

Favoritism is a wrecking ball

I have the privilege of talking to you about James 2: 1-13 this morning. In this passage, James wrote about the danger of showing favoritism or partiality. In a couple of minutes, I want us to dive into this text to learn from James. First, though, I want us to do a little exercise. I want each of us to look around to find just one person we don't know. If you can't see anyone around you whom you don't know, then imagine someone you might have seen this morning or recently. Fix that person's face in your mind. You have two minutes. Are you ready? Go! Now keep that picture in your mind for a while. Let's turn our attention to the text for today.

In this first part of the letter of James, he deals with the danger of the wrecking ball of favoritism in a community of faith. James explains to us **what favoritism is, why it sharply contrasts with loving people, and an alternative to favoritism called mercy.**

What is favoritism or showing partiality?

Favoritism is judging based on externals. (verses. 1-7)

Notice that James opened this chapter, addressing the hearers as brothers and sisters. Think about the instruction James gives here as family talk. I imagine a group of people sitting around in a living room, reading this letter from James, who gives instructions on how to live well as the family of God. James dives right into the relational danger of judging each other based on externals.

In the original language, to show favoritism or partiality means to make a judgment about another person based on their outward appearance, or literally, "to lift their face". James calls us **not** to show favoritism in our fellowship. James then tells a story to illustrate his point. In his story, James draws a mental image of a man wearing fancy, expensive threads and flashy, expensive bling, vs a poor man dressed in dirty clothes. In the story, these two guys enter the fellowship, and James asks the believers. He asks the question. "Would you say (to the rich guy) 'Here's a good seat for you', and tell the guy dressed in dirty clothes, 'You stand there.' " or "Sit on the floor by my feet v. 3)?" Of course not! We would never do that, would we?

This is the problem we face; we tend to make judgment calls about people based on externals. It is human nature. But James warns us that when we show favoritism based on external things, we make ourselves out to be judges of others without even knowing them.

James states in verse 5, "Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised to those who love him?"

James distinguishes between worldly riches and heavenly riches. A person may be poor in terms of the riches of this world, but they might be wealthy in relation to faith and their investment in the coming kingdom. So, if we focus on the externals, such as clothes and jewelry, we are ascribing value to people who have the riches of this world and ignoring or even snubbing someone who may be rich in faith and obedience toward God. If we do this, we are dishonoring those who are poor in respect to the riches of this world.

When James wrote this letter, there were wealthy people who were exploiting poorer Christians, dragging believers into courts of law, and blaspheming God's name in their actions and words. And so why should people like this receive honor in the church, just because they are wealthy? It doesn't make sense, does it?

Think about the person I asked you to look at or imagine in your mind. You looked at the outward appearance of that person, and what did you see? You might have noticed their face, their hair, or what they are wearing, but that is all we can see. Without knowing the person near us, we can't see who they really are. What was their family of origin like? Did they have a happy childhood? Are they married or single? Are they relaxed or stressed out? Are they currently dealing with a big issue in their personal life? Are they wealthy or just getting by? We can't answer any of those questions without really knowing each other, can we? We must work not to judge people or show favoritism to those we think will meet a need of ours or make us feel good about ourselves. Everyone has value, not because of what they can do for us, but because they are human, and because we are all human, we all bear the image of God. That gives each of us value. Let's think about that whenever we catch ourselves judging other people based on externals.

Is it already obvious to you why judging people by externals is contrary to love?

Favoritism and love are opposites. (verses. 8-11)

"If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers (James 2: 8,9)."

James makes this point very clear. If we show favoritism or partiality, we are judging people rather than loving them, and that is sin. We have a God-given responsibility to love people regardless of how rich or poor they are, or whether they can meet any of our needs. When we judge people, we fail to love them. When we fail to love people, we are lawbreakers.

Loving people and showing partiality are complete opposites. When we love people, we accept them for who they are and find ways to serve them and accept them. But when we show partiality, we are not loving others; we are asking ourselves, "How can this person meet our needs?" That is not a loving thought; That is a selfish thought. What does the Bible call us to do? We are called to love our neighbor as ourselves (v. 8).

"Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.

Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him (1 John 4:8,9)."

Loving others is not sloppy sentimentalism that sees sinful patterns in others but sweeps them under the rug. No way! Since we love one another, we must develop the courage to help each other walk on the path of righteousness, and when our brother or sister deviates from that path, we go after them, calling them to return from their waywardness and follow Jesus with us.

Think about how Jesus treated people. He touched the leper, he took time for the woman with a 12-year hemorrhage, he stopped to heal the blind, he took time to heal a lame man by the pool of Siloam, and he set aside his agenda to give resurrection life to a little girl and the only son of a widow. What do these people have in common? None of them could offer Jesus anything. They couldn't offer him status, popularity, money, or anything else, yet he took time for them. Why? This is why ...

" ... the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28)."

Jesus didn't choose favorites; he just served and loved people.

Favoritism vs mercy. (verses. 12-13)

"If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right.

But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.

For he who said, “You shall not commit adultery,” also said, “You shall not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker (verses 8-11)."

Why did James bring up the Law here? Remember that James was writing to Jewish people scattered throughout the Roman Empire. Because these people had a Jewish background, they would have been familiar with the Old Testament. But just look at what James wrote.

“Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful (verses 12 and 13).

What is James saying? God is the true and only perfect judge. So, we should remember that God will judge us, not on our keeping the Old Testament Law perfectly, but on the law that gives freedom, as verse 8 refers to.

Hold on for a minute! What is mercy, and what is the difference between mercy and love? Love is accepting another person for who they are, not for how they meet your needs. Mercy is realizing that we are all in a miserable state if it were not for God, who is loving and kind, and who looks at us in our lostness and brokenness and rescues us from the power and penalty of sin.

I was on **a city bus in Carol Stream**, in the middle of winter, when I heard two guys near me talking about the challenges of being homeless during winter. One guy excitedly told the other that he had found a place where he could get free hot meals. The guy who was talking invited the other guy to come with him to that place. That is a picture of mercy. When we realize that we are all in need of God's mercy, we are excited to show mercy to others rather than looking down on them and judging them.

“Mercy triumphs over judgment (13).” Since God has mercifully provided an answer for all of us sinners, we are to **participate in the mercy of God** by being merciful to one another. Favoritism is judging (this one is good; this one is bad). But James calls us to show mercy because “Mercy triumphs over judgment (v. 13). Let’s leave judgment up to God and let us look at each other and those around us through the eyes of mercy, not judgmentalism. Why? Because God our Father is the God of mercy, and since we have come to know that wonderful mercy of God through what Jesus Christ accomplished for us on the cross, we are recipients of mercy. Mercy should be part of our DNA as followers of Jesus. The hymn writer stated,

“Mercy there was great, and grace was free; pardon there was multiplied to me; there my burdened soul found liberty, at Calvary.”

If we truly know that great mercy, let us then be people full of mercy: loving and accepting one another, not based on externals but based on mercy. We show mercy because we know mercy!

Conclusion:

Maybe you have been hurt by people who judged you. Perhaps you carry bitterness in your soul because others have been judgmental toward you, and they failed to love you for who you are and be merciful toward you. If that is true of you, I plead with you to accept the mercy of God. Let mercy flow through your veins. We can't change those who have judged us, but by the wonderful grace and mercy of God, we can be changed. We can be healed; We can be whole again. Forgive those who have hurt you and let mercy and love do their perfect work in you.

Maybe today you have realized that you have been judging others based on externals. It's time to let go of that. It's time to love one another and show mercy.

Do you need prayer? There are people who want to pray with you over here on this side of the room. There is a prayer room where people are ready to pray with you. Don't let this moment slip by. Respond to what God has been saying to you through his word today.