

A Living Faith: Show No Partiality

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

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

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
September 8, 2024

James declares, “If you show partiality, you commit sin” (James 2:9). **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. But it is important to note both are used differently in James from simply having a personal preference for one thing over another, in that they are primarily **connected with having an unfair bias, being prejudice leading to discrimination, and judging others with evil thoughts.**

We are clearly being challenged, however, to ask of ourselves and of our community of faith: **Have you and I, have we, ever had the tendency to play favorites?** For instance, to treat certain people with more respect and dignity and honor than others. **I find it hard to believe anyone being able to claim they have never played favorites.** Often, however, this happens almost unconsciously and instantaneously.

Think about a time when you have been on the receiving end of someone showing you favoritism? How did that feel? On the flip side of this, 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. How did that feel?

Whether we like it or not, it's tough to read and hear the words, “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 are wired to 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, as I mentioned last Sunday, **the author’s main concern is what we do with our faith, more than with our intellectual assent to theological doctrines and propositions (what we believe).** To frame this using fancy religious terminology: **orthodoxy** (which literally means ‘right thinking’) **must not take precedence over orthopraxis** (‘right doing’). I’m not saying that what we believe isn't important, because it is. Rather, the way we live out our daily lives, guided by our faith, takes precedence over giving assent to this or that idea or belief.

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, 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 fine 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 is simply a sign of respect and honor. However, when a poor person, also judged 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.

It's no accident that James mentions the person's dirty clothes. **Dirty clothes were and are a symbol.** Biblical commentator William Loader writes:

We don't want dirt. Dirty people don't belong. This is a version of a **purity code.** Dirt is what does not belong. People sometimes speak about being treated like dirt. The striking thing about Jesus was that he refused to treat anyone like dirt... James assumes that people matter most in God's eyes and should matter most to us. That defines our purity laws, so that **dirt is never people; it is what dehumanizes and abuses people.**

This scenario in James 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 and class bigotry, 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 our community of faith, whether visitor or member alike. 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?** Again, 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, including attractiveness
- even those with differing degrees of mental health

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' point. The real problem facing the Christian community of faith, then and now, is not so much showing dignity and respect to some people, but rather not showing dignity and

respect to *all* people equally. So yes, **the Christian faith, in its purest form, is incompatible with favoritism and partiality.**

Now, 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 (as in our beliefs) 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. **A person in need does not need evidence of our faith beliefs, but evidence of our good works.** For saying the right words does not count for much if we don't put those words into right action. That's what we mean by **social justice.**

When presented with the opportunity, will you, will I, will we take action or not?

Know that we are regularly presented opportunities concerning this here at College Hill.

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. **For treating people as less than, as dehumanized second-class citizens, is sinful.** That, unfortunately, has been part of the caste system that has been built into our nation since its founding. And the Christian Church itself, throughout its history and to this very day, is also guilty of this. Agreed, our current culture of divisiveness and polarization is making treating *all* people as beloved children of God this harder and harder to do. Yet, we are called to demonstrate our faith in and through our actions.

Therefore, with God's help, **let our thoughts and actions not be ones of discrimination or indifference, but rather acts of inclusion, genuine hospitality, and compassion.** In doing so, we are loving our neighbor as ourselves.

Amen.