

Series: Faith that Makes a Difference

“Faith without Favoritism”

Introduction: With last week’s approval at Essex Town Meeting of a grant from Community Preservation funds, our fundraising for the steeple project is, remarkably, reaching its end. On many levels, that is reason to celebrate!! So, how might we go about doing that? Well, out of the 65 or 70 different individuals and groups that contributed, we could identify the top six or seven, those who gave the most. Once identified, Craig and I could take them out for a lavish dinner at the Top of the Hub. We could then come back to the church and let them be the first to ring the bell. We could also engrave each of their names on a individual plaque and affix it to their favorite pew so they’d always have a place to sit, and we could reserve a place for them to park each Sunday right in front of the church so they wouldn’t have to arrive early or walk very far. And I could make certain that if they had pastoral needs, those needs would always be met before anyone else’s.

Sound absurd? I hope so! However, this kind of preferential treatment, this kind of favoritism is, sadly, not at all unusual in the world in which we live. James wants to make sure it doesn’t leak into the church, or into our life of faith.

James is encouraging us to develop a faith that makes a difference, in our lives and in our world. As we’ve read along with him so far, he’s addressed the way God can use various trials in our lives to mature our faith, and our need to seek God’s wisdom as we go through them. He’s highlighted the importance of listening—to ourselves, to God, and to our neighbor, in order to build change in our relationships. And he’s pointed out the necessity to “weed and water,” through repentance and soaking in God’s word, the faith that has been planted within us so that we might grow in our faith.

James ended last week by encouraging his readers to care for the helpless and the hopeless, as well as warning them not to be polluted by the world, that is, not to let the status quo, or the standards of the world, influence how they lived (1:27). As he goes on, he gives an illustration of what such “pollution” looks like. What he wants us to see overall is that favoritism (which can come in many flavors) can have no part in the lives of those who are seeking to follow Jesus. [READ 1:27 - 2:13]

I. Imagine the Scene

A. James begins by having his readers imagine the scene at one of their weekly gatherings as it seems to have played out with disturbing regularity. Two men arrive for worship. One is dressed to the “nines.” He’s wearing a Rolex watch, a diamond studded ring, a fancy suit, and a pair of alligator shoes. The other is clothed in a dirty sweatshirt and old jeans with holes (not the fashionable kind!). His clothing actually looks like it should be thrown into your rag bag to be used the next time you wash and wax your car. Seeing both of these men, the usher runs up and fawns all over the rich man, finding him a very good seat. But for the poor man he simply makes some space on the floor by his feet. This kind of favoritism, James declares, is discrimination; even more, it is judgment grounded in evil thoughts (v. 4).

Illustration: In a more recent day, British theologian, and former bishop, Tom Wright recalls an Easter Sunday when he was not carrying out his ecclesial duties but simply standing in a long line waiting to get into worship. The line was not moving at all which indicated that the sanctuary was already packed. As

he was wondering what to do, a very senior and distinguished man from the city came up behind Wright and instructed him to follow. The two walked all the way up to the ushers where this man said “I am Lord [XYZ]. I would be grateful if you could find me and my friend someplace to sit.” The usher promptly escorted them right to the front of the church where they were given excellent seats with a view of all the proceedings. But Wright recalls not enjoying it at all. Instead, he said he kept remembering James 2 and wondering if either Lord XYZ, or the usher, had recently read those specific verses on favoritism!

B. “Favoritism,” literally, “to receive the face,” means practically to make judgments based on either external considerations, or what someone can do for us. Showing such partiality seems to somehow have become ingrained in us. Who will benefit us? Who will help us get what we want or need? Who are we most comfortable with? Who might we be afraid of? The sad irony in the situation James describes is that the wealthy who were being given special treatment were also the ones who were actively engaged in oppressing and persecuting the poor among these believers by hauling them into court for their own economic gain. This accords with what we know of conditions in first century Palestine where a small group of wealthy landowners and merchants were accumulating more and more power while large numbers of people were forced from their land and grew even poorer. No one, it seems, was willing to stand up for these poor and oppressed individuals, especially the church, which seemed willing to fawn all over these oppressors. That needs to stop, declares James. You are judges with evil thoughts.

C. This is one of the primary points Jemar Tisby makes in his book, *The Color of Compromise*. As he traces the tragic history of the favoritism based on skin color—racism—in our country, he identifies many places where the American church has been complicit in this history. Not only did the church allow slavery in the colonial days to be born and in the revolutionary days to continue, not only did countless Christians fight and die in a bloody civil war in an attempt to cling to slavery as an institution, but as the period of reconstruction, then civil rights, then Black Lives Matter has unfolded, the best the church seems able to do in recent years is talk about segregation being a bad thing; rarely has it pushed for civil rights, or spoke out against the horror of racist practices, or sought to find ways to change the structures that lead to such injustice. Instead, it favored the oppressive powers by saying very little, or even nothing at all. That compromise, Tisby declares, with James right there by his side, has to stop.

II. Fighting Favoritism

A. So what can we learn from James about what it takes to fight our inclination to play favorites, to offer others preferential treatment, and to be silent in the face of oppression? Such a fight begins with understanding that favoritism has nothing to do with the character and heart of God, or the character and heart God desires for his people. This is the God who created all mankind in his image, and with whom people from every nation, tribe, people, and language will be present in his new creation (Ge. 1:26-28; Rev. 7:9). As Moses (who had an interracial marriage, Num. 12:1) describes God’s character to his people:

For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt. - Dt. 10:17-19

B. This God not only shows no favoritism, but he has a heart for and extends his mercy to oppressed and suffering people, from the fatherless to the foreigner, those who James describes as being “poor in the eyes of the world.” Even the Israelites, who were at one time an enslaved people, had recently experienced this mercy of God and so were being called by Moses, as were their offspring by James, to extend this mercy to others who were experiencing injustice. It’s a reminder that social concern, social justice, is not political, it’s highly spiritual, grounded in the mercy and grace of God.

C. This impartial and merciful to all nature of God’s heart is revealed throughout his word.

As an Israelite king named Jehoshaphat reminded the judges he appointed: “Now let the fear of the LORD be on you. Judge carefully, for with the LORD our God there is no injustice or partiality or bribery” (2 Chron. 19:7).

The apostle Peter, in the midst of a great racial discussion in the early church about the inclusion of Gentiles, when God made it clear to him that the mercy of God through Jesus Christ was available to Gentile and well as Jew, said, “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right” (Ac. 10:34f).

The apostle Paul, writing to first century churches, declares that the Creator God is interested in renewing all people in his image, so that there is “no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all” (Col. 3:9-11).

And then, of course, there is Jesus, living out the character and heart of God in the flesh, spending time with, caring for, and treating with dignity Jew and Gentile and Samaritan, men and women and children, synagogue ruler and leper and prostitute. There was absolutely no favoritism to be found at the feet of the one who had come to break down the walls of hostility that exist between people groups (Eph. 2).

D. Such a character and such a heart is what God desires for his people. James sums it up with the way Jesus had summed up the law: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” In an incredible application of this, as he works out the implications of the grace of God in his letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul courageously chooses to address Masters in the following way, “Masters, treat your slaves in the same way [that you want them to treat you]. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him” (Eph. 6:9).

As James goes on, the implication is that even if you manage to avoid adultery and murder, if you’re not loving your neighbor as yourself you’re still turning your nose up at God’s royal law, at what God desires for his people. To this point, Tisby cites a book titled *White Flight* in which author Kevin Druse refers to a neighborhood in Kirkwood, Georgia where pastors, during the 1950’s, actively urged their parishioners not to sell their homes to black people. “If everyone simply refuses to sell to colored, then everything will be fine...Please help ‘Keep Kirkwood White’ and preserve our Churches and homes.” These were Christians, as Tisby comments, who filled the pews in their churches on a Sunday, prayed before meals, and did their best to work hard and provide for their loved ones. But they saw no contradiction between their faith and the favoritism they were living out in subtle, and not so subtle, ways. [Tisby, 144f]

So may we, as James ends this section, seek to live within the mercy of God. May that mercy from God triumph over the places and moments where we have fallen into the worldly practice of favoritism, where we have been “judges with evil thoughts.” And may we, in turn, seek to offer such mercy, God’s generous, indiscriminate love, to another, especially those who are not at all like us.