

Playing Favorites

- We are going through a letter. A letter written by James, the half brother of Jesus.
- James, who had grown up around Jesus and thought he was crazy, had seen his brother after he had died and risen from the dead. Once that happened, he was all in for the mission of Jesus. He not only believed that Jesus was his Savior but he ended up being a leader in the local church. In his position as leader, he wrote a letter.
- That is the letter we are studying. It was a letter that he wrote to people that he cared deeply for. He wanted to see them living out what they say they believed. He desired for them to live in freedom. He wanted to see them live powerful lives that mattered.
- Our theme for this entire series that comes from this letter is that **AUTHENTIC FAITH PRODUCES AUTHENTIC DEEDS**. You cannot separate what you say you believe from how you live. Today, we look at another issue that he addresses – the issue of favoritism.

- Have you ever been on the receiving end of favoritism?
- Maybe you have had an experience on the positive side.
- You were your mom's favorite. Your dad's favorite.
- Perhaps you were the favorite of the boss. Or maybe you were the favorite boss. People told you that you were the one they most liked working for.
- Maybe you were the popular one, the one that people sought out at parties. The one who got picked first on every team.
- Maybe is was within family. You are the glue that hold is together and everyone wants you to be at every party.
- It is a pretty good feeling in general. You are wanted. Liked. At least on the surface.
- Have you ever been on the negative side?
- You watched your mom or dad favor the other brothers or sisters over you?
- The boss gave all the advantages to the other people. It was not fair. You were the boss who was generally avoided at work.
- Maybe you were the one who only found out about parties third hand, because you did not get invited.
- You felt tolerated within the family, but not really loved and accepted.
- How did this feel? Some of your deepest wounds, the reason you don't trust people, the church or God come from some of these issues.

- The church is not exempt from this. You have felt like an outsider. The one who never feels included.
- This morning I am not talking to you as the recipient of unfavoritism. There are so many different pieces to this. I am sure that you were on the receiving end of someone who favored another. They had no right to treat you that way. Even if your actions were not right.
- This morning, I am speaking to you as someone who shows favoritism. Every single one of us has or is doing this. I am humbly asking you to open your heart to the Spirit this morning as we talk about this.
- **UNITY SHOULD CHARACTERIZE CHRIST-FOLLOWERS**. Favoritism can ruin this so fast.

- This was happening in the early church too and James begins a new paragraph of thought here with another instruction.

James 2:1 My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.

- Don't show favoritism. For those of you that quickly think that this is not you, that you don't play favorites, let's put some other names to it.
- Nepotism: Picking or hiring family members regardless of qualifications. "It must stay in the family." Blood is thicker than water.
- Cronyism: Picking or hiring friends regardless of qualifications. Scratch my back and I'll scratch yours.
- Hero-Worship: Treating a famous person differently than another person without notoriety. Maybe its within the job where you treat the boss totally differently than your peers or the janitor.
- Gender Bias: Believing that one gender is better than the other; treating the other gender poorly.
- Age-ism: Treating someone different because of their age... usually the very young or the very old.
- Prejudiced / Racism: Treating one race different than others; usually preferring one's own race to others. Maybe another religion?
- Favoritism that James is talking about literally means to *receive someone according to their face*. It is judging based on external appearances. It is attributing value to someone based on the outside.
- If we claim to follow Jesus we cannot act like this because **UNITY SHOULD CHARACTERIZE CHRIST-FOLLOWERS** and:

I. Unity is ruined by favoritism.

- He uses a financial example. This could easily have actually happened. Or perhaps it is simply a word picture.

2 Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in.

- They are meeting – gathering in their situation.
- Two people who are at opposite ends of the spectrum are present.
- The first has rank and money. The clothes are literally shining clothing, to draw attention to oneself.
- The poor person is a Greek word for the most severe type of poverty. Nothing. Their clothes are disgustingly unclean.
- How do you treat them?

3 If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet,"

- Compare the two attitudes. There is a desire of the speaker to impress this wealthy person.
- Alternately, there is a sense of superiority by where the poor person sits.
- James describes this as discrimination. The idea behind this verb is to "make a distinction."
- If you show special attention to the more socially acceptable person, you are showing favoritism, or to use a stronger word, practicing discrimination.
- When we attempt to discern people's value based on external features, we take on the role of God and fail miserably.
- The root of this problem is inside, not outside.

4 have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

- Evil thoughts. Favoritism is sin. This issue is all about our hearts.
- This is NOT about treating everyone the same in terms of all the same actions. Jesus did not model this.
- In fact, I must take into consideration individual needs and do my best to treat everyone the right way. This means NOT treating everyone the same way.
- When we practice any form of discrimination or favoritism in our lives, and particularly in our churches, we destroy unity because we have begun to take God's place.
- It is birthed in here and if looks ugly.
- Try to get out of conversations as fast as we can with boring or weird people.
- We don't trust someone, but not because they have proven themselves untrustworthy, but because of who they are.
- Walk the other direction. Cross the street. Go down the hallway in a different direction.
- Be nicer to them because of what they might be able to do for us. The basic tendency of all people is to favor those we serve to profit from the most.
- Assume ill intent sooner than we would with others. The judgmental attitude towards the one begging on the streetcorner. The unemployed person. The person of a different race. They must be thinking _____. The problem is that we have turned our attention from God whom we worship to evil-intentioned judges.
- In his autobiography, Mahatma Gandhi described the time he considered converting to Christianity because he saw in the teachings of Jesus the solution to the caste system, which was dividing the people of India. On one Sunday he decided to attend services at a nearby church and talk to the minister about becoming a Christian. However, when he entered the sanctuary, the usher refused to give him a seat and suggested he go worship with his own people. Gandhi left the church and never returned. He later wrote, "If Christians have caste differences also, I might as well remain a Hindu."
- **UNITY SHOULD CHARACTERIZE CHRIST-FOLLOWERS**

II. Discrimination is inconsistent with following Jesus.

A. **God's value system is different than ours.**

5 Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: 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 those who love him? 6 But you have dishonored the poor.

- God's choices often don't mirror our choices. He sees differently.
- James accusation of dishonor was a particularly strong charge in a culture of honor and shame.
- It is inconsistent with God's choice of the poor
- He asks a rhetorical question.
- God has picked people you do not expect to: be rich in faith, to inherit the kingdom he promised to those who love him.
- With some few exceptions, the church was made up of the poor.
- The poor more often become believers (than the rich). The poor are more often inclined to depend on God than the rich.
- God is near the poor not because they are poor, but because they are responsive to him and near the kingdom.
- They are rich in the kingdom of God. They have a place in the kingdom.
- James is inverting the standard value system of the world of that time (and of today).
- Whenever you show favoritism, you put yourselves in God's shoes and my friends, that is simply not the place you want to be in.

B. It short circuits God's work in us.

- Favoritism never accomplishes what you think.
- They were favoring the the rich and the rich were actually causing the problems.
Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? 7 Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?
- The people they were trying to curry favor from were not the ones contributing to the church. To their spiritual growth. To their well being.
- The rich of the world around them are the very ones who are persecuting them as a church, yet they are trying to please those same people who are persecuting them.
- They actually paid more honor to people who do not deserve honor.
- Note, he never condemns them for *being* rich, but for their *actions*.
- When we think that the way we grow or become more like Christ is by pursuing those above us, we often miss what God is doing.

C. It is not who we are.

- Favoritism is inconsistent with our identity.
8 If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. 9 But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. 10 For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. 11 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.
- When James talks about the royal law, most scholars feel that he is talking about the law of the OT filled and expanded by Jesus.
- Many Jews regarded the law as a series of detached commands. To keep one of those commands was to gain credit. To break one was to incur debt. Therefore, a person could add up the ones kept and subtract the ones broken and, as it were, emerge with a moral credit balance.
- Some form of this is common to every works-based religion. But James rejects this completely. A windowpane with one crack is a broken window. A person who breaks one of God's laws is guilty of being a law-breaker.
- They must love their neighbors as themselves, including those poorest people who can offer them nothing material in return.
- The word "neighbor" means it includes everyone.
- We do not get to choose which words of Jesus that we follow
- Love your neighbor as yourself – this is the framework that we are to use in how we treat the people around us.
- Give them the benefit of the doubt that we want extended to us. Don't judge their motives when we want the same for us. Extend forgiveness when we want forgiveness.
- We cannot selectively follow God's words, because it is all connected.
- You cannot pick one piece and ignore the rest.
- **UNITY SHOULD CHARACTERIZE CHRIST-FOLLOWERS**

III. God is after your entire heart – not just part of it.

- We do not get to withhold a portion and then be OK with God.
- When we are prejudiced. Racist. Show favoritism. We are withholding a part of our heart from our Savior.
- When we show favoritism, we are violating a central tenet of God's will.

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

- According to James, it seems as though we will be judged according to our weakest link – that thing that we withhold from Jesus.
- The law that gives freedom is the new law of the covenant that fulfilled and expanded the original commands.
- Our lives need to reflect the seriousness to our hearts and actions.
- It's like James is telling us to act like you are going to be judged, because you we live is going to be reflected back at you in the end.
- Even Christ-followers will undergo judgment, but our judgment will take place before Christ, who has already offered us freedom through his grace and mercy. This, in turn, should lead us to help liberate rather than oppress others.
- Failure to show mercy reveals a failure to understand mercy. We cannot expect mercy from God if we live our lives without mercy.
- Put another way, those who never show any mercy cannot have internalized and accepted God's mercy. Favoritism and grace and mercy cannot coexist.

- **UNITY SHOULD CHARACTERIZE CHRIST-FOLLOWERS**
- Favoritism. Prejudice. Racism. They have no place in the lives and hearts of those who follow Jesus.
- It ruins unity within the church.
- It's inconsistent with following Jesus because his value system works differently. He wants to work in us in line with who we really are.
- He wants all of us.
- We get a clue in James first sentence as to the rationale against favoritism.
- "As believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ."
- Jesus is the manifestation of God's presence
- Jesus showed no favoritism in dying for us.
- The good news of the gospel is that Jesus did not distinguish based on your gender, race, social status, intelligence or anything else.
- He went to the cross for everyone and that includes YOU.
- Jesus is so amazing and what he has done for us is so amazing, that we have no right to show favoritism.
- When we do, we are not following our own Lord and Savior.