

Wisdom for Right-Living
from the Book of

J A M E S

6 – Favoritism in the Church (Part 1)

When you think of the attributes of God—His nature and His characteristics—what comes to mind? We usually think of such things as His holiness, His omnipotence, His omniscience. Or perhaps we think of His sovereignty, His grace, His love, His faithfulness, or His goodness. All true. But let me mention another attribute of God that is not thought of or mentioned nearly as often, but that's still very important: **God's impartiality**. Said another way, **God doesn't play favorites**. God's impartiality is a recurring theme throughout the Bible. While *God* is absolutely impartial in His dealings with people, all too often, we are not.

We tend to pigeonhole people, placing them in predetermined categories, ranking them by their looks, their clothes, their race, their personality, their intelligence, their wealth, the car they drive, the type of house they live in, and even by our perception of their godliness. Let's see what God has to say to us about how we are to deal with others according to James 2:1-4 (HCSB)...

¹ *My brothers, do not show favoritism as you hold on to the faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.* ² *For example, a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and a poor man dressed in dirty clothes also comes in.* ³ *If you look with favor on the man wearing the fine clothes and say, "Sit here in a good place," and yet you say to the poor man, "Stand over there," or, "Sit here on the floor by my footstool,"* ⁴ *haven't you discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?*

Showing favoritism. God is simply not like that. Moses declared, *For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes.* Deuteronomy 10:17 (NIV) **Not only that,** but God also expects His people to reflect this same impartiality. Moses warned, *Do not show partiality in judging; hear both small and great alike. Do not be afraid of any man, for judgment belongs to God.* Deuteronomy 1:17 (NIV)

The New Testament is equally clear about the sin of partiality. To a crowd in the temple, Jesus said...

Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment.
John 7:24 (NKJV)

Paul specifically emphasized that God is impartial in regard to social status, occupation, or a person being enslaved or free. He told believers at Ephesus...

⁵ [Slaves], be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ; ⁶ not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as [slaves] of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, ⁷ with goodwill doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men, ⁸ knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free. ⁹ And you, masters, do the same things to them, giving up threatening, knowing that your own Master also is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him.
Ephesians 6:5-9 (NKJV)

Like Jesus, we who belong to Him should treat the lowest-paid laborer with the same respect that we give to a bank president, *and* we should treat those who work under us with the same impartiality and dignity as we would give our boss.

Impartiality is also expressed in the way we give help to others, especially fellow believers. 1 John 3:16-19 (NIV) ¹⁶ *This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.* ¹⁷ *If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?* ¹⁸ *Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.* ¹⁹ *This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence...*

If we do not treat those in need the way God treats them, His love is not in us. Later in 1 John, we read this: ¹⁰ *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.* ¹¹ *Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.* ¹² *No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.*
1 John 4:10-12 (NIV)

So—whether it concerns salvation, making judgments, helping a brother in need, or anything else—God’s standard is the same: **God deals entirely with the heart and soul of each person with total impartiality.** Aren’t you glad?!

Peter affirms God’s impartiality, and gives followers of Christ a reminder at the same time: ¹⁶ *For the Scriptures say, “You must be holy because I am holy.”* ¹⁷ *And remember that the heavenly Father to whom you pray has no favorites. He will judge or reward you according to what you do. So you must live in reverent fear of him during your time as “foreigners in the land.”* 1 Peter 1:16-17 (NLT)

In other words, if we expect God to be fair and impartial with us, we should be fair and impartial with others. The book of James is very practical in dealing with real-life, day-to-day issues. In *this* passage, he stresses that **Our impartiality (or lack thereof) is another test of whether our faith in Christ is real.**

Here, James presents Five Features of Genuine, Christ-Like Impartiality. Let's look at two of these features today, then next week, the final three.

1. The Principle.

Vs. 1 *My brothers, do not show favoritism as you hold on to the faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.*

James prefaces this command by addressing readers as *my brothers*, indicating that he is speaking out of love as a fellow believer to followers of Christ.

The basic principle is stated succinctly in vs. 1, indicating that having a genuine Christian faith while also showing favoritism toward others is contradictory and incompatible. The concept is very simple: **We cannot possess real faith in Jesus, (who is the very presence and glory of God) and at the same time play favorites.**

Showing partiality is in total conflict with our salvation and with what Scripture teaches. If we are saved, we are children of God; if we are children of God, we should be like Him. The Bible declares that *“there is no partiality with God.”* Where does the Bible say this? Romans 2:11, Proverbs 24:23, Proverbs 28:21, Ephesians 6:9, Colossians 3:25, 1 Peter 1:17. So why does God say the same thing repeatedly? Probably because we need to hear it repeatedly!

During His incarnation, Jesus was the glory and the image of God in human form. Like His Father, Jesus showed no favoritism, a virtue even His enemies acknowledged. It made no difference to Jesus whether the one to whom He spoke was a wealthy Jewish leader or a common beggar, a virtuous woman or a prostitute, a high priest or a common worshiper, someone who was handsome or ugly, educated or uneducated, religious or non-religious, law-abiding or a criminal. His overriding concern for *all* was the condition of their soul. What does this have to do with us today? **If we wear the Name, we need to be the same.**

In one of Jesus' parables, when some of the invited guests did not bother to show up at the king's wedding banquet for his son, the king ordered his servants to ⁹ *Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.* ¹⁰ *So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.* Matthew 22:9-10 (NIV)

Jesus' impartially calls all people to Himself. If they have saving faith in Him, the fact that they are rich or poor, educated or uneducated, somewhat moral or grossly immoral, religious or non-religious, Jew or Gentile—none of it makes any difference at all.

The Gospel is the great equalizer, available with absolute equality to everyone who believes in the Savior it proclaims. Jesus' promise to all those who trust in Him is this: ²⁹ *"Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."* ³⁰ *For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."* Matthew 11:29-30 (NIV) No one, but *no one*, is beyond the love of Jesus Christ—if they would but surrender their lives to Him as Lord and Savior.

Tragically, many otherwise good churches today do not treat all people the same. Frequently, those who are of a different race, financial standing, or social status are not fully welcomed into the fellowship. Beloved, **This ought not to be.** It's not only disobedience to God's divine command, but it is also a mockery of His divine character. We, the people of God, must *never* show favoritism. Now let's move to a second feature of genuine, Christ-like impartiality:

2. The Example.

Vs. 2-4 ² *For example, a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and a poor man dressed in dirty clothes also comes in.*

³ *If you look with favor on the man wearing the fine clothes and say, "Sit here in a good place," and yet you say to the poor man, "Stand over there," or, "Sit here on the floor by my footstool,"* ⁴ *haven't you discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?*

The vast majority of early converts to Christianity were Jewish and poor. If they were not already poor, many suddenly *became* poor when, because of their faith, they were ostracized from family and society, such that a husband and father lost his job, or a wife and mother was thrown out of the house with only the clothes on her back.

In his first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul asked believers to consider the fact that, among them, *"Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth."* 1 Corinthians 1:26 (NIV)

And so, immediately after Pentecost, the absence of partiality was evident: ⁴⁴ *All the believers were together and had everything in common.* ⁴⁵ *Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.* Acts 2:44-45 (NIV)

A short while later, Luke reported, ³³ *With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all.*

³⁴ *There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵ and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.* Acts 4:33-35 (NIV)

Still later, as persecution caused many Christ-following Jews to lose their jobs and become ostracized by family and friends, the need for food, clothing, shelter, and other necessities increased to a critical point. One consequence was that ¹ *“As the believers rapidly multiplied, there were rumblings of discontent. The Greek-speaking believers complained about the Hebrew-speaking believers, saying that their widows were being discriminated against in the daily distribution of food.”* Acts 6:1 (NLT)

This practical need led the church to choose godly men who came to be known as deacons. Their task was to oversee the distribution of food, which would allow the apostles to devote themselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word.

It's obvious from this passage in James that at least some of the churches to which James wrote had wealthy members, or at least wealthy visitors. Otherwise, it would've been pointless to warn them about showing favor to someone who comes into your assembly wearing a gold ring and fine clothes. Of course, the sin in this case had nothing to do with the fact that someone wore a gold ring, had fine clothes, or was given a good place to sit. Nor was there any sin in the fact that others wore dirty clothes which would've looked and smelled horrible. The sin is partiality—making distinctions among people by showing special favor to the well-dressed man while showing contempt for the poor man. To do either is a serious sin, and those who are guilty of it become judges with evil motives in their hearts. **Among followers of Christ, such discrimination is far more than poor hospitality—it is blatantly evil.**

Of the three Greek words which James uses for *EVIL*, the one used here is the strongest of the three, meaning *“vicious intentions which have a destructive effect.”*

In the book of Romans, Paul reminds followers of Christ that “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: *While we were still sinners*, Christ died for us.” Romans 5:8 (NIV) How much *more* obligated, then, are we, as God's still sin-tainted, imperfect children, to love others—including both fellow believers as well as unbelievers?

There is only one “favoritism” that God honors: *With humility of mind [we] regard one another as more important than [ourselves].* Philippians 2:3 (NASB)

This type of unselfish partiality favors the needs of *others* above our own, and favors *their* welfare above ours. *That* is the way of Christ!

Final thoughts: Wealth, in and of itself, is not sinful...so long as it is acquired justly and used wisely and generously as good stewards of that which ultimately belongs to Christ. I share this because some who are poor by the world's standards are hateful toward and jealous of—those who are wealthy. That, too, is sin. Nor is there any sin in being poor...unless a person has become so from squandering that which he has been graciously given by God.

Both rich and poor are equal in God's sight; therefore, partiality must not be shown to either. May we love all people equally for the glory of God.