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Lesson 5 — *Real Faith: Real Faith Forsakes Favoritism (2:1-13), Part 1*

INTRODUCTION

We are creatures of favorites. We all have our own preferences, our own likes and dislikes. That's the way we were born, but we've also been conditioned that way since birth. We all have our favorite meal, academic class, hobby, board game, musician, book of the Bible, and hymn. And throughout life, we often form new favorites and discard old ones. Illustration: picky eaters

When it comes to our church life and ministry, however, having favorites is an altogether different matter.

At the end of chapter 1, James describes “pure and undefiled religion” as working to “bridle [one’s] tongue,” “to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world” (v. 27; cf. vv. 9-11). Faith’s transformation of the tongue will be James’ focus in chapter 3, and worldliness will have his attention in chapter 4. In chapter 2, however, James fleshes out how genuine faith reaches out to “down-and-outers”—in James’ day, “orphans and widows.” Real faith shows loving concern for those who might be less fortunate than us or those with whom we might naturally connect. This kind of religion may not be that which is most comfortable and rewarding for us—but it is religion that is accepted by God (“pure and undefiled”), for it is true religion (i.e., the outward expressions of a living faith). This characteristic of real faith is what James discusses now in chapter 2.

In a nutshell, James crystalizes his point in one clarion call in verse 1: “My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.”

- This is not saying that everyone is reduced to a common level. 1 Peter 2:17 says, “Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear

God. Honor the emperor.” Clearly, then, within society, there is some way in which distinctions ought to be made and honor rightly accorded. Special honor (and rudeness) is very appropriate in many social settings—we should honor the elderly, respect our rulers, express gratitude to our military, etc. Scripture allows for this distinction, also admonishing situations in which dishonor should be applied (e.g., to the fool or scorner in Proverbs). But this is not James’ point. James’ point in this passage doesn’t have to do with specially honoring someone’s office or character.

- The word “partiality” (Gk. *prosopolepsia*) is a combination of two words which means etymologically, “accepting or receiving faces.” This word conjures up the idea of accepting someone because you like his/her face, and ignoring or rejecting someone else because you don’t like his/her face. Clearly then, as it will be further evidenced by the illustration in verses 2-3 and the indictment in verse 4, “partiality” or “favoritism” (NSAB, NIV, NLT, HCSB; “prejudice” NET) refers to treating people differently based upon an external evaluation (i.e., their “face”).
- In this passage, then, James is condemning the behavior that makes external and superficial distinctions in the way that we treat people around us on a daily and practical basis. The illustration James uses in verses 2-3—wealth—highlights one very common external distinction that people (including Christians) often use to determine how they will treat someone. Essentially, James is rebuking the Christian snob—that one who makes interaction-affecting judgments based on some external standard: wealth, pop culture integration, education, occupation, ethnicity, hygiene, physical appearance, etc. Alistair Begg summarizes the point this way, “Don’t ever attempt to combine snobbery with faith in Jesus Christ.”
- Partiality or snobbish favoritism is consistently repudiated in Scripture: Proverbs 24:23; 28:21; Malachi 2:9; John 7:24; 1 Timothy 5:19-21 (even towards church leaders).

See, God has no place for favoritism in His church. It’s one thing to have a favorite salad dressing, baseball team, or color. It’s another and destructive matter to show favoritism within the body of Christ. James gives us five reasons why we must forsake favoritism.

FAVORITISM VIOLATES OUR PROFESSION OF FAITH (v. 1)

My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

Verse 1 may be easy for us to skip over, but embedded in it are clues as to how such counter-cultural favoritism may be cultivated.

1. Faith purges us from favoritism.

At the end of chapter 1, James drew a distinction between “religion” and “real (or pure and undefiled) religion” (vv. 26-27). That is really important, because many people today would consider themselves religious and therefore spiritually safe. James, however, would put them on very tenuous ground.

In this epistle, James is writing to those who have “real faith” or “real religion,” and he calls them “brothers” (and “sisters”). Now, these were not blood relatives of Pastor James, so we need to consider in what way he calls them “brothers.” Indeed, we recognize that he is using it in a rich spiritual sense, for he understands personally that being a blood relative of Jesus may actually be a worthless position, if it does not become a spiritual brotherhood. James, the physical brother of our Lord, had for a long time rejected Jesus’ spiritual claims (cf. John 7:5). Yet now, James dares to call other religious people “brothers,” while also distancing himself from false religious people. What makes the difference? What is it that births someone into the privileged standing of being “brothers and sisters” together and with the Lord?

James answers that here in verse 1—they “hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.” Jesus makes all the difference. Only faith in Jesus can take a religious person (there are many of them!) and make them truly religious—that is, give them a true internal relationship with God (1 Peter 3:16) that they can live out externally. This is what happened to the very religious Lydia in Acts 16:11-15—hers was a false, meaningless religion, until she believed in the gospel of the Jesus Christ.

And this kind of faith, this belief in the Christian gospel is fundamentally humbling and barrier-shattering. This is what James alludes to in verse 5. Those who are “rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom” first acknowledged that they were “poor

in the world.” They stopped being snobs and rightly evaluated themselves as being the foremost of sinners (cf. 1 Timothy 1:15). They realized that their air of superiority was a façade of absolute destitution, and being “poor in spirit” they were “blessed” by Jesus and given “the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3). Against the arrogant prejudice of secularism and the haughty snobbery of religion, only “faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” can purge us from favoritism and make us mutually loving and communally sacrificial.

Do you believe? Are you “rich in faith,” “holding faith in the Lord Jesus Christ”? Are you really a “brother or sister”? Or are you merely religious? Have you admitted being “poor” in God’s sight? Or are you still piously practicing empty religion?

Until we believe, we probably won’t really be all that concerned about favoritism, prejudice, and partiality. Until we believe, any expressed concern will likely be hypocritical and will not extend far enough. Until we “hold faith in our Lord Jesus Christ,” all we can do is try our best in this and every area. And in that state, we will be absolutely frustrated and fruitless.

Only “brothers and sisters,” those who “hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” may be purged from favoritism. But why is that? What about Jesus Christ makes faith in Him so transformative?

2. Faith replaces favoritism with the character of Jesus.

Well, consider how He is referred to by James in this passage.

a. Through faith, Jesus becomes our example.

In verse 1, James calls Jesus “the Lord of glory.” Literally, James writes, “...our Lord, Jesus Christ of the glory.” At first glance, that might seem like an interesting or even inappropriate name to ascribe to Jesus in a passage dealing with favoritism. After all, if he’s admonishing us to be humble and impartial, wouldn’t it be better to select a name for the Lord that highlights those characteristics? Well, I think that character of Christ is where James wants us to go, but he rightly starts here with this high and lofty title, “Jesus Christ of the glory.”

By stressing Christ's divine, sovereign, powerful, and glorious position, James is teaching us that even our Lord and Savior—this "Jesus Christ of glory"—was not one to practice favoritism, although it was common for important people of Christ's day (and ours) to do so. Although Jesus is the "Lord of glory," He was called a "friend of sinners" (Matthew 11:39). He was mockingly and disparagingly given that label because He so consistently ministered to so many kinds of people. Jesus had glory, but what did He do with it? He was neither a snob, nor was partial to or against the snobs. Rather, Jesus received and ministered to women, children, palsied people, lepers (i.e., contagious, sickly, disgusting, oozing-sore-filled people), adulteresses, materialistic thieves, arrogant lawyers, belligerent fishermen (e.g., Peter), holier-than-thou religious fanatics (i.e., Pharisees, who also were trying to kill him), crooked politicians, uncouth military men, murderers, and naked maniacs (i.e., would you have felt comfortable ministering to this guy?). When it came to His "religion," Jesus was as prepared to minister to rich Zacchaeus as we was to accept the ill-reputed woman at the well.

Indeed, Jesus exemplified a counter-cultural way of interacting with people and practicing His "religion" toward them. He was open and accessible to all; He was receptive and befriending to everyone. This in no way suggests that He sacrificed truth and distinction to do so, but it merely emphasizes that the Head of the Church is absolutely impartial when it comes to the way He established our faith and wants it to be expressed.

Real faith, real religion sees this distinctive example of Jesus Christ and pursues it. But so does false faith and empty religion. Many people then and now are compelled by the distinctively loving character of Christ and seek to mirror that in their own ministry. But such external moralism is insufficient and does nothing to address our heart, which is the factory that produces favoritism.

Those who are "brothers and sisters," who "hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" in sincerity, discover an additional resource in their relationship with the Lord. Those who have real faith, real religion discover that Christ is more than just an example in their religion, but that He is actually the enablement of their religion. And in that enablement, He fundamentally changes the way we view and relate to others and replaces our prejudicial favoritism with His loving and befriending character.

b. Through faith, Jesus becomes our enablement.

See, the point that James wants us to understand in this title for Jesus is not really that *in spite of His glory* Jesus is still impartial. Now, that's true—even though He was cloaked in glory, He condescended to minister to us—but it doesn't go far enough or really capture the essence of Jesus' glory. Jesus' glory wasn't a potential obstacle, but was rather the reason for His impartiality. Jesus is impartial, *because of His glory!*

In Exodus 33:18-24:7, Moses asks to see God's glory and God answers by proclaiming His name and character: "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation" (34:6-7). In declaring His character, God revealed that an inherent quality of His glory is the absence of superficial, external prejudice—He doesn't play favorites! In fact, in the New Testament, the word that James uses here for "partiality" is used only three other times, and each passage is explaining that God is *not* that way (Romans 2:9-11, Ephesians 6:9, and Colossians 3:25; cf. 1 Peter 1:16-17).¹

In John 1:14 and 2 Corinthians 4:4-6, we learn that Jesus Christ personally contained the fullness of God's glory in visible form for us to see (John 1:18; 14:7-9)—He is, quite literally, "Jesus Christ of the glory"! And when we read the gospels, it is impossible to notice in His character a complete absence of partiality and prejudice. In His ministry, Jesus never betrayed a snobbish spirit of superiority or favoritism. Instead, "though He was rich, yet for [our] sake He became poor, so that [we] by His poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9), and "though He was in the form of God, [He] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant" (Philippians 2:6-7).

This all becomes powerfully practical to James' exhortation to forsake favoritism when we recognize that "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:7). "Holding the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" not only gives us a good example to follow, but it actually takes away the old self and replaces it with the new self, one being renewed into the image of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 4:24). Then, and only then, are we enabled to be free from favoritism and enjoy the liberty of love!

Only those who have been impacted by the glory of Jesus can ever hope to know His same gentleness and graciousness. Only those who have been "called...to His own glory and excellence" and become "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:3-4) can discover the same absence of favoritism and prejudice that characterizes Christ.

Indeed, it is holding the faith in our Lord, Jesus Christ of the glory that makes all the difference, for "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" (2 Corinthians 3:18). Only when the glory of Christ invades our hearts and fundamental

changes our nature through faith in Him, can we ever become the kind of mutually loving, inclusive, and serving individual and community that we are called to be.

So, what have you done with Jesus? Because He makes all the difference. If you don't have His character, you will never love as He loved and be impartial as He was impartial, even if you appreciate and pursue His example. No, Jesus must come inside of you and transform you from the inside out with His glory.

Friend, is that true about you? Are you trusting Jesus as your Savior and Lord? Have you been saved? "Jesus Christ of the glory" showed no prejudice in His ministry toward you. Instead, even though you were His willing enemy, He laid aside His glory for you, obediently endured human existence for you, sacrificially died for your sins, and rose from the dead in order to offer you forgiveness from all your selfish and arrogant and prejudicial sinfulness. What are you doing with Jesus? Have you trusted Him to forgive you and rescue you from sin and death? Are you holding faith in our Lord Jesus Christ?

"Brothers and sisters"—so called or real—of we practice favoritism, we are absolutely violating our profession of faith. Real faith, real religion is accompanied by the transforming glory of God within your life that impacts you with the character of Christ to such a degree that you begin to behave as He behaved. Dear brothers and sisters, allow the glorious distinction of your faith to be that impartial and universal ministry that characterized Jesus Christ.

Discussion: Read Luke 5:27-32 and discuss the following questions.

- In the context, who are the "well" and who are the "sick"? *The Pharisees and scribes were the "well" ones; the tax collectors and sinners were the "sick."*
- So, what does Jesus mean by "well"? *Not "well" spiritually, but "well" in society—that is, they were accepted, respected, and viewed as "well," while the others were obviously sick.*
- What is ironic about this description? *Both groups are actually sick and need God's grace. Both groups are blind, but the "well" are doubly blind—the "sick" know they are sick (for society tells*

them over and over again), but they just don't know how bad or how to be healed; the "well" not only reject any solution, but fail to recognize any need.

- *What do we learn from the example of the Savior? He ministered to those who readily understood their status as "sick" and didn't waste energy on those who bore the hypocritical and societal label of "well." While He did indeed minister to the so-called "well" when they began to sense their need (cf. Nicodemus, etc.), He focused His attention on the "sick" and "sinners." A few principles can be gleaned here:*
 - *As a general rule, I should focus on reaching the reachable and teaching the teachable, even when they are the overlooked, ignored, despised, or rejected of society. The Lord may actually be using such derision to awaken them to their spiritual "sickness" so that He may heal them.*
 - *I must warn the unreachable and unteachable of their actual sickness and sinfulness, but God alone can actually convince the "well" that they are really "sick."*
 - *To practice the deceived prejudice of the world and show favoritism to the socially or intellectually or financially "well," is to perpetuate their spiritual blindness and "sickness." My favoritism might actually become their condemnation.*
- *On a side note, who were the "tax collectors" and how does that affect our understanding of to whom we should minister? The tax collectors preyed on those around them, manipulating them and totally taking advantage of them. Their society was repulsed by them, and they were considered totally worthless and were rejected. Parallels in our society today may include tax collectors, politicians, reformed (and unreformed) criminals, sexual perverts, and pedophiles. The glory of Jesus Christ would express itself in impartial ministry to these same "sinners" today.*

ENDNOTES

¹A biblical summary of favoritism can be succinctly summarized this way: God is impartial; therefore, we too should be impartial (Deuteronomy 10:17; 1:17; 15:7-11; 16:19; Leviticus 19:15; 2 Chronicles 19:7; Ephesians 6:5-9).