

Show No Partiality: James 2:1-7
Ben Reaoch, Three Rivers Grace Church
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Last week we saw the difference between the hearer of the word and the doer of the word. James exhorts us very clearly to be doers of the word and not hearers only. We must not only listen to biblical truth. We must put it into practice. And as we come to chapter 2 of the letter of James, we are now going to see another specific way in which the word will transform our lives. In the last verse of chapter one, James defines pure and undefiled religion as visiting orphans and widows in their affliction and keeping oneself unstained from the world. And then he goes on in chapter 2 with the exhortation to “show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.” I think the flow of thought here shows us that James has the same thing in mind when he refers to “religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father” and when he refers to “faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.” He’s talking about genuine Christianity—faith in Jesus. And this faith will work itself out in caring for orphans and widows, living a pure and holy life, and also by avoiding the sin of partiality or favoritism. Verses 1-7 of chapter 2 deal with this sin of partiality.

I want to start by trying to define partiality, and then looking at the illustration that James gives. And then we’ll look at five reasons why we must show no partiality.

Definition

The word that is translated “partiality” or “favoritism” in verse 1 is a word that the New Testament writers created in order to convey an Old Testament expression. It is literally, “receiving the face.” To show partiality is to assess a person by their face, by their outward characteristics—their skin color, their clothes, the car they drive, where they live, where they work, where they’re from. Favoritism is to evaluate individuals, and to treat individuals, based merely on external things.

This word, and related words, show up only 7 times in the New Testament. In James it is found here in verse 1 and also in verse 9, and it’s in the context of riches and poverty. The 5 other occurrences all refer to the fact that God is NOT partial. In Acts 10:34 and Romans 2:11, it’s in the context of ethnicity. In Ephesians 6:9 and Colossians 3:25, it’s in the context of slaves and masters. And 1 Peter 1:17 also describes the Father as the One “who judges impartially according to each one’s deeds.”

So we see that partiality is evaluating individuals based on external things—their outward appearance, or their ethnic

background, or their status in society, or any other external criterion. If we give special treatment to certain individuals because they are well-dressed, or because they have a prestigious career, or because they have a similar background as us, then we are showing favoritism. If we differentiate between groups of people based on these outward things, and we give special treatment to certain groups and not others, this is partiality.

Illustration

Let's look at the illustration in verses 2-3. James, being the good teacher that he is, gives us a very concrete example. Suppose, he says, that a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in. Here's the test. This is where it's going to become evident whether or not there is partiality present in the congregation. Do we treat the two individuals in the same way? Or do we give preference to the person with the gold ring and fine clothes? Do we pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while we say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet." That would be favoritism. That would be partiality. To distinguish between these two individuals based on the fact that the one is dressed well and the other dressed poorly, and to treat them differently based on that outward criterion—this would very clearly reveal favoritism in the life of a congregation.

This illustration, of course, is only one example of favoritism. The difference might not be in the way the individuals are dressed. It might be that they have different ethnic backgrounds. It might be that one has a career that is highly respected by the world, and the other has a less-respected job. So the passage has a much wider application than just rich and poor.

Also, the scenario that James describes is a very blatant example of favoritism, but favoritism can manifest itself in much more subtle ways as well. We might not tell people to sit in different places, but we may subtly avoid certain individuals and gravitate toward others. When that happens in our hearts—when we are evaluating others and treating them differently based on external things—then we are committing the sin of partiality.

Five reasons why we must show no partiality

Now let's look at five reasons in this text why we must show no partiality. This is the clear command to us, and God's Word does not leave us without a basis for the command. Throughout these verses we find reasons and explanations for heeding the command. Let's take them one by one.

I. Partiality is inconsistent with faith in Jesus Christ (verse 1)

The NASB, on this verse, gives us a better understanding of the structure of the verse. It says, “My brethren, do not hold [that’s the main verb] your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism.” In other words, you can’t hold on to faith in Jesus Christ and also hold on to partiality. The Christian faith cannot be mixed with personal favoritism. The two are at odds. They are inconsistent with one another.

Why is this? What is it about faith in Jesus Christ that rules out personal favoritism? I think we have a clue in the word “glory” here. Jesus Christ is “the Lord of glory” or “the glorious Lord Jesus Christ.” When we recognize Christ’s glory and we put our hope in Him, then there isn’t any room for man’s glory. And what is partiality? Partiality is giving glory to man. That’s what we see in these verses. James doesn’t use the word “glory” again, but his illustration shows how we glorify man by elevating certain individuals based on their earthly “glory.” That’s the way the world thinks about glory. If someone has a lot of money, or fame, or power, that is considered to be true greatness. And the world fawns over such individuals.

But for those of us who are looking to Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, our delight in His glory shouldn’t leave any room for man’s glory. Jesus is the glorious One. And no matter how well you are dressed, or what kind of job you have, or how much influence you have in the world, you don’t hold a candle to the Lord of glory. Jesus’ glory puts everything else in perspective, and as the hymn says, when we “turn our eyes upon Jesus” and “look full in His wonderful face,” then “the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of His glory and grace” (hymn by Hellen H. Lemmel, 1922). In light of Christ’s glory, there is no room for us to glorify man. Faith in the Lord of glory is fundamentally inconsistent with partiality.

The application for us here is to look into our own hearts and examine the way we perceive others and treat others. Do we glorify the things the world glorifies? Do we give preferential treatment to those who are wealthy, while ignoring those who are needy? If that is so, then it means we are not beholding Christ’s glory as we ought. The more we see of Christ’s glory, the less we will pay attention to man’s glory. As we look into his wonderful face, the things of earth will grow strangely dim.

The clear command of verse 1 is: don’t hold your faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, while also showing favoritism. And the implication we can draw from this is: if we are showing favoritism, we are not seeing enough of Christ’s glory. Therefore we can apply this not only in a negative sense: Stop

showing favoritism. But also in a positive sense: Pursue Jesus Christ with a passion to see His glory, to delight in His greatness. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 3:18, “we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.” Look into God’s Word. Read of the glories of Jesus Christ. And you will be changed! You will be sanctified. Over time, you will be conformed more and more into His likeness. And as that happens, we will perceive people the way He perceives them and not the way the world perceives them. Partiality is inconsistent with faith in Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

II. Partiality divides (verse 4)

A second reason why we must not show partiality is that partiality divides. In verse 4 James concludes his illustration with this rhetorical question, “have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?” Let’s just look at the first part of that statement for now, “have you not then made distinctions among yourselves.” Partiality involves division, distinctions, discrimination. Certain individuals are elevated and treated better because of some external characteristic, while others are treated poorly.

We see this very vividly and painfully in the racial divide that has caused so much turmoil in the history of our country. Based solely on color of skin, our country, and our churches, have been divided. We have told the white man, “You sit here in a good place.” And we’ve told the black man, “You stand over there,” or “Sit down at my feet.” Brothers and sisters, it must not be this way. We must recognize that “red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in His sight.” There must not be divisions based on race or wealth or position in society. As the church of Jesus Christ, we must be an example of impartiality. We must be a light in this dark world. We must be a place where anyone and everyone can come and be welcomed warmly, where there will be no discrimination of any kind, where no one is looking down on anyone else. We should make no distinctions among ourselves. Instead, we need to strive for reconciliation and unity and peace. Ephesians 4:3, be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” What a testimony this could be to a world fraught with bitterness and division and inequality. In the midst of the world’s turmoil the church ought to be an oasis of racial harmony and diversity. It also ought to be a place of socioeconomic diversity. The church must be a place where all of the world’s divisions and distinctions disappear because of our unity in Christ.

During my college years I spent one summer working in a large chemical plant in Midland, Michigan. And over the course

of that summer I experienced another type of division. I saw very clearly the distinction between the white-collar executives and the blue-collar union workers. It was evident, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, that these two groups of individuals were deeply divided. And nobody seemed to be working to bridge that divide. I think the point of this text as it relates to that kind of situation is that when a white-collar executive and a blue-collar union worker come into the same church, there shouldn't be any trace of that distinction. One must not be regarded above the other, or at odds with another, because of their positions in the workplace. Our faith in Christ will bring unity, and that unity will bridge all kinds of earthly divisions.

III. Partiality involves evil judging (verse 4)

Verse 4 says, “have you not then made distinctions among yourselves *and* become judges with evil thoughts?” This is the third reason we have for not showing partiality. Partiality involves evil judging.

When we show favoritism toward certain people and treat others poorly, we are participating in an evil kind of judging. We are setting ourselves up as the ones who can determine who is important and who is not. And this judging is based on evil thoughts. It's based on worldly thinking and evil intentions. In the particular illustration that James gives, the thought process might be something like this: The rich person is respected by the world, and he also has the ability to help my financial situation. Therefore, I'm going to give him preferential treatment. I'm going to let him have the seat of honor. That's wicked. That is putting ourselves in the place of God to decide who's in and who's out. It divides people according to the world's standards and according to our own selfish desires. Partiality involves evil judging.

IV. Partiality is inconsistent with God's nature (verses 5-6)

Moving to verses 5-6 we also see that partiality is inconsistent with God's nature. This is the fourth reason for showing no partiality. Look at the contrast that is drawn here. In verse 5, “Listen, my beloved brothers [he's going to remind us of something very important about God's nature], 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?” That's God's perspective on things. He loves the poor. He chooses the poor, and makes them wealthy in the way that matters most. And then the contrast is seen in verse 6, “*But you* have dishonored the poor man.” Partiality is inconsistent with God's nature. When we dishonor the poor, when we make distinctions among ourselves

based on external things, we are out of step with the ways of God. God does not show favoritism, and neither should we.

A very profound way in which we see God's impartiality is in the doctrine of election, which James points to here. We refer to it as "unconditional election," and it is a great theme throughout the Bible. It's the truth that in ages past God chose for Himself those individuals whom He would save. Jesus states this in John 15:16, "You did not choose me, but I chose you . . ." And Paul, in Ephesians 1:4, "[the Father] chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world."

The point here in James 2 is to remind us that God's election is unconditional. God is impartial in His choosing. He did not choose us on the basis of wealth, or race, or place of employment, or good looks, or personality. He has chosen to save individuals from all walks of life, from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, rich and poor, white-collar and blue-collar, urban and suburban and rural. He does not show partiality. He certainly does not regard what the world regards. He is not impressed by riches or fame or talent.

In fact, it is God's pleasure to choose those who are weak and lowly in order to silence human boasting and glorify His saving power. This is what we read in 1 Corinthians 1:26-28, "For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God."

James is saying a very similar thing in terms of worldly riches and worldly poverty. And he turns this distinction on its head. God has chosen those who are *poor* in the world to be *rich* in faith. The NIV says, "those who are poor in the eyes of the world." I think that's a good paraphrase here, because it brings out the contrasting viewpoints represented in the verse. In the eyes of the world there are rich and poor, and that assessment is based on *material* wealth. But in God's economy, a person is rich or poor based on the condition of his soul. The rich person is the one who has faith in God and loves God. This person will experience the riches of knowing Christ, and the eternal inheritance of being in His presence. True wealth is to be an heir of the kingdom, which God has promised to those who love Him.

I want to pause here to ask you, Are you rich in faith? Are you an heir of the kingdom? Do you love God? These are the ways that this verse describes Christians, and each of these things is an evidence of being chosen by God. The verse is speaking of

those who are poor in the world, but we cannot read the verse to mean that God chooses *only* the poor. James is simply making the point that God is impartial, and He chooses the poor (among others) to be saved. Therefore, whether rich or poor in the eyes of world, we can all ask ourselves, Am I rich in the realm of faith? Am I wealthy in the currency that really matters? And I challenge you this morning to look past the externals of this life and consider the things that are eternal. Your life is fleeting. And when you die the only thing that will matter is whether or not you are rich in faith, whether or not you are an heir of the kingdom, whether or not you love God. I pray that God will give you eyes to see Him for who He is, because when you see the beauty of His greatness, you will love Him. You will trust in His Son, Jesus Christ. He is the only way for us to be forgiven of our sins and to inherit the kingdom. So repent of your sinful ways. Repent of seeking your joy in the fleeting pleasures and riches of this world, and look to the eternal riches. Fall in love with the Lord of glory.

V. Partiality honors man above God (verses 6-7)

Fifthly, and finally, partiality honors man above God. We see this in verses 6-7. In contrast to God, who *chooses* the poor, James chastises his readers for *dishonoring* the poor. They dishonor the poor by giving the rich man the good seat. They cater to the comforts of the wealthy at the expense of the poor. And James now shows how absurd this is, especially in their situation. You see, the Christians who originally received this letter were poor themselves. It's not as though they were wealthy, and they looked down on the poor folks who sometimes joined them for corporate worship. Instead, they were mostly poor and oppressed Jewish believers who had been dispersed because of persecution. But apparently the tendency was to show special kindness to the rich when they attended, in the hope of having that kindness repaid in the form of money or food or some other material need.

James shows the absurdity of this by asking these rhetorical questions in verses 6-7. "Are not the rich the ones who oppress you and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?" These rich people were using their wealth in evil ways. They were oppressing the poor. They were even exploiting the court system to increase their power and wealth. And not only did they oppress the poor, they also blatantly dishonored God. This is stated very dramatically, they "blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?" In other words, their way of life is diametrically opposed to everything you stand for. But when they come into your assembly, you grovel at their feet! You give them the best place to sit, at the expense of the poor person.

The point of verses 6-7 is not to say that we should treat these people with disdain and hatred. But how ridiculous it is to fawn over those individuals in the hopes of getting some of their money! When the rich man walks through the door, Christian conviction has gone by the wayside. This honors man above God. It honors wealth and prestige and power above God.

This is the partiality that the church wrestled with in the first century, and continues to face today. It's the sinful desire to admire the things that man admires, and to crave the things that man craves. It's the urge to honor man above God.

In closing, I want to encourage us as a congregation to be a body of believers where there is no favoritism. I want this to be a church where any person who walks into one of our worship services, or small groups, or Sunday school classes, is welcomed warmly and feels the love of Christ which has nothing to do with partiality. I long for us to be a loving and welcoming and impartial congregation, and my prayer is that our unity in Christ and our lack of favoritism would result in us being more and more diverse.

I pray that we would be diverse ethnically. We have the promise in Revelation 5:9 that Jesus died to ransom people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. Therefore we know that God is drawing to Himself the most diverse group of people imaginable, and we should pray that our local congregation would reflect that.

I also pray that we would be diverse in terms of rich and poor. God has a special place in his heart for those who are on the lowest rung of society, and our hearts should beat with that same kind of compassion. We should go out of our way to invite and welcome individuals who are in desperate situations.

I believe God will be glorified as our congregation becomes more diverse in these ways. Diversity is not an end in itself. But it makes a profound statement about the power of the Gospel. Who could bring together men and women from different backgrounds, different races, different vocations, different neighborhoods, and different levels of income? Who could bring together a diverse group like that and give them a deep and abiding love for one another, a love that involves praying for each other and making sacrifices for one another and encouraging one another? Who could do that other than the Lord of glory?

Let's pray for our own hearts, that God would root out any partiality or favoritism that is present there. And let's pray for our congregation, that we would be a unified, loving, impartial, and diverse family of believers.