

Refusing to Play Favorites

James 2:1-13

Rev. Brian Bill

February 16-17, 2019

Read James 2:1-13

Saturday night – Nick Castillo

Sunday at 8 – Dale Steele

Sunday at 10:45 – Sheila Mills

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? ⁵ Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? ⁶ But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? ⁷ Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?

⁸ If you really fulfill 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 but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. ¹¹ For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. ¹² So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. ¹³ For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

Over 30 years ago, when I was serving on a church staff in the Chicago area, Paul Harvey, the nationally recognized radio personality, attended one of our services. Harvey passed away in 2009 and had a radio show for over 50 years, reaching 26 million people a week. As soon as the service was over, I ignored everyone else and raced down the aisle to introduce myself.

I held out my hand and said, “Hi. My name is Brian. I’m one of the pastors here.” He said, “Paul Harvey. Nice to meet you.” [I was hoping he was going to say, “Good Day,” but he didn’t!] Not really knowing what to say next, I stammered, “I listen to your program every day.” Very perceptively he responded by saying, “Thank you. That must be pretty difficult with a schedule like yours.”

He then turned and left. I felt sick. I had just lied to Paul Harvey—and he knew it! I didn’t listen to his show every day—maybe once a week, but certainly not every day! My encounter with a celebrity left me feeling embarrassed and ashamed.

About five years ago our daughter Lydia and I visited our oldest daughter Emily who was serving as a missionary to at-risk children in the Dominican Republic. I'll never forget walking up a steep hillside with a number of kids on the way to their village. A young boy reached out to hold my hand. I looked at his hand and saw it was not only dirty but he had open sores on his fingers. I pulled my hand back and tried to act like I didn't see him.

We've all given preference to the preferred while dissing the down and out, haven't we? If you didn't know it before, you know it now...I'm inconsistent and hypocritical, just like you are.

As we dive into the second chapter of James, we'll see God gets riled up when we jump to judgment by giving preference to people. Our main point is this: *If you want God's favor, don't treat people with favoritism.*

Pastor Kyle sure did a super job last weekend helping us see *it's good to hear; it's better to put it into practice.* We're not to merely listen to the Word but also do what it says. We're faced today with a call to specific obedience in an area where it's so easy to excuse and rationalize our attitudes and behavior.

In chapter two, James uses an analytical argument to motivate us not to practice partiality.

- Admonition (1)
- Illustration (2-4)
- Explanation (5-11)
- Application (12-13)

1. Admonition. We see the admonition in James 2:1: ***“My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.”*** Once again, Pastor James of the First Church of Jerusalem reveals his tenderness toward his readers when he calls them ***“brothers.”***

He states these brothers, ***“hold the faith.”*** We are brothers *and* believers, sisters *and* saints, because we are in the same faith family and on the same team. There is to be no distinction as Paul makes clear in Galatians 3:28: ***“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”***

James is the half-brother of Jesus but he doesn't mention this but instead calls Him ***“the Lord of glory.”*** Jewish-background believers would have equated this phrase with God's Shekinah glory, which was on display as the Israelites were led in the desert. John 1:14 says Jesus is God's glory come down to earth: ***“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”***

Let's get straight who we are. We are saved sinners who are called to serve Him. And let's focus on who He is. He is the glorious Lord Jesus Christ. In light of who we are and who He is, we're admonished to ***“show no partiality.”*** This is in the present tense, which means we're to ***“stop showing partiality.”*** It literally means, ***“to accept the face”*** of someone. It's the idea of turning toward the one and turning away from someone else based simply on outward

appearance, economic status, skin color or any other kind of discrimination. Let's define some terms.

- **Favoritism** is giving unfair preferential treatment to one person or group at the expense of another.
- **Discrimination** is the practice of treating one person or group of people less fairly than other people or groups.
- **Prejudice** comes from the words, *pre-judge* and refers to discriminating against people solely on the basis of outward appearance or skin color.
- **Racism** is an explicit or implicit belief or practice that qualitatively distinguishes or values one race over other races.

To show partiality is incompatible with our faith because Acts 10:34 says: ***“God shows no partiality.”*** God is the ultimate umpire according to 1 Peter 1:17 because He is the ***“Father who judges impartially.”*** As ones who claim His name He expects us to treat people fairly as Leviticus 19:15 says, ***“You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great...”*** Warren Wiersbe nails it when he says: *“The way we behave toward people indicates what we really believe about God.”*

If you want God's favor, don't treat people with favoritism.

2. Illustration. As a good preacher, after admonishing us not to show partiality, James then gives a vivid illustration. Look at verse 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.”***

The text literally reads, *“gold-fingered and brilliantly clothed.”* This man had multiple rings on his fingers. Fine clothing was often bright and flashy, sometimes with silver sewn into the fabric so it glistened in the sunlight. I Googled “most expensive suit” and found a suit made from a blend of Cashmere wool and silk containing over 480 half-carat diamonds. Taking more than 800 hours to design and stitch, it sells for \$890,500. If someone came in here wearing this they would stand out for sure. J. Vernon McGee liked to say, *“Some go to church to close their eyes, and others go to eye the clothes.”*

In contrast, how would you feel if a poor person came in the doors wearing the only set of clothes he owns? The word for ***“shabby”*** means, *“vile, filthy, tattered and torn.”*

James points out given a choice; we're prone to show partiality to the man sporting some bling. Verse 3 uses the phrase, ***“And if you pay attention,”*** which means to *“gaze upon.”* It's easy to turn our attention away from the glory of the Lord to the material splendor of someone's clothing, car or status. To the finely dressed man we'd 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.’”*** The flashy guy gets the best seat (which in our case would be the softer seats in the middle); the filthy guy gets the floor.

I like what one pastor said about pride and prejudice: *“We were all made of dirt... there’s white dirt, red dirt, yellow dirt, brown dirt, and black dirt...we all came from the same place...we’re dirt.”* Too many times we judge someone’s character by their outward appearance while forgetting we’re all smelly sinners.

When we practice partiality, in essence we’ve set ourselves up as judges, taking God’s judging job away from Him. Here’s a news flash – He doesn’t need any help running the world. Check out verse 4: ***“Have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?”*** Making ***“distinctions”*** has the idea of ***“separating”*** people into distinct categories. One reason they fawned over the rich man is they thought he could increase their offerings or would do something special for them. Their motives were all messed up. When we judge others, we have ***“evil thoughts,”*** which means we have reached ***“malignant, malicious and wicked”*** conclusions about people.

Let’s face it. We tend to judge the better off as *better*. We’re prone to give preference to the pretty or to those who make us look good or can do something good for us. Proverbs 14:20: ***“The poor is disliked even by his neighbor, but the rich has many friends.”*** Friends, our focus must be on the true glory of the Lord Jesus Christ and not the passing glory of outward appearances. Since everybody matters to Jesus, everyone must matter to us.

In his autobiography, Mahatma Gandhi described the time he considered converting to Christianity because he saw in the teachings of Jesus the solution to the caste system, which was dividing the people of India. On one Sunday he decided to attend services at a nearby church and talk to the minister about becoming a Christian. However, when he entered the sanctuary, the usher refused to give him a seat and suggested he go worship with his own people. Gandhi left the church and never returned. He later wrote, *“If Christians have caste differences also, I might as well remain a Hindu.”*

My beloved brothers and sweet sisters, *if you want God’s favor, don’t treat people with favoritism.*

After giving the opening admonition and then moving to an illustration, next James gives an explanation.

3. Explanation. In order to explain himself, James appeals to personal experience in verses 5-7 and then challenges us to let Scripture be our standard in verses 8-11.

In verse 5, we see another affectionate appeal: ***“Listen, my beloved brothers ...”*** The word ***“listen”*** is an urgent request and is translated as ***“to hearken and hear.”*** Exhibiting earnestness and animated exhortations, James asks four lively questions to get us to see the contradictions that reside within us. Each question expects an affirmative answer.

- ***“Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?”*** Yes.
- ***“Are not the rich the ones who oppress you?”*** Yes.
- ***“And the ones who drag you into court?”*** Yes.

- ***“Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?”***
Yes.

Two weeks ago we jumped over James 1:9-11. Let’s go back to it now: ***“Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.”***

After appealing to personal experience, James now turns to Scripture.

- **Let love be your law.** We see this in verse 8: ***“If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing well.”*** This is a quote from Leviticus 19:18 which was also referenced by our glorious Lord Jesus Christ in Matthew 22:39. The reason this is called the royal law is because King Jesus reinforced it. Galatians 5:14 says: ***“For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”***

Brothers and sisters, and fellow believers in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ, it is impossible to truly love your neighbor and show favoritism.

- **Let Scripture be your standard.** We tend to trivialize our own trespasses, thinking our sins don’t smell as bad as the sins of others. Some of us excuse our judgmental hearts, thinking it’s no big deal. I wonder if we secretly congratulate ourselves for not committing certain “big” sins, while shrugging off our “little” sins. It’s easy to think because we keep *most* of God’s commands; it’s OK to violate a few small ones. But actually, to break one link in the chain is to break the whole chain. Look at verses 9-11: ***“But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. For he who said, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ also said, ‘Do not murder.’ If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.”***

What’s the harm in ignoring people we think are different, strange or weird? Some of us look down on people from other races or countries, while denying we are racist. Or maybe we separate people according to gender or generation, vocation or location, popularity, personality or even politics. Or perhaps we judge based on background or disability or simply because someone’s not in our clique. Others of us act like spiritual snobs when we see someone struggling with something we don’t struggle with. Some of us hear about what God is doing in other parts of the world through missionaries and we just don’t care.

According to a recent Gallup poll, for the first time in more than two decades, more people are saying race is the most pressing issue facing our country. Let’s face it. The Evangelical church is often the most racially segregated place in America. Edgewood is known as a church “up on the hill.” How do we treat those who live “below the hill”?

Don't miss how repugnant partiality is to the Almighty. Discrimination is not just ill advised or inconsiderate or bad etiquette. In verses 9-10, partiality is a perversion of justice and is referred to as "**S-I-N**" and those who do it are "**transgressors**" who are "**guilty**" of breaking the entire law of God. Racism is not just a social problem in our world; it's a sin problem within.

It's as if James is reading his readers' minds, "*OK, I might not think the best of some people, but at least I'm not a murderer.*" Notice James equates partiality with murder, much like Jesus did in Matthew 5:21-22 when He said to hate someone in our hearts is to commit murder. When we diminish someone by reducing their value through insults, slander, gossip, racial statements, character assassination or treating them as invisible, it's like we're committing murder.

To continue his argument, James is anticipating someone saying they have never committed the terrible sin of adultery. If we keep nine of the commandments, and break one, we are guilty as a lawbreaker before God as if we had broken all of them. God's law is not a set of disconnected commandments; but rather a unified whole. The sin of showing partiality is just as serious as murder and adultery.

Mike Andrus points out the Jews regarded the law as a series of detached commands. To keep one of those commands was to gain credit. To break one was to incur debt. Therefore, a person could add up the ones kept and subtract the ones broken and, as it were, emerge with a moral credit balance. Some form of this is common to every works-based religion. But James rejects this completely. A windowpane with one crack is a broken window. A person who breaks one of God's laws is guilty of being a law-breaker.

I heard about a bishop who was sailing to Europe on an ocean liner. After meeting the man he was assigned to share a cabin with, he went to the purser and asked to have his gold watch and other valuables put in the safe. He explained he had never done this before but his roommate didn't look very trustworthy. After taking his valuables, the purser remarked, "*It's all right, bishop, I'll be glad to keep them safe. Your roommate was just here and left his valuables for the same reason!*"

We're all sinners who are guilty before God. Since we're in need of God's mercy, we should be known for showing mercy to others.

Before leaving these verses, I see two principles that will help us live on mission.

- **Utilize Questions.** James uses four different questions to make his point. One of the most effective ways to witness is to simply ask questions. In his book called *Tactics: A Gameplan for Discussing Your Christian Convictions*, Greg Koukl suggests following the Columbo approach to evangelism. In an unassuming way, Detective Columbo, wearing his old trench coat, had a way of asking questions that was very disarming. His classic line when leaving a room was to say, "*Oh, just one more thing...*" Here are some ways to utilize questions:
 - ✓ **Do you mind if I ask you a question?**
 - ✓ **What do you mean by that?**

- ✓ **How did you come to that conclusion?**
- ✓ **Have you ever considered...?**

BTW, our sermon series after Easter will be called, “Glad You Asked” and will focus on questions you submit to us. In particular, we’d love to hear the questions you’ve been asked by your non-Christian friends that you’ve found difficult to answer. You’ll hear more about this in the weeks to come.

- **Use the 10 Commandments.** One of the purposes of the commandments is to show us we can’t keep them. Romans 3:20: ***“For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.”*** Ray Comfort is an expert at this approach. When speaking to someone who thinks he’s a good person, you could ask if he’s ever lied before. And then follow-up with, *“What do you call someone who tells a lie?”* You could then ask if he’s ever stolen something and follow it up by asking, *“What do you call someone who steals?”* Then go to this passage and show if we’ve broken one commandment we’ve broken them all. Because we’re sinners, we need a Savior.

4. Application. After admonishing, illustrating and explaining, James moves to applying in verses 12-13.

- **Watch your words and adjust your actions.** Remember judges will be judged. We see this in verse 12 and in the first part of verse 13: ***“So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy...”*** Notice we’re to speak *and* act. Let’s camp on the phrase, ***“law of liberty.”*** When we look at the law, these things should happen:
 - ✓ We *see* we are sinners who have broken God’s laws.
 - ✓ We *flee* to the cross of Christ so we can be forgiven.
 - ✓ We are *free* because we’ve been pardoned and set at liberty. True freedom is freedom to obey God and to do what pleases Him.

We need to watch what we say and what we do because we’ll be judged accordingly. Jesus said it like this in Matthew 7:2: ***“For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.”***

- **Make mercy your message.** This passage ends with a message of mercy in the last part of verse 13: ***“...Mercy triumphs over judgment.”*** Mercy is the aspect of God’s character that causes Him to minister to the miserable. It’s a strong word in Hebrew which means to feel something deeply in the gut. It’s the idea of having a deep and tender reaction of compassion. Jesus said it like this in Matthew 5:7: ***“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.”*** *When we’re merciful we receive mercy and we’re to be merciful because we’ve received mercy.* This kind of mercy ***“triumphs,”*** which means, to ***“exult over or against.”***

I came across a quote recently: *“Never look down on anybody unless you are helping them up!”* Failure to show mercy reveals a failure to understand mercy. That’s why Jonah didn’t want to go to Nineveh until he was in deep need in the belly of the great fish. Proverbs 21:13: ***“Whoever closes his ear to the cry of the poor will himself call out and not be answered.”*** Jesus warns us in Luke 6:38: ***“For with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you.”***

Don’t you love how God is moved with mercy toward us? Micah 7:19: ***“He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot.”*** God saves us in spite of our sins. Listen. If we received what we truly deserved, we’d be in Hell right now. We don’t want justice. We want mercy. And so let’s give mercy to others as well.

Jesus was the ultimate model of ministering with mercy while not giving preference to people. He recruited a despised tax collector and reached out to the Syro-Phoenician woman, well aware Jews referred to her as a “dog.” He gave grace to the woman caught in adultery. He celebrated the little the widow gave while allowing the rich young ruler to walk away when he wouldn’t turn away from his love of money. He held up the Good Samaritan, a hated half-breed as the hero in a story about compassionate neighboring. I like how one pastor explains it: *“Jesus so identified Himself with those who were racially and socially rejected that the Pharisees liked to call Him ‘a Samaritan,’ which was a nasty epithet in that day.”*

Listen to how Jesus introduced one of his parables in Luke 18:9: ***“He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt.”*** The Pharisee prayed about how great he was, focusing on a number of external things while claiming to be better than the tax collector. The tax collector stood far off and wouldn’t even look to heaven when he prayed, ***“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”*** This sinner was shown mercy and went home justified while the haughty man was humbled.

If you want to go home justified, you too must admit you’re a sinner and ask for His mercy. Believing is not just assenting; it’s also embracing.

Conclusion

Let me give you the “rest of the story” (see what I did there?) related to my encounter with Paul Harvey...

After showing partiality to Paul Harvey, I sat down and wrote a letter. Here’s part of what it said: *“Dear Mr. Harvey, in my excitement to meet you yesterday I realized I lied to you. I mentioned I listened to your program every day—that is not true. I feel I need to ask you to forgive me. I was wrong. I was trying to make you think something that was not true. Please accept my apology.”*

BTW, I did listen every day the next week to see if he was going to read my letter on the air!

Here’s what happened after I pulled my hand away from the little boy’s dirty hand...

Just then I looked up the hill and saw Emily skipping up the hill. Both of her hands held the dirty hands of two children. Another young girl with soiled clothing was riding on her back. Lydia was galloping while holding hands with two little girls. I was convicted and reached out for the young boy's hand. He looked up at me and smiled, through rotting teeth. I felt rotten inside and was thankful for the example of my daughters as they followed Jesus more fully than I was.

Here's the bottom line: *If you want God's favor, don't treat people with favoritism.* Since February is Black History Month, it's appropriate to ask, are we gracious or racist? Martin Luther King, Jr. penned these pointed and poignant words more than fifty years ago: *"In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted on the Negro, I have watched white churches stand on the sideline and merely mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities."* Here are some ways we can get off the sidelines...

1. Repent of racist attitudes, words and actions. Ponder this quote from Paul Tripp: *"We cannot grieve what we do not see, we cannot confess what we have not grieved, and we cannot turn from what we haven't confessed."* Let's own our pride, our partiality and our prejudices. See sin in your own heart. Confess it and turn from it. No more. No longer. Not here.

2. Listen and love. Let's pray and go out of our way to connect with someone who looks different from us this week. Let's enter into awkward conversations by intentionally moving toward someone with a different background or skin color. Refuse to tell or listen to racial or ethnic jokes. Grace must affect how we look at race.

3. Let's make Edgewood ethnically and racially diverse and yet harmonious and united. This is a place of grace for discussions about race. We *gather* together no matter our skin color or background. We *grow* together because we can't grow alone. We *give* to each other because of what we've been given. And we *go* with the gospel to people who are different from us because the dividing wall of hostility has been knocked down by the gospel. That includes the nations living next door as God has brought refugees to us and it also includes our neighbors and the nations around the world. *Mercy must be our message.*

The only way any of this changes in our hearts and in our habits is by remembering what Jesus did for us on the cross.

Closing Song: "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross"