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

INTRODUCTION

In a nutshell, James crystalizes the point of this passage 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.” 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)

1. Faith purges us from favoritism.
2. Faith replaces favoritism with the character of Jesus.
 - a. Through faith, Jesus becomes our example.
 - b. Through faith, Jesus becomes our enablement.

FAVORITISM VIOLATES GOD’S PRINCIPLE OF EQUALITY (vv. 2-4).

For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly,¹ and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “You sit here in a good place,” while you say to the poor man, “You stand over there,” or, “Sit down at my feet,” have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

As we noted in our introduction, James now uses a timeless, universal, and poignant illustration to help clarify what he means by an attitude of partiality or favoritism. James presents a situation in which two men—apparently visitors and, we assume, unbelievers—walk into church. One is a rich man wearing an expensive gold ring and bright, extravagant clothing (cf. “fine” in Luke 23:11 and Acts 10:30); the other is a common poor man, as is evidenced by his external attire. The one who is partial and shows favoritism or prejudice gives a good seat to the rich person and a standing place or floor spot² to the poor person. In our context, we wouldn’t ask a guest to sit on the floor, but perhaps we would have him sit by himself or just let her find a spot on the front row. We might not show contempt (although sometimes we do), but we may show discourtesy. And if we don’t show disrespect, perhaps we just ignore the individual altogether. This is the fruit of favoritism.

1. The fruit of favoritism

James describes this fruit this way in verse 4—“you...made distinctions among yourselves.” The word for “make distinctions” (Gk. *diakrino*) is related to the Greek verb “to judge” (*krino*) means “to conclude that there is a difference” or “to differentiate by separating.”³ This word pictures the activity of assigning people to certain categories or classes. Such externally-driven, distinction-making judgmentalism is alive and well today, even in the church. Differences between people certainly exist, but prejudicial eyes cannot see beyond that. Rather, prejudice draws near or backs away based upon its external evaluation—a rich man, a poor man; a white man, a black man; a republican, a democrat; an academic scholar, a blue collar worker; a popular athlete, a “past-his-prime” old man; a beautiful or sexy individual, a “plain Jane” or “average Joe”; a spiritually mature leader, a spiritually messy novice. If we’re not careful, we will, like the world, start putting price tags on people—“this person’s worth \$5 million,” “this person’s ‘in,’” “he’s cool,” “he’s a nerd,” “she’s weird,” and a host of other labels are assigned. Soon, cliques begin to form in the church when this kind of thinking invades—the young adults seal themselves off in their place, all the yuppies meet over here, the businessmen talk around the coffee, the soccer-moms gossip in the lobby, the intellectuals hold their own

conversation, and the rest...they just do whatever. And that white, middle-class, cliquish body of Christ looks no different than any other prejudicial social community. No one cares that we're Jesus' disciples, because we don't have love one for another (John 13:35).

Such preferential treatment and prejudicial grouping is not the product of biblical thinking, for it violates the uniform teaching of the Bible that all men are created equal (Genesis 1:26-27), are equally needy (Romans 3:10ff; Ephesians 2:1-3; Titus 3:3), are equally unworthy candidates of God's grace (Luke 7:6; 18:9-14; Romans 5:6ff), and can be equal recipients of God's grace (Gk. *diakrino* in Acts 15:9; cf. Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11). Furthermore, we are reminded in James 4:14 that our lives are short, and no amount of money, friendships, prestige, power, accomplishments, or good looks can add another day to our lives or a worthier status to our soul. To play favorites based on those characteristics is to violate the principle of equality that James already reminded us about in chapter 1—even the rich man “shall pass away” (James 1:10).

While post-modern relativism and tolerance shouldn't impact what we do with principle, I think it has a lot to instruct us on how we interact with people. Sometimes the children of darkness are wiser than the children of light. The broken, yet retained image of God in them provokes some unbelievers to practice an openness and inclusiveness and service that puts many Christian assemblies to shame. We Christians, of all people, ought to understand and revel in God's principle of equality—for after all, if Jesus treated us according to this illustration, where would we be sitting? But He doesn't treat us that way, and we find ourselves instead “seated...with Him in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 2:6).

So the question is this: how can we, who have benefited so greatly from God's gracious and equal treatment to us in Christ, turn around and do the opposite to others? Why are we manifesting this prejudicial fruit of favoritism? James answers that in verse 4.

2. The root of favoritism

James describes the root of favoritism this way in verse 4—you have “become judges with evil thoughts.” This indictment of favoritism has two parts.

a. We usurp an inappropriate position.

James first condemns us for becoming “judges,” a position that was never ours to have. James is not prohibiting the “right judgment” that Jesus spoke about in John 7:24 (cf. Leviticus 19:15), for that kind of judgment is, after all, “not...by appearances.” In His teaching, Jesus would encourage character evaluation (Matthew 7:15-20), as long as it was devoid of arrogant pride (Matthew 7:1-6).

But when it comes to judging someone's worth, importance, significance, and value—and the necessity of personally ministering to them—that is a judgment that was never ours to have. Instead, Jesus consistently told us how to value others and minister to them—He commanded “love your neighbor as ourselves” (Matthew 22:36-40; Mark 12:30-31) and “love your enemies” (Matthew 4:43-47; Luke 6:27-36) and “love one another as I have loved you” (John 13:34-35).

When we make external judgments that determine our quality of our loving service towards someone, we have usurped a position that was never ours to take. In James 4:12 and 5:9, James will remind us that God alone is Judge, who judges righteous judgment, seeing the heart (cf. 1 Samuel 16:7).

Discussion: Have you ever labeled someone wrong, perhaps judging them and writing them off, only to discover that you were way off?

b. We use an evil process.

And that is why we make lousy judges, because unlike God who sees the heart and consistently makes righteous judgment, we are “judges with evil thoughts.”

The word “thoughts” refers to the “process or content of reasoning” that we use to “make distinctions.”⁴ So, James is saying, the very mental process that we use to evaluate and categorize people is “evil.” This word means wicked, base, worthless, vicious, and degenerate.⁵ MacArthur writes, “Of the three words James uses for evil (see 1:21, *kakia*, ‘wickedness’; and 3:16, *phaulos*, ‘evil’), the one used here and in 4:16 (*ponēros*) is the strongest, carrying the idea of vicious intentions that have a destructive and injurious effect.”⁶ History—Christian and secular—is replete with examples of these effects of prejudice and partiality.

Do you view your judgmentalism, prejudice, and favoritism this way? Do you understand that God considers it “evil”? Will you repent from it and replace it by God’s help?

We must forsake favoritism because it violates God’s principle of equality. In Romans 15:5-7, Paul agrees with James’ repudiation of the “evil” of partiality, and he encourages us toward gospel-driven acceptance. He writes, “May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”

Discussion: Read Acts 2:44-47; 4:34-35; 6:1-7; 11:29-30; 2 Corinthians 8:1-2, 13-14. Answer the following questions.

- How was the principle of equality practiced by these early believers who “held the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ”? *They (1) “were together” (2) and sacrificed and shared their belongings so that needs were met. (3) They did so “with glad and generous hearts,” and (4) were driven by God’s grace for they were “praising God.” (5) When challenges arose, instead of allowing “distinctions” to divide them, they unified around a biblical solution of mutual service (Acts 6:1-7). (6) When they heard of “extended family members” facing challenges, they impartially sacrificed and gave in order to “send relief” and meet needs” (Acts 11:29-30; 2 Corinthians 8:1-2, 13-14).*

- Was was the impact of this generous impartiality? *In every instance, it cultivated the favor of the people (Acts 2:47) and increased the impact of the gospel (Acts 2:47; Acts 6:7).*

Discussion: Read Luke 6:27-36 and discuss the following questions.

- What real temptations might encourage us to “make distinctions” among people in this passage? *Some people are truly our “enemies” who “hate” us, “curse” us, “abuse” us, and use us.*
- Are those legitimate allowances? Why or why not? *No, the command of Christ is clearly to treat them differently than we “judge” that they are owed, but to instead treat them as we would want to be treated (v. 31). That is righteous judgment, in that it transcends the common pragmatism of human judgment (i.e., “I will love those who love me”—vv. 32-34) and practices the supernatural principles of divine grace (vv. 35-36).*
- According to this text, what is the only way that I can be liberated to be this radical, this free (contra. prejudicial and partial) with my love? *I must become a “son of the Most High” with God as my Father (vv. 35-36). That can only come by “holding faith in Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory,” for “when the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36).*
- In verse 30 (and 34), James offers once specific illustration that resonates with people in our area. What is that illustration and how does it drive home the freedom from favoritism that Christ alone can give us? *James refers to someone “who begs from you” and “takes away your goods.” When looking at the beggar or pandhandler, we immediately begin a “process of reasoning” that assigns all kinds of intentions to that individual, many of which have good evidential backing, and excuses us from embracing them as we “make distinctions” and ignore them (or hold them in contempt). According to Jesus, real Jesus-bought gospel-driven freedom is the ability to “give to everyone who begs from you and from one who takes away your goods [to] not demand them back.” Humble, loving, impartial Christian ministry may even be struck on the cheek and have one’s cloak taken away, and it will offer the other cheek and extend the tunic (v. 29)—in other words, our “religion” is so radical and so*

free that it is willing to condone a ripoff (John Piper) in loving ministry. When seeking to literally interpret and relevantly explain the counter-cultural and radical nature of this command, John Piper quotes his wife as saying, “Probably at the judgement day, Jesus will never chasten us for being taken advantage of.” The person of “real faith” and “real religion” who is “holding the [eternal security of] faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” will be so free from prejudice and partiality and fear that he/she will not be imprisoned by any perceived cost to one’s reputation, safety, stuff, time, etc. Otherwise, “If anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?” (1 John 3:16-18; Galatians 6:10).

ENDNOTES

¹“As mentioned in the Introduction, the fact that James uses *sunagōgē* here instead of *ekklēsia*, which has the same meaning and is usually translated ‘church’ (as in 5:14), gives further evidence that the churches to which he wrote were composed primarily of Jews and that the letter was written at an early date in the life of the New Testament church. Also like *ekklēsia*, the term *sunagōgē* is not a proper noun, as are their English counterparts, *synagogue* and *church*. In the New Testament, both terms were used of any sort of gathering, or place of gathering. That is the sense in which *sunagōgē* is used here by James and in which Luke uses *ekklēsia* in Acts 19:32, 39, 41” (John F. MacArthur Jr., *James*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary [Chicago: Moody Press, 1998], 102.)

²“In most synagogues of that day, there were only a few benches to sit on, perhaps one or two in the front—the ‘chief seats in the synagogues’ that the scribes and Pharisees coveted (Matt. 23:6)—and possibly some others placed around the walls. Most of the people either stood or sat cross-legged on the floor. Occasionally, someone would also have a footstool. To ask another person, especially a visitor or guest, to sit down by my footstool was therefore a double show of disrespect. The person on a bench or in a chair not only would not give that seat to the visitor but would not even allow him to sit on his footstool” (Ibid., 103.

³William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 231.

⁴William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 232.

⁵Ibid., 851.

⁶MacArthur, 103.