

Warning: Playing Favorites Can Lead to Discrimination & Indifference

“But if you show partiality, you commit sin...” James 2:9

James 2:1-10, 14-17
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Have you ever had the tendency to play favorites – to treat certain people with more respect and dignity than others? Think about the times when you have been on the receiving end of favoritism? Truth is, there's not a one of us who hasn't experienced being on the giving and receiving end of favoritism. On the flip side of all of that, it might be helpful to reflect upon those times when you have been the *victim* of someone else showing favoritism toward another and not treating you with equal respect and dignity.

So whether we like it or not, it's tough to read in the New Testament book of James, “My brothers and sisters, **do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?**” (James 2:1) And he adds, “**If you show partiality, you commit sin** and are convicted by the law as transgressors.” (v. 9)

But why? Why is it a sin? Isn't playing favorites just an engrained part of our human nature, the way we respond to our likes and dislikes? The simplest answer to why the scriptures consider it sinful is that **it violates what James called the ‘royal law’ – Jesus' command to love our neighbor (all our neighbors) as ourselves.**

Throughout the entire Book of James, often referred to as the “Proverbs of the New Testament,” the author's main concern is not so much what we *believe* as Christians, but rather what we *do* as people who are part of a community of faith. To frame this using fancy religious terminology: **orthodoxy (which literally means ‘right thinking’) must not take precedence over orthopraxis (right doing).** Orthodoxy, throughout the ages, has been used to enforce doctrinal correctness, as determined by the church, of course. Unfortunately, much of orthodox thought, the long-held beliefs and traditions of the church, has been turned into what can be called “the fundamentals” of our faith. When they become absolutized, they are often used as litmus tests to determine if one is a good and faithful Christian or not. **Jesus, however, wasn't hung up on litmus tests before he put his faith into action. And he called his followers to do the same. That's orthopraxis.**

College Hill, and many other progressive communities of faith, also tend to emphasize the importance of doing over theory, of orthopraxis over orthodoxy. **I'm not saying that what we believe isn't important, but that the way we live out daily lives takes precedence to making verbal assent to this or that idea.** Perhaps we can even extend this to the point of claiming that **imitating Jesus is more important than worshipping Jesus.** Let that sink in for a moment.

Last Sunday, we focused on James statement from chapter 1, "Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves" (James 1:22). Today's passage, from the second chapter of James, wastes no time in illustrating this point. James, in his usual blunt manner, basically asks: How can you call yourself a Christian if you behave in ways that discriminate against other people? Again, the honest answer is: quite easily! It happens all the time. This is why we need this kind of wisdom instruction to bring our 'disconnects' into the light.

James uses a simple and concrete illustration to make his point. Biblical commentator, Peter Jones, calls it the '**parable of the prejudiced usher.**' We witness a rich person, sporting a little bling and wearing impressive clothes, who upon entering an assembly of some kind (most likely a service of worship) is shown special favor. That doesn't seem too terrible, does it? However, when a poor person, also judged based solely on physical appearance, enters the same assembly, is treated in a dismissive and discriminatory manner.

The scenario is so straightforward, and so universal, that it basically needs no explanation at all. The point is crystal clear! Any favoritism, in this case based on socio-economic class distinction, is unacceptable and inconsistent to the point of being incompatible with the Christian faith itself. It becomes evident that even 2000 years ago there was a deep concern that discrimination, and to be blunt, social snobbery was infiltrating the church. At one level then, when it comes to applying this to ourselves, **we are meant to reflect upon our attitudes and behavior toward people who come to visit this church.**

If we dig a little deeper, however, we will find a layer beyond our comfortable moral outrage at any such blatant discrimination. It is important to do so, because otherwise we tend to think these words only apply to other people. You know, those *other* churches that discriminate, certainly not us.

It is James' intention that we courageously ask ourselves: **Are we ever guilty of showing favoritism – of treating some people better than others, especially here at church?** That involves our interactions not only with the stranger and visitor in our midst, but each other as well. While James uses the obvious example of the difference between rich and poor, a **socio-economic distinction**, other things we might consider as leading to discrimination include:

- educational differences,
- differing theological or political perspectives,
- generational differences,
- differences in marital status,
- different sexual orientations and gender identities,
- those of different ethnic and language backgrounds and races,
- differences in physical appearance,
- even those with varying degrees of mental illness.

The list of distinctions could go on and on. No one is completely innocent when it comes to playing favorites. Of course, we are going to *like* some people more than others. But that's not James's point. **So the real problem facing the Christian community of faith, then and now, is not so much showing honor and respect to some people, but rather not showing honor and respect to all people.** So yes, the Christian faith, in its purest form, is incompatible with favoritism. But that's not all.

The Christian faith is also incompatible with indifference – not caring enough to actually help those in need. This discussion begins in v. 14 and deserves another reading.

*What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So **faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.** (James 2:14-17)*

The principle revealed here is that **faith and works cannot be divorced from each other.** The argument is that our beliefs, by themselves, do not secure the well-being of those who are in need. Instead, concrete acts of genuine kindness, compassion, and mercy are needed, rather than pious benedictions and empty words. In other words, **a person in need does not need evidence of our faith, but of our works.** To put it perhaps more simply, the work and ministry of the church must deal with issues of **social justice.** And we are called not just to talk about these issues, but to active engagement in working for social justice for all people.

The straightforward, and yes abrasive question from today's text is this: **When presented with the opportunity, will you, will I, will we take action or not?**

As you encounter people this week, I encourage and challenge you to observe your patterns of showing favoritism - especially to those with whom you are not partial. And observe your response to people who are in need of love and compassion and mercy and kindness. **Treating people as second-class citizens is sinful.** The Christian Church itself, throughout its history and to this very day, is certainly guilty of this. Again, there's no problem with treating a friend with respect and honor, we just need to treat the stranger, or those who don't think or act or look or believe the same way we do, with respect and honor as well – for we are *all* children of God.

We are called to demonstrate our faith in and through our actions. So let them not be acts of discrimination or indifference, but rather acts of inclusion, genuine hospitality, and by extending dignity and respect to all.

Amen.