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James 2:1-13

Fourth Message

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# LOVE PLAYS NO FAVORITES

*SERIES: FAITH THAT WORKS*

When our bathroom faucet began leaking recently I was in a hurry to fix it. At the hardware store there was kind, older gentleman at the door. He looked like a greeter, but I didn't ask him for the plumbing aisle; I figured he was a slow talker and by the time he had finished I could have found it myself. Once I got to the plumbing aisle there were dozens of choices, so many that I wasn't sure I had the right parts. I saw a young girl stocking the shelves, and I figured there was no way she would know. She would probably steer me the wrong way or have to ask her supervisor, and that would take another several minutes, so I picked out the parts myself.

As there was a line at each cash register, I had a choice to make. I could get in the line run by an older woman helping an older man. They were chatting away, and she was having trouble opening a plastic bag. My other choice was to get in the line run by a young woman in her early twenties, and she had five-inch fingernails! At first I chose the older lady's line, but at the last minute changed lines. You can guess what happened. The younger lady had a hard time scanning the stickers. I would have gotten out a lot quicker if I had stayed in the older lady's line.

On my way home the Lord convicted me of my sin of favoritism toward certain people and against others based on their outward appearance. I was judging them by what I saw. It's easy to put labels on people – we do it all the time – but we should know that how we categorize people has a profound influence on the way we treat them.

James ends chapter 1 of his letter with an appeal to his readers to practice an authentic faith by exhibiting purity and compassion. In our text today he will continue his exhortation, making it clear that favoritism is not compassionate and has no place in the life a follower of Jesus Christ.

**My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. (James 2:1 NIV)**

Favoritism is incompatible with being part of the family of God. James begins by reminding us of who we are. We are "believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ." If we are followers of Christ, then our character should reflect his. We are to love others like he loved others. As Jesus said to his disciples, "This is my commandment: love one another, as I have loved you" (John 15:12). It is obvious from the

wide-variety of individuals whom Jesus loved that he did not show favoritism, so neither should we.

Favoritism literally means, "to receive by face." It suggests making judgments and distinctions based on external considerations. It is a particularly insidious, ugly and destructive way of treating others, and includes bias, partiality, discrimination and prejudice.

Consider for a moment the ways in which we categorize people. On what basis do we prefer some people to others? Is it according to physical appearance, personality, social status, race, financial standing or academic achievement? There are many ways in which we can show favoritism. James says we are not to do any of it. Favoritism based on external attributes is inconsistent with the character of God.

Our scripture reading, from 1 Samuel 16, makes it clear that God does not receive a man by face: "But the LORD said to Samuel, 'Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart'" (1 Sam 16:7). Out of seven candidates for king, God chose the one who looked the least impressive on the outside. God does not evaluate by external factors. He looks at the heart, and so should we.

James goes on to illustrate, in verses 2 and 3, why favoritism is so incompatible with being members of the family of God.

**Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. 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," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? (2:2-4)**

James depicts a scene where two men enter the assembly gathered for worship and instruction. The first man is obviously wealthy. He has a gold ring and is wearing fine clothes. The other man is poor and shabbily dressed. The wealthy man is given preferential treatment. He is addressed with respect and conducted to a place of honor, one of the

best seats in the assembly. The poor man is spoken to rather rudely and treated with indifference. He is given the choice to either stand somewhere out of the way or sit on the floor by someone's feet.

If we determine that the wealthy are worthy of honor and respect merely because they are wealthy, and that the poor are less worthy merely because they are poor, we are judging their human value by their bank account. If we judge each other in such a way we cease to be a family and instead become a jury.

James says that when we behave this way we have become judges with evil motives. We show partiality for personal gain. If our motive is to treat someone well, hoping that we will be treated well in return, that is not right. Favoritism and discrimination show that we love ourselves more than others. Instead of becoming servants of one another we become masters over one another. We destroy the harmony and unity that the Lord has called us to as brothers and sisters in the family of God. As the apostle Paul writes, "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:26-28).

We are one in Christ Jesus. A proper perspective of each other and ourselves begins at the foot of the cross. It is the cross that reverses the world's standards and values and creates a brand new community. As a church we are brothers and sisters, equal in standing before our Heavenly Father who shows no partiality (Deut 10:17). This view should galvanize all of us to treat each other with equanimity and generosity. Favoritism and Christian love do not mix. They are radically incompatible.

James's first exhortation is that favoritism is incompatible with being members of the family of God.

His second exhortation is expressed in a series of pointed questions.

**Listen, my dear brothers: 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? But you have insulted the poor. (2:5-6a)**

Favoritism is incompatible with the choice of God. Favoring the rich might be the way of the world, but it is completely inconsistent with God's way. Wealth, fame and power, which are enormous assets in this world, give people no advantage whatever in the kingdom of God. In fact, the scriptures say that they can be disadvantages if they are the seeds of pride that keep us from humbling ourselves before the Lord.

To insult the poor is to contradict the way of God. If we favor the rich over the poor, then we are not perceiving as God perceives. The rich may seem like they have a lot, but if they are only rich in themselves and do not have the Lord they are poor.

The poor may be without earthly riches but those who love the Lord are rich in faith and will inherit the kingdom of God. James says they inherit the kingdom, not because they are poor, but because they "love Him." Rich or poor, the spiritual blessings of God's kingdom belong to those who love the Lord. Material wealth pales in comparison to what is gained when we are joined to Christ and become heirs with him.

Please don't get the wrong idea. James does not spiritualize or idealize poverty. Poverty does not guarantee either faith or salvation. God does not favor the poor over the rich. If he did, he would be guilty of the very favoritism he condemns. It is simply that God delights to shower his grace on those whom the world ignores and on those who are most keenly aware of their own inadequacy.

As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, "Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord" (1 Cor 1:26-31).

On our knees at the foot of the cross we see that we are all sinners saved only by the mercy and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is from the perspective of the gospel that we see the arrogance of favoritism.

Who do we think we are that we can insult others? You and I are here because God chose the foolish, the weak and the lowly. He never asked us whom to include in the church. He chose his family on the basis of his mercy and grace. Do we have the right to treat with disrespect anyone whom God has chosen? How can we exclude from our hospitality and love anyone whom God has called into fellowship with him?

This is why it is inconceivable to James that the poor in their midst would be insulted because of their material standing. Those whom God has lifted up they had brought down. The poor were not finding respect in the one place they should expect it – the church.

James continues:

**Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong? (2:6b-7)**

In first-century Palestine, many Christians were oppressed and persecuted for their faith. They were fired from their jobs and their businesses were often boycotted. Many were poor and destitute, and yet they were hounded by the wealthy landowners in their community. Unable to pay their rent, Christians were being dragged into court where their character and Christian faith were slandered. The rich used their wealth and influence with the courts to secure favorable verdicts. As a result, many Christians were forced to forfeit their land and grew even poorer at the hands of the rich.

How inappropriate then, says James, that those who slander the noble name of Christ should be favored over the poor in the church. The wealthy should be treated like everyone else, with dignity, compassion and love. But, James says, their wrongdoing should not be ignored and their ill-gotten riches should certainly not be the basis for preferential treatment.

Favoritism is incompatible with being members of the family of God, and favoritism is incompatible with the choice of God.

The third reason that favoritism is wrong is found in verses 8-11.

**If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. (2:8)**

Favoritism is incompatible with the royal law of God. We are judges with evil in our hearts if we show favoritism, but if we keep the royal law of love we are doing right. The royal law is the law of the King, the law that sums up all the Old Testament laws. When Jesus was asked which is the greatest commandment in the Law, he replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandment” (Matt 22:37-39).

Jesus consistently illustrated and emphasized loving our neighbor, and he expanded the definition of “neighbor” to include anyone who needs our care and attention. Love is not to be refused to anyone, even strangers (Luke 10:25-37) and enemies (Matt 5:44).

Love is difficult to define. Scripture does not give a textbook or dictionary definition of love, but we know what love is because God has so clearly demonstrated it. As the apostle

John writes, “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. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:9-11).

True love is from our Heavenly Father. It is demonstrated in the giving of ourselves on behalf of our neighbor. This kind of unconditional love for others is not limited in expressing itself only to those we like, to those who like us or to those who are easy to love. It is far more expansive and powerful than that. It is the very love of Jesus Christ, and through him it dwells within us.

The apostle Paul says in his letter to the Romans, “The commandments, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ ‘Do not murder,’ ‘Do not steal,’ ‘Do not covet,’ and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law” (Rom 13:9-10).

Love is the fulfillment of the law, and favoritism is a failure to love. Failing in love is therefore failing the law. As James goes on to say,

**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, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.”(2:9-11)**

James’s point here is that favoritism is a serious matter. If we show favoritism we sin and are guilty of breaking the royal law of God. The individual commandments are all components of one indivisible whole because they reflect the will of the one Lawgiver. To violate even just one commandment is to disobey God and be guilty before him. It takes only one sin to make us a sinner.

At this point we all feel the weight of the law. We all have sinned and broken the royal law of God. The gavel of judgment slams down: Guilty! We are convicted as law-breakers, and the sentence is death (Rom 6:23).

Fortunately, that is not the end of the story. James continues,

**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. Mercy triumphs over judgment! (2:12-13)**

Favoritism is incompatible with the mercy of God. Observe the amazing and jarring difference between verses 11 and 12. At the end of verse 11 we discover we are all guilty of

breaking the royal law, but then in verse 12 we are called to speak and act as those set free. Imagine you are in a courtroom, convicted of the most heinous crime. You are standing before the judge, waiting to hear your sentence. You fully deserve and expect to receive the death penalty, but when the gavel slams down you hear that you have been given your freedom.

James reminds us that we are law-breakers and fully deserve the harshest judgment, but the sentence we receive is not “death” but “freedom.” How is that possible? Because Jesus Christ completely fulfilled the law and paid our penalty. Through Christ’s perfect life and atoning death on the cross he has completely blotted out our sin and given us his righteousness. It is because of his work of mercy that we are set free.

God did not choose to be merciful to us because we were better, but because he is loving. He has liberated us from the penalty of sin and given us, in his Spirit, the power to love others as he has loved us. If we believe in the Lord our God and receive the gift of his love, then our hearts will overflow with love toward others and our love will look like his. If our hearts have been truly transformed, then we will be merciful like he is merciful.

Showing mercy to others does not obligate God to show mercy to us. We cannot in any way earn God’s mercy. You and I have been given an extravagant gift which we can never repay. All we can do is receive it, enjoy it and share it with others. Knowing this truth, says James, ought to make a huge difference in how we speak and act.

If we speak and act as those who do not show mercy toward others, if we do not accept and forgive each other as God accepts and forgives us, then, James says, it is obvious that we have not chosen to accept the mercy and forgiveness of God, and therefore we come under his judgment. As the apostle John puts it, “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:7,8).

In all our depravity and spiritual poverty God is compassionate and merciful to give us a new life through his Son Jesus Christ. Paul says, “And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world. . . indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath . . . *but God*, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him in

the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus, in order that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:1-7).

The gospel is not intended to save isolated individuals and so perpetuate our loneliness, but to unite us in the new community of Jesus. Through him all our relationships are radically transformed. In Christ we are one, equal in dignity and value in the sight of God by being related to Christ.

What a wonderful message from James! He reminds us that favoritism in all its forms is incompatible with authentic Christian love. He calls us to enthusiastically welcome and lovingly embrace all types of people. In obedience to our Heavenly Father and Almighty King we are to build among ourselves a genuine counterculture in which the values of the kingdom of God, rather than the values of this world, are lived out.

In Christ, without fear of condemnation, we are free to be honest with ourselves. We are free to ask probing questions. Do we as a church manifest unconditional love toward one another? Do we not only preach the gospel, but embody the gospel? In what ways do we struggle with the subtle and not so subtle forms of favoritism? Toward whom have we recently shown indifference that we can ask for forgiveness? Toward whom can we show an extra measure of mercy?

Around us we observe the many cultures and backgrounds in our congregation. This is a very appropriate message for us here at PBCC. Our community could hardly be more diverse. What a blessing, to witness how God is bringing together in this church men, women and children from all walks of life! We are rich and we are poor. We are old and we are young. We are from every corner of the globe, and yet God has brought us together as the body of Christ. What a unique privilege and opportunity we have to demonstrate to a watching world that we are a unified family of God who welcome with compassion, honor and love all who enter into our midst.

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