prejudice and ending our favoritism?"*

🕒 *Why is Jesus the key to overcoming our prejudice and ending our favoritism?*

James says something very interesting in verse 1. Let's look at it again together:

James 2:1

"My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory."

James could have simply said, "My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ." That would be enough to answer the question of morality: What should we/ shouldn't we do? And if Christianity were only concerned with questions of morality, then the sentence would end there. But Christianity is *not* merely concerned with *morality* (what should we do?); it is also concerned with *motive* (why should we do it?). This is why James reminds us that our Lord Jesus Christ is "the Lord of glory." Now, how does that help us to see why Jesus is the key to overcoming our prejudice and ending our favoritism?

Well, let me ask this? In our passage, what is it that caused the church to favor the rich man over the poor man? Was it not the fact that the people in the church saw a greater "glory" in the rich man when they beheld his jewelry and fine clothing? They compared the rich man to the poor man and because of the rich man's "surpassing glory," the poor man appeared to have no glory at all. Therefore, they treated the two men differently.

Now suppose another poor man, only slightly less shabby in his appearance, had entered the assembly. Would the church have made a distinction between him and the other poor man? NO. And why not? Isn't he dressed slightly better than the first poor man? Yes. But because of the surpassing glory of the rich man in the room, this second poor man also appears to have no glory at all. Therefore, no distinction is made between him and the first poor man.

This, friends, is why Jesus, the Lord of glory, is the key to overcoming our prejudice and ending our favoritism. When we look at him, his surpassing glory makes the glory of the rich man seem like no glory at all. The rich man, then, is placed into the same category as his poor brother and, as a result, we are able to treat both of them in the same way.

Illustration:

Have you ever walked into a relatively dark room right after being outside in the bright, bright sun? At that moment, were you able to make distinctions between the various things in that room? No. Even though there were very real distinctions between the things in that room (distinctions in color, size, and shape), for a short time you were unable to see those distinctions because of the greatness of the light that you had just taken in.

The glory of God that we see in Jesus Christ is like that light in one sense. It temporarily strips us of our ability to make ungodly distinctions between people. The apostle Paul even speaks about the glory of God in Jesus as a kind of saving light in 2 Corinthians.

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2 Corinthians 4:6

For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

When we hear, and seriously consider, the story of Jesus Christ...when we remember the great love of the one who, though innocent, sacrificed himself for us on the cross so that we could be forgiven and accepted by God...we are once again beholding the glory of the only perfect life to have ever visited this earth. More than just our eyes...our hearts are brought to the place where they are unable to make ungodly distinctions between rich and poor, black and white, Republican and Democrat, etc...

We look upon Jesus and, for a moment, we understand what the songwriter meant:

*Turn your eyes upon Jesus
Look full in is wonderful face.
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of his glory and grace.*

Summary:

How will our prejudice against one group most often show up? As favoritism toward another. Where will we perhaps be most tempted to play favorites? In the areas of sexual orientation and political affiliation.

Why is Jesus the key to overcoming our prejudice and ending our favoritism? Because only when we look at him do we see the kind of "light"--the kind of glory and grace--that makes all the other things of this world grow strangely dim.

Prayer.

Lord Jesus, may we be so privileged as to look upon you often. May the glory of your perfect life, your humble death, and your all-conquering resurrection make the glory of every other person appear to us like no glory at all. And help us, as a result, to resist our tendency to play favorites and to give too much place to our prejudice. Amen.