

Favoritism

James 2:1-7

I pastored a church in Concord, NC for nine years. It was the decade of the 90s. During that decade Concord changed significantly. The demographics changed dramatically. Concord had been an old mill town, home to multiple textile mills most of which were associated with Cannon Mills. They produced sheets and towels. For a couple of generations, husbands and wives had both worked in the mills, earning a very modest income and surviving because of the very low cost of living. Sometimes they worked opposite shifts so that one of them would be able to be home with young children while the other was at work. Many of the women never learned to drive, many men and women would walk to the mill where they worked, often living in houses owned by the mill. They would shop at stores owned by the mill. Life was very simple and very routine.

And when it came to retirement, many were left close to impoverished. After working for 40 or 50 years at the mill, day in and day out, there was little profit from their retirement pensions. Not long before we arrived, the company pension funds greatly declined in value because of investments in a large number of junk bonds leading up to the savings and loan crisis of the 1980s. And when the company was sold not long after that, little or none of that pension fund remained. Yet, for the most part, people got along just fine. Their houses were plain. Their lifestyle simple. And their neighborhoods were friendly.

The years I lived there were a very difficult time of transition for the whole city. Concord was right next to what had become known as the I-85 corridor. Some of the major interstate exits didn't even exist those years, let alone the rapid development that defined the whole of that 85 corridor. The area from Atlanta to

Charlotte was one of the fastest growing and economically vibrant regions of the country, and Concord was actively transformed from that old mill town to a new bedroom community for Charlotte. Houses upon houses were being built, thousands of them, development after development, transforming the quiet scenery of the open land and farms into a typical, prosperous suburban sprawl. With all those new houses, huge and glamorous by local standards, came money. Lots of it. And lots of people and families whom we called in those days "yuppies." Young, upwardly mobile professionals, far better off financially than any of the locals could ever imagine.

So what is a church to do? Let me tell you the temptation, one that we certainly felt. The temptation was to covet those new, young, rich families. And to look down upon those ordinary, hardworking retired folks who somehow managed to maintain their own sustenance. The temptation was to welcome visitors to church differently. How different it would be for an economically successful and respectable young family to come through our doors, a husband and wife with 2 young children, all immaculately dressed in expensive clothes and fashionable dress. A different reaction perhaps than when someone came in without that appearance, someone working a blue collar or minimum wage job, living in a rental house down the street in the old neighborhood in which the church was located.

Some churches abandoned all hope of ministry with that latter group, and focused all their attention and their ministry upon the former. And many new churches were begun, catering nearly entirely to those affluent, upper middle class suburbanites. That broad context always makes me think of these words we have come to study this morning in James 2. The subject is partiality; in other words, not being impartial. Showing favoritism. A respect of persons, as you read in the original King James version.

Paying special attention to one group and not to the other.
Making distinctions that determine and define those reactions.

And what we find immediately in our text in James 2 is,

I. THE DANGER OF PARTIALITY.

James doesn't mince any words. He never does. His meaning is as plain as it could be.

v.1

He proceeds to give an example, an easy-to-understand example, not unlike what I just described in my introduction.

v.2-4

There is,

A. The example of showing favoritism.

"Do not hold the faith...with partiality." That word somewhat literally means to accept the face, to accept the person based on outward circumstances and not the intrinsic nature of the person himself. The outward circumstances are defined in verse 2, the outward appearance. One man in fine clothing, displaying his affluence with a gold ring. And then a man in filthy clothes, well worn and soiled from hard work. One man is obviously a bank executive. Or maybe a lawyer. His business suit is impeccably tailored, and his tie is modern and fashionable. The other man must work construction. He's a common laborer of some sort. He can't afford any real fancy clothes--other things in life are just more important and have a greater priority.

To the one you say, "You sit here in a good place." You "pay attention" to him. You pay special attention to him! You go out of your way to greet him, when he comes in the church and before he leaves. You are friendly and helpful.

Why? Because he is rich. Now, maybe you don't admit that to yourself. But maybe you should admit it. Maybe you should realize that you are tempted look upon the outward appearance, and honor those who mere outward appearance seems pleasant. And maybe, perhaps, it becomes blatantly obvious.

v.3 "...you say to the poor man, "You stand over there."

This really does need to be impressed upon our hearts, to see just how seriously James considers this whole matter. It is not something to take lightly! So we ought always to be willing to consider whether or not we ever give special attention to people on the basis of their outward appearances. Maybe it is just an attitude, or a tone of voice. Learning not to do that begins by realizing where and when we might actually be doing it. You have to look into that mirror intently, as we studied last time from verse 24 of chapter 1.

Notice how James identifies,

B. The contradiction of showing favoritism.

By that I mean, it is actually a contradiction of your faith! Go back to,

v.1 "My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality."

This is a matter of "holding the faith." It is a matter of the very essential nature of our faith, and showing favoritism, partiality, is a contraction of that very profession of faith you proclaim.

1 John 2:9 "He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now."

Even more clearly,

1 John 3:14 "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother

abides in death. 15 Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.”

This is where the church of our day too often misses the point. The church can easily be tempted to covet the rich, but God honors the poor. The church of our day often markets herself to the successful movers and shakers of a community, she seeks after the leaders and the power brokers. But God looks at the heart. And while there is nothing inherently advantageous about being poor, it is the poor whom God so often calls.

Paul makes this point so explicitly.

1 Cor. 1:26 “For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. 27 But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; 28 and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, 29 that no flesh should glory in His presence. 30 But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption — 31 that, as it is written, “He who glories, let him glory in the LORD.”

That’s the contradiction, putting value where God doesn’t, putting value on the outward circumstances of a person’s life where God doesn’t, considering those who have an abundance of earthly riches to be of greater importance or greater value than those who don’t. And so the contradiction—“God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty.”

Mat. 5:3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4 Blessed are those who mourn, For they

shall be comforted. 5 Blessed are the meek, For they shall inherit the earth.”

So, “do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality.” Notice then,

C. The evil of showing favoritism.

Again, the plain language of James. If you do what he describes in the first three verses, then the conclusion in verse 4 is appropriate—“have you not shown partiality among yourselves.” Then he adds of you who shown this favoritism, that you have “become judges with evil thoughts.”

You have become a judge, judging someone else based upon their appearance of external or earthly success. You have become a judge! And Paul describes the danger of that when he writes to the church at Rome,

Rom. 14:10 “But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. 11 For it is written: “As I live, says the LORD, Every knee shall bow to Me, And every tongue shall confess to God.” 12 So then each of us shall give account of himself to God. 13 Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother’s way.”

James is pretty clear, isn't he? If you show favoritism, not only do you become a judge, but verse 4 says that you “become judges with evil thoughts.” Evil motives. Showing favoritism is an evil thought. Showing partiality, based on any external measure of prosperity or success represents an evil motive. And because of that danger, James gives us,

II. THE REBUKE TO PARTIALITY.

v.6-7

The rebuke begins obviously enough.

A. Favoritism is a dishonor to those who are not favored.

Verse 6, “you have dishonored the poor man.” You have dishonored him, you have sinned against him. You have brought offense to him, sinful offense. And that is no small thing when you realize, as we’ll study next week in,

v.8 “If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you do well; 9 but if you show partiality, you commit sin.”

Again, this is no small thing, honoring those whose mere outward appearance seems more pleasant. In doing so, “you have dishonored the poor man.” And James adds a further rebuke, namely that,

B. Favoritism ignores the evil of those who are favored.

He makes an interesting point, one that isn’t universally true but so often it is—that it is the rich who often cause the most trouble! It’s the rich who are actually the source of the problem!

v.6 “But you have dishonored the poor man. Do not the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts? 7 Do they not blaspheme that noble name by which you are called?”

In other words, while you are busy looking at the outward appearance, while you are focused upon all the good that this outwardly successful and prosperous person or family can bring to the church, while you are being partial to him and showing favoritism to him, you miss a really important point—He might well be the one who causes the most trouble. He might “drag you into the courts.” I’ve certainly seen it, so I recognize the great value of James’ warning.

Too often, it is the rich and affluent who resist the gospel! It is they who accuse you of depending upon a crutch, that religion is really quite a useless thing for those who are self-sufficient. They are the ones who bring persecution, too! It’s not the poor who attack Christianity! It’s not the uneducated or entry level laborers who bring all sorts of lawsuits against the church. It is the well-to-do.

So if you are partial to someone, if you show favoritism to someone, you too easily become blind to their faults and you are unable to recognize their danger. And with the wisdom James offers here, I should note that those who are the objects of the partiality or favoritism, and receive and appreciate it, they are the ones most likely not only to cause division in the church, but even to bring offense against God himself.

v.7 “Do they not blaspheme that noble name by which you are called?”

They are the ones most prone to evil, those who enjoy being exalted by the favoritism shown to them, ultimately it is an evil against the very nature of God himself. Those who are favored, those who seek to be favored, who want to be favored, who enjoy being favored, that very desire on their part is called “blasphemy” by James! It is a blasphemy against God, against “that noble name” of God, to promote your own glory in the eyes of others that they might show partiality to you.

C. Favoritism brings dishonor to God himself.

...dishonor to “that noble name by which you are called.”

So what is the solution?

III. THE ANSWER TO PARTIALITY.

How do we learn to resist this temptation? What is the

encouragement or challenge that James gives to us? Look at,
v.5

In other words,

A. God is gracious to the poor.

“Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?” Or as I quoted from the sermon on the mount a few minutes ago,

Mat. 5:3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4 Blessed are those who mourn, For they shall be comforted. 5 Blessed are the meek, For they shall inherit the earth.”

To be sure, there is no inherent spiritual value in poverty per se. That’s not Jesus point. Rather the meaning is this, that God is gracious to the humble, to the lowly. Not to those who enjoy outward and external privileges and honor. The poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek. Those are the ones to whom God is gracious. Going back to,

1 Cor. 1:20 “Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?...25 Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”

Then as I read before,

1 Cor. 1:26 “For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. 27 But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty.”

With good reason! Verse 28, “that no flesh should glory in His

presence.” God reserves the glory for himself, so he shows no favoritism to those who believe they have reason in themselves of which to boast. The quote in 1 Corinthians 1 is from the prophet Jeremiah,

Jer. 9:23 “Thus says the LORD: “Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, Let not the mighty man glory in his might, Nor let the rich man glory in his riches; 24 But let him who glories glory in this, That he understands and knows Me, That I am the LORD, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight,” says the LORD.”

“God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty.” That’s the correction needed to the spirit of partiality. So who is most important among us? Who ought to receive the greatest honor? Who is it who ought to be recognized above others? Jesus has an answer to that.

Mat. 23:11 “But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. 12 And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Mat. 28:27 “And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave— 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

God is gracious to the poor, and along with that,

B. God gives true riches to the poor.

Again, the point is not poverty per se. There is no virtue simply in having no money, as if a vow of poverty would make you more spiritual. But the point is this, God overturns and reverses the outward and external judgments of the world. So the poor, those who have the least to show forth with regard to the outward blessings of worldly prosperity, they are the ones who so very often most clearly understand and receive the saving truth of the

gospel. So James writes,

v.5 “Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?”

Again,

1 Cor. 1:27 “God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty...28 the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, 29 that no flesh should glory in His presence.”

Those who are rich have an additional burden, an additional obligation, as Paul puts it so well,

1 Tim. 6:17 “Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy.”

That is a lesson the poor typically learn more quickly and more easily, by God’s grace. They more easily understand the meaning and the value of true riches, and so they, the rich and prosperous, must learn to recognize that their riches have no value in the presence of God. It is a warning that the Apostle John would give to that lukewarm churching Laodicea.

Rev. 3:15 “I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. 16 So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. 17 Because you say, I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked— 18 I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. 19 As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. 20 Behold, I stand at

the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. 21 To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.”

So there is the danger, the danger of thinking you are secure and rightly to be favored because you are rich and have need of nothing. Jesus words cut right to the heart of such pride: “[you] do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked.” God gives true riches to the poor. And one more final thought from verse 5, notice that,

C. God honors those who love him, not those who have favored status.

v.5

It is the end of that verse I am here emphasizing. God has promised the kingdom “to those who love him.” Not to the most wealthy. Not to the most powerful. Or the most outgoing personality. Not to the one with the ability to lead or to perform any particular task. The Lord looks at the heart, and this question defines his judgment of that heart, the question is, “Do you love me?”

So how do you avoid showing favoritism or partiality? Actually, it’s quite easy. Instead of evaluating a person in the context of outward riches and success, evaluate their heart and give the most value, the most honor, to the person who loves God. For that is whom God himself honors.

Who is the greatest among you? The one who loves God and demonstrates that love by being a servant to one another.