

SERIES: Walk the Talk

SERMON: **When Favoritism and Prejudice Come to Church**

SCRIPTURE: James 2:1-13

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DATE: June 22, 2008

Racism in the church today is not as bad as it used to be. Forty years ago Jan and I were members of a Bible Church in Arlington, Texas, pastored by a graduate of Dallas Seminary, where blacks were unwelcome and the whites in the church made no bones about it. They would literally get up and move if an African American sat down next to them. Needless to say, there weren't many who visited, and none who stayed. Thankfully that would be almost unheard of today. But few of us would say there is no vestige of racial discrimination remaining in American society, or even in the Church.

Nor is racism a new problem. In OT days the Jewish people were notorious for using their unique position as God's chosen people to justify discrimination against non-Jews in areas that had nothing to do with their relationship with God. And the Christian Church had hardly been established before racism began to rear its ugly head. We read in Acts 6 that "In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food." And Paul had to hammer the Galatians with the truth that "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek" (Galatians 3:28).

But racism is not the only kind of discrimination that can impact the church. We see partiality toward the wealthy, the powerful, and the well-educated, along with neglect of the poor and the socially insignificant. That same passage in Galatians goes on to say, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

The book of James, written just 15 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, demonstrates that in the earliest years of church life there was already need for a position paper on what to do "when favoritism and prejudice come to church." I want us to read that position paper as found in James 2:1-13.

*My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. 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?*

*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. 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?*

*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, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you*

*have become a lawbreaker.*

*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!*

In last week's passage the Apostle James exhorted us not to merely listen to the Word but to also do what it says. Now immediately he calls us to specific obedience in an area where we are notoriously guilty of excusing and rationalizing ungodly behavior.

The first verse of our passage is a clear command regarding favoritism: "My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism." The word "favoritism" in the original language means literally, "receiving the face." It refers to making judgments and distinctions based on how a person looks, on external considerations, without consideration of his true merits, abilities, or character. Such distinctions can be either favorable or unfavorable, but in either case it is wrong. Favoritism and prejudice are two sides of the same coin of discrimination.

I would like to offer this working definition of discrimination (whether it's favoritism or prejudice): "making any decision about another person based solely upon the color of his skin, size of his nose, national origin, wealth, social status, or any other external factor." Favoritism is discriminating *in favor of* a person on the basis of one of these factors; prejudice is discriminating *against* a person on the basis of one of them.

Some today would add religious views, gender, and sexual preference as additional illegitimate factors in making decisions about people, but I have purposely left those out. Any honest reading of the New Testament would show that it does permit and even demand discrimination on these grounds *in some situations*. This sermon, hard-hitting as it will be on the subject of discrimination, should not be interpreted as support for gay marriage, for example. The God who calls discrimination sin discriminates Himself in favor of marriage between one man and one woman.

Now James challenges us with five reasons why favoritism and prejudice (of the kind delineated in our definition) are incompatible with true Christian faith.

### **1. Favoritism and prejudice are occasioned by evil motives. (1-4)**

Consider the situation described by James. Two visitors of very different external appearance come into the church. One bears the marks of wealth: he wears a gold ring (the original says literally that he is "gold-fingered," indicating probably a number of gold rings) and is dressed in fine clothes. To bring the illustration up to date, he drives up to church in a new Mercedes, wears a \$1,000 hand-tailored suit, and sports a Rolex watch. The other man is obviously poor. He drives up in a rusted '87 sedan, wears an outdated topcoat and disheveled suit, and obviously needs a haircut. The rich man is singled out for special attention and conducted politely to his seat. The poor man, on the other hand, is ignored.

Matt. 23:6 helps us better understand the situation James describes by telling us that there were chief seats (not cheap seats) in the synagogues. The Pharisees loved the chief seats—apparently located down in front—because they could enter the place of worship in their elegant robes and march toward the front, calling attention to themselves. There was nothing wrong with these people being wealthy, but stoking their pride by showing them favoritism *was* wrong.

Chief seats, by the way, are not entirely unknown even in some evangelical churches. When we lived in Dallas back in the 60's we visited on several occasions a particular church whose membership included H. L. Hunt, at the time allegedly the richest man in the world. He had a special pew down near the front which the ushers reserved for him, or so we were told. We are far more subtle today. In many churches the favoritism is shown by appointing the wealthy to the board, naming buildings after them, or just giving them preferential treatment.

James' point is driven home in verse 4: If you react this way to visitors in your meetings, “have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts (or evil motives).” I think a case can be made for the fact that ultimately all favoritism and prejudice can be traced back to evil motives. We cater to the rich because we hope to get something out of them, we show favoritism to the powerful and the popular because we feel important when we're around them.

Evil motives also dominate in respect to prejudice, especially racial prejudice. My wife and I managed a small apartment building while I was in graduate school at SMU. We were advertising a vacancy when two young professional black women came to inquire about the two-bedroom unit that was available. We showed it to them, they liked it, so I drew up a lease. When the owner came by a few days later he was livid! “What did you do that for?” he demanded. “Because it's the law,” I responded, “it's illegal not to rent to anyone qualified.” He told me he thought I had enough sense to get around the law. “You could tell them you just rented it, or double the price, anything to get rid of them.” I told him I couldn't do that.

It was obvious that he had an evil motive—greed. Anything that was a potential obstacle to keeping that building fully occupied was unacceptable, and he felt for sure other tenants would move out if those girls moved in. As it turned out they were great renters and no other tenants moved, but we didn't last long as managers. I don't know what he did to the girls after we left.

Examining our motives demands painful honesty, but I believe the effort will demonstrate that favoritism and prejudice are always occasioned by evil motives.

## **2. Favoritism and prejudice are inconsistent with God's example. (5,6)**

In verse 5 James says, “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.” While man looks on the outward appearance, God looks on the heart. Wealth, power, and status are not high on His list of criteria for usefulness. As a matter of

fact, God specializes in the poor, the weak, the foolish, the downtrodden, and the rejected.

Why? Well, I think there are several reasons. One is that He is making a statement, teaching us a very important theological truth through the kind of people he chooses. Listen to Paul's description of the early Christians as found in 1 Cor. 1:26ff:

*"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."*

That last phrase is the key. God avoids favoritism of the wealthy and powerful to prevent them from becoming proud in their external assets and thinking that their wealth and power give them an inside track with God.

But that's not the only reason God does not practice favoritism toward the rich, the mighty and the intelligent. It is also because to a great degree those who have been downtrodden socially are much more readily able to recognize their downtrodden position spiritually. Just ask yourself, where are you more likely to find people willing to admit they are sinners in need of a Savior? At a meeting of the Wichita Chamber of Commerce or in a chapel service at Union Rescue Mission? At a faculty meeting at WSU or at a Manna Meal at Hilltop Community Church?

I think it's worth while to notice, while we're speaking of God's example, that Jesus sure followed it. He never favored the rich, the powerful, and the influential. In fact, He spent a relatively large part of his time with the down-and-out and the rejected. He recruited a despised tax collector to be one of His twelve apostles (none of whom were from the upper class) and made a special effort to reach out to another tax collector named Zaccheus. He ministered to and identified socially with a Samaritan woman, a prostitute at that. He healed the daughter of a Syro-Phoenician woman, whom the Jews treated like a dog. He healed a Roman centurion's servant. He indicated that the poor widow who gave her mite was greater in His eyes than the rich Pharisee who boastfully gave his large donation. In fact, He so identified Himself with those who were racially and socially rejected that the Pharisees liked to call Him "a Samaritan," which was a nasty racial epithet in that day.

And yet He was the Glorious Lord, as verse one tells us. When we see that glory for what it really is we cannot be much impressed by external human status symbols, or lack thereof, in those to whom we minister, and with whom we worship. To claim to be worshiping Jesus Christ who came to earth to minister to all sorts of people, and yet at the same time to discriminate between individuals on the basis of externals, is a perversion of the Gospel and is completely inconsistent with the example that both God and His Son have set for us.

### **3. Favoritism and prejudice are self-defeating. (6,7)**

Look at the middle of verse 6: "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?" Now I don't think James intends this as a categorical challenge to the integrity of every rich person. But in general, he argues, the rich are far more of a threat to us than are the poor.

Who is it really, asks James, who brings social and economic hardship upon us? Is it the poor? I would guess that greedy mortgage bankers, trial lawyers, commodity traders, and the politicians who are in bed with them, have cost us more over the past twenty years than all the millions of poor people on welfare.

Let's bring the point right into the church. Someone might argue that the church needs the rich and powerful in order to have a solid base of financial support and influence. But I have done an informal, totally unscientific survey over the years of churches that have gone through major splits, and I want to tell you that the catalyst for every church split I've ever seen, always and without exception, is a rich and/or powerful church member. Because the rich and powerful are catered to out in the world it becomes easy for them to expect the same treatment in the church. Because they learn that they can get their way by using their money and throwing their influence around out in the world, it's easy for them to try the same tactics in the church.

The fact is that the financial backbone of most evangelical churches is the ordinary people who tithe week in and week out and sacrifice for the sake of the ministry—not a few individuals who bankroll it. Now I have known a few very wealthy people who had the gift of giving and exercised it faithfully, and they are an incredible blessing to the Body of Christ. If you are one of those persons, please do not think I am attacking you—I am not; on the contrary, I am very grateful to you. But it was not for nothing that Jesus Himself indicated that it was easier for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. It is also not without reason that Paul offered these words of warning to the rich:

*"Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life." (1 Timothy 6:17-19)*

Favoritism and prejudice are self-defeating, says James, not only because the rich tend to oppress but also because the poor are more often richer in faith. I guess one of the ways I have seen the truth of this is to experience true worship with some very poor people. Foremost in my mind is an experience a group of us from First Free had in 1978, when Ed Aulie took us for the first time to a little Chol Indian village in the mountains of southern Mexico. These dear believers didn't have electricity or plumbing or communication with the outside world. They were just one step above the stone age. But when they met for worship every night of the week, which was their custom, they sang as though they really believed what they were singing and they hungrily lapped up the sincere milk of the Word.

Have you ever studied the theology of the old Negro spirituals? Believe me, much of it is richer and deeper than what was being sung in the beautiful churches of the slave owners! Maybe we ought to pray that God would bring into our church a wave of blue collar workers, poor people, and racial minorities. We might end up being a richer church for it.

Now everything James has said so far is really preliminary. Favoritism and prejudice are occasioned by evil motives, are inconsistent with God's example, and are self-defeating. Those are three good reasons why we shouldn't participate in it. But the real crux of the issue is revealed in verse 9, where he says unequivocally, "If you show favoritism, you sin."

#### **4. Favoritism and prejudice are sin. (8-11)**

Let me back up to verse 8: "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." Here James seems to be entertaining an objection from one of his readers. It might be expressed this way: "My concern for the rich man is a genuine concern, not motivated by selfish or evil considerations. After all, the rich need love too."

So James answers this objection by saying that if indeed one's motivation is love, he is doing the proper thing. But, he adds, as though this objection sounds a little phony to him, if it is done for any other reason, it's sin. Notice please, friends, that the Apostle does not say that discrimination on the basis of externals is ill-advised, or inconsiderate, or an example of poor etiquette, or excusable if you're born and reared in the south. He calls it sin. S-I-N.

At this point many of us might be tempted to introduce a distinction we learned somewhere between mortal and venial sins. OK, we might say, prejudice is a sin, but it's not in the same league with lying or adultery or idolatry. Wrong again! James goes on,

*"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 the same God 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."*

The Jews tended to regard 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.<sup>1</sup> Some form of that philosophy is common to every works-based religion.

But James rejects it completely. A pianist who strikes one wrong note produces a discord. A shirt soiled in one place is a dirty shirt. A window pane with one crack is a broken window. And someone who has broken one of God's laws is a law-breaker, a transgressor, a sinner. It will do no good to say at the Judgment, "But God, I never killed anybody." That's like telling the traffic cop when you're on the receiving end of a ticket for speeding, "But sir, I've gone down that road a hundred times without speeding." No, God has made His will known, and to violate it is sin. We have seen four reasons why discrimination in the church on the basis of externals is

incompatible with true Christian faith. What are we going to do about it? James tells us what to do in verse 12, and then he will follow that up with a fifth and final reason for avoiding favoritism and prejudice. He says, "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."

I believe the emphasis is on the little word "and" at the beginning of verse 12: "Speak *and* act." It's not enough to speak the truth; it's not enough to quote Scripture like Gal. 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." We must live what we speak; we must walk the talk. And what if we don't? Here's reason # 5:

### **5. Favoritism and prejudice will be severely judged. (12,13)**

"Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful." Now I don't think he's talking here about eternal condemnation. After all, he began this chapter by identifying his listeners as brothers and believers, and Romans 8:1 tells us clearly that there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. But "no condemnation" does not necessarily mean "no judgment." Believers face judgment in the form of chastisement and discipline.

I don't know what form the judgment James talks about might take, but God has creative ways of disciplining His people, either individually or collectively. I will forever have the haunting picture in my mind of a trip I took to East Germany just prior to the fall of the Berlin wall. Church after church had been turned into a museum or a factory, or just boarded up. Even the church where Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the door and where he and Philip Melancthon are buried had no services—just tours. God could allow our churches buildings to become relics as they have over most of China, the Soviet Union, North Korea, and Cuba. We could lose the freedom to worship altogether because we have abused it by playing favorites or just playing games.

The law by which we are to be judged is characterized in two unique ways here in this passage. Back in verse 8 it is called "the royal law found in Scripture." And lest we have any confusion about exactly what the royal law is, he states it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." The implication is clear that favoritism and prejudice are both violations of the Great Commandment, first given in Deuteronomy 6 and then repeated and enlarged by Jesus in Matthew 22:38-40.

Then in verse 12 he calls it the "law that gives freedom." We saw a similar expression a week ago in chapter 1, verse 25. We noted then that the purpose of a good law is to restrict one kind of behavior in order to grant freedom in a more important area. God's Law frees us from sin and enables us to be all we can be in Jesus Christ.

James concludes with an interesting comment: "mercy triumphs over judgment!" Some liberal commentators suggest this means that God's mercy will triumph over His threatened judgment and in the end all will be saved. I think that is completely extraneous to the passage and clearly contradictory to the rest of Scripture. What I think it probably means is that if we show mercy to

the downtrodden, that will be used in our defense at the Judgment Seat of Christ. Instead of being judged we will be rewarded.

**Conclusion:** Frank Stagg, a Southern Baptist author, addressed his own denomination more than 40 years ago with a statement that is still worth considering. He said, "It is possible that future historians may declare the irony of ironies—that in the middle of the 20th century, fight promoters and baseball managers did more for emancipating the Negro than did the Church."<sup>ii</sup> Well, racism is much less overt today than it once was, but favoritism and prejudice are far from absent from the church.

I ask you if that sign out in front of the typical evangelical church, "Everybody Welcome," really means what it says. Charles Swindoll writes, "If there is one place where class distinctions should break down, it is in the place of worship where color, political persuasion, type of Christian experience, money, status, rank, name, apparel, smell, size, and age mean nothing."<sup>iii</sup> By God's grace may it be so at First Evangelical Free Church.

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i. John MacArthur, *James*, 114.

ii. Citation lost.

iii. Citation lost.