Partiality Can Lead to

Discrimination & Indifference

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

*James 2:1-10, 14-17 Rev. Todd B. Freeman*

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Our Epistle reading for this day, from James 2, is blunt and to the point. There is a blatantly clear condemnation of demonstrating acts of favoritism and showing partiality. For clarity sake, and for those of you who love definitions, let’s start with this.

**Partiality**: the inclination or predisposition to favor one thing, one perspective, one person, or group of persons compared with another. Partiality is closely associated with favoritism, as they are both clearly used in the Book of James. And both are different from simply having a personal preference for one thing over another, in that they are primarily connected with having an unfair bias, prejudice, or taking sides at the expense of another.

We are clearly being challenged to ask of ourselves and of our community of faith: **Have you, have we, ever had the tendency to play favorites?** For instance, to treat certain people with more respect and dignity than others? Often, this happens almost unconsciously and instantaneously. 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 and partiality. 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 and partiality toward another person and not treating you with equal respect and dignity.

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 is this so? **Why is it considered a sin?** Isn’t playing favorites and showing partiality just an engrained part of our tribal human nature, simply the way we respond to our likes and dislikes? The simplest answer to why scripture considers it sinful is that **it violates what James calls 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 what we *do* with our faith, more than with our intellectual assent to theological doctrines and propositions**. 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 exclusively by the church hierarchy, 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. **And by fundamental, rather than the term foundational, they became literalized and absolutized and then used as litmus tests to determine if someone is a good and faithful Christian or not – as in being a heretic.**

This was the point made by Bishop John Shelby Spong, who passed away just last Sunday at the age of 90, in his groundbreaking 1991 book, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism: A Bishop Rethinks the Meaning of Scripture*. Many of us are indebted to him and his work by introducing us to the understanding that a progressive approach to theology and Christianity, something that many of us experienced as somehow already deep in our souls as true, is closer to a truer reflection of the nature, character, and purposes of God, the Sacred Presence within us and all creation.

**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, have pivoted to emphasize the importance of doing over theory, of orthopraxy over orthodoxy. I’m not saying that what we believe isn’t important, because it is. Rather, **the way we live out daily lives guided by our faith takes precedence over giving verbal assent to this or that idea or belief**. Perhaps we, as progressives can even extend this to the point of claiming that **imitating Jesus, thus following his ways and teachings, is more important than worshiping Jesus**. Let that sink in for a moment.

Three Sundays ago, 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**.’ (Makes me glad we don’t have an overly formal usher program here.)

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? It was simply a sign of respect and honor. However, when a poor person, also judged based solely on outward physical appearance, enters the same assembly, is treated in a dismissive and discriminatory manner. There was no effort of exhibiting respect or honor.

This scenario is so straightforward, universal, and timeless 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 new Christian communities, the church.

When it comes to applying this to ourselves, we are meant to reflect upon our attitudes and behavior towards people who come to visit our community of faith. 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 also with each other. 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, racial, and language backgrounds,
* differences in physical appearance, like attractiveness
* even those with varying degrees of mental illness.

The list of distinctions could go on and on. **No one, none of us, is completely innocent when it comes to playing favorites or showing partiality**. But let’s be honest. Of course we are going to *like* some people more than others. But that’s not James’s point. 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 equally. So yes, **the Christian faith, in its purest form, is incompatible with favoritism and partiality**. While I’d like to end the sermon here, I’m afraid that’s not all.

**The Christian faith, we also learn in this passage, is incompatible with indifference – not caring enough to actually help those in need.** This may be even more incriminating than partiality. 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, what is needed are concrete acts of genuine kindness, compassion, and mercy, 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, which we do a good job doing, but to actively engage 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?** And no, it’s not just the pastor’s responsibility.

As you encounter people this week, I encourage 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 less than, as second-class citizens *is* sinful. That, unfortunately, has been part of the caste system that has been built into our nation since its founding.** 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, all created in the image of God, all infused with the Divine within.

Agreed, our current culture of divisiveness and polarization is making this harder and harder to do. That includes for me, as well. Yet, we are called to demonstrate our faith in and through our actions. Therefore, with God’s help, let them not be acts of discrimination or indifference, but rather acts of inclusion, genuine hospitality, and compassion by extending dignity and respect to all.

Amen.