

Christian, Don't Show Favoritism!

- I. Because of what it reveals about your heart
- II. Because of what you know about your Savior

1 My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. 2 Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. 3 If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," 4 have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? 5 Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? 6 But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? 7 Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong? 8 If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. 9 But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. 10 For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.

Just for a minute, I want you to imagine that you are sitting in church on a Sunday morning (shouldn't be hard to imagine right now). The sermon has just started and you happen to notice out of the corner of your eye that there is a black man, an African-American, kind of wandering down the aisle, apparently looking for a place to sit down. He's wearing baggy pants and sandals on his feet. He has long hair in dreadlocks and tattoos covering his arms. Tell me, honestly, what would you be thinking at that moment? Maybe, "Who is that guy? Why is he here? I wonder what he wants? I wonder if he's looking for a handout or maybe walked over from the bus stop"—as you grab your purse a little tighter.

But then, you take a second look at the man. And then a third look. And suddenly realize, "Wait a minute. I think I know that guy! Big man, big hair, big beard, with a big smile. That's Z'Darius Smith, the guy who just signed a 66 million dollar contract to play for the Green Bay Packers! Oh my goodness! How cool is it that he's right here in my church? Wow, I hope I get to meet him. Maybe I'll get his autograph. Wouldn't that be awesome if he would join Mount Olive? I'll bet he could write a check to take care of our building debt!"

Now you realize, that is a purely hypothetical scenario, at least, for now.... But that doesn't mean that it couldn't happen. In fact, it's something that Christian churches have struggled with for centuries. It's why St. James writes what he does in our text for today. James' advice to church goes in his day and ours is simply this:

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In James, chapter 2, the inspired writer asks his readers to imagine a scenario similar to the one I described for you, but he tailors it to fit a congregation in his day. James writes, *Suppose a man comes you're your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man*

in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or, "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

Obviously, in this scenario, these people were not treating their visitors equally. They were giving preferential treatment to the wealthy and were mistreating the poor. And James chides them for it. He basically says, "It makes no sense for you to be fawning over the rich." Why not? James gives them three reasons. First, James asks, *Is it not the rich who are exploiting you?* Isn't the same thing true today? What's more likely to happen? The poor exploiting the rich or the rich exploiting the poor? Are the burger flippers of the world writing themselves fat bonuses, all on the backs of the CEOs of the world—or is it the other way around? James goes on. *Are they* (namely, the rich) *not the ones who are dragging you into court?* In Jesus' day and today it's typically not the poor for hiring high-priced lawyers to get what they want in a court of law. It's the rich who are doing that. And thirdly, *Are not the rich the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?* You think about how often those who are rich and famous in our world give absolutely no thought to what God has given them but rather are defy God and defame his church.

James' point is this. Why would you give preferential treatment to the rich--especially when so often it's the poor who have a much greater appreciation for God's grace in Christ? So often those who are financially poor are spiritually rich. That's what James means when he says, *Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?*

From there, James goes on to point out that showing favoritism to the rich is not only illogical. It's immoral. It's a sin against God's moral law. James writes, *If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.*

Isn't that right? The second table of the law demands that I love everybody as much as I love myself. Every human being is to be on the same level. If I give more attention to some, while insulting others, I prove that I'm not keeping God's law. I'm breaking it.

In fact, James says that when we are guilty of that kind of discrimination, when we treat the rich one way and the poor another way, then we become *judges with evil thoughts*. What does it mean that when we show favoritism, we become judges with evil, literally, with wicked thoughts? Well, go back to that imaginary visitor who wandered into our service today. When you first saw that black man, and thought yourself "What is he doing here?" When you made some assumptions about what kind of person he was, what did that reveal about what's going on in your own heart? Didn't that reveal a certain amount of prejudice? We're guilty of prejudging that person without really knowing anything about him. We're judging him on the basis of his outward appearance, the color of his skin, or the style of his hair, or the clothes he's wearing. And then we're attaching to those observations some negative qualities. We make assumptions about the man. We assume he's going to asking for a hand-out. We assume he's going to give us some trouble. By our internal prejudices, we end up sinning against God and that man. We reveal that our hearts are evil.

But isn't the same thing true when the coin flips the other way? Think about how you felt when you realized that that black man was in fact a rich and famous Packers player. (Or substitute your own example of someone rich and famous.) If Brad Pitt or Oprah Winfrey or John Bergstrom were to walk in here, would you be tempted to give that person a special

treatment? Why? Why would you be tempted to treat that famous person any different than any other average Joe? Could it be that in our heart of hearts, we want what that rich person has? We wish we had their money, their fame, their fortune? Could it be that the favoritism we show is ultimately rooted in our own greed or envy or covetousness?

Now, someone might say, “Okay, maybe I do get a little googly-eyed over the Rich and Famous. Maybe I do have a tendency to kind of ignore those who are down on their luck or turn my nose up on people who are not really like me. I mean, is that the worst thing in the world? At least I'm not robbing banks or killing people. I still am a good husband, a hard worker, a law-abiding citizen. That ought to be good for something, right? That ought to make up for a few minor flaws my heart, right?

Actually, no. Here in our text, James addresses the popular opinion that all the good things I do kind of make up for the few flaws I have. What does James say? *Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.* Wait a minute. Really? Break one commandment and we're guilty breaking all of them? Yep. That's what God tells us in his Word. In fact, you know what that reminds me of? It reminds me of something I learned while I was working in a junkyard.

When I was in college, I spent my summers working in what I guess would more accurately be called an auto salvage yard. My job was to basically run old cars through a big diesel car crusher. But before I did, I always try to clean up around the car. I'd throw any loose parts into the car, an old brake drum that had fallen off, or a battery lying on the ground. And sometimes to get it inside the car, I'd have to break the window. Well it didn't take me long to figure out that all car windows are not created equal. Did you know that there is a difference between the glass in the front windshield of a car and the glass all the way around the rest of the car? The front windshield is made of laminated glass. That means that you can put a crack in laminated glass and the window will still stay intact. You've maybe seen windshields with these big spider webs in them and they're still in place.

But you'll never see that in a rear window. That's because those windows are made of tempered glass. There's no way to put a little crack in tempered glass. One crack and the whole window shatters into a thousand pieces. I'll tell you, I had a lot more fun throwing those brake drums through the back window, or better yet, a side window, than trying to force them through that front window. Now the question is, which of those two window best illustrates God's Law? A lot of people today think God's law is like the front windshield. (“I've put a few cracks in it. But it's not that bad. I can still see out. It's not like I've shattered it or anything.”) No, God's law is not like the front windshield. It's like the back window. It's either perfectly intact or it's completely shattered. When it comes to God's commandments, you either keep all of them perfectly. Or you were guilty of breaking all of them completely. What did James say? *Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it*

You realize what that means, don't you? It means that suddenly those minor sins, the ones that nobody else sees, the sins of the heart (like looking down on someone else, or prejudging them on the basis of their appearance or their skin color or their nationality or even their political party)—all those sins of the heart will separate us from God just as fast as murder or robbery or adultery will. That means that because of the evil thoughts in our hearts, we all deserve God's just and eternal condemnation. That's some really bad news—except for one thing.

All those laws that we've shattered, someone else has kept perfectly for us. And all the sins in our hearts, the pride, the prejudice, the greed and favoritism, Jesus has erased them all from our record. You might say that Jesus has, in effect, given us all a brand new windshield. a

windshield that allows us to see the world as he sees it. Not as different classes of people separated by race or color or economic status, people who are worthy of more respect or less respect based on their outward appearance. No, Jesus allows us to see people the way he sees them, equally created by God, equally redeemed by his blood, and equally worthy of our love and respect.

In fact, isn't that what ultimately changes our hearts, changes our attitude toward others? When we see the love that Jesus has shown to us, it changes the way we see others. It's what allows James to say: Christian, don't show favoritism! Not only (I.) Because of what it reveals about your heart, but more importantly, (II.) Because of what you know about your Savior.

Isn't that the truth? When you think about the unconditional love that Jesus has shown to a sinner like you, or me. When you realize that God didn't take into consideration our skin color. He didn't care whether we were rich or poor. He didn't judge us by our outward appearance. He just loved us. He gave his life for us. So that we might believe and be saved.

It's been said that the theme for the book of James is "The faith that saves is the faith that shows." In other words, when you know and believe in Jesus as your savior, it will show in your words and actions. In fact, isn't that why St. James began this whole section the way he did? James writes, *My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism.* James is reminding us what God has done for us. God has made us believers in our Lord Jesus Christ. That means he's given you and me a new heart. He's made us different from the world, so that we can make a difference in the world. By God's grace, you and I get to be little reflectors of Christ, ambassadors of his love, conduits through which God delivers his love and mercy to the people of our world.

Remember that the next time that stranger walks into church. Or for that matter, that member that you don't really know. Every week you and I have a chance to treat people the way Jesus treated us. And that is...with open arms and open hearts—all because of Jesus. Amen.