

The Problem with Partiality

Devotional

“Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are equal.” With those words, Abraham Lincoln changed the course of history.

Fast forward 100 years. On a sweltering August day in 1963, a quarter-million people traveled to Washington, D.C. for the largest civil rights demonstration in American history. Gathered in front of the Lincoln Memorial, the multitudes heard a 34-year-old preacher named Martin Luther King, Jr. His words struck home in the heart of America. Something inside the nation stirred when he said, “I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” Those four words—“I have a dream”—came to be the rallying cry of an oppressed people who would no longer be denied justice.

The words of Dr. King and the words of President Lincoln hearken back to this statement from the Declaration of Independence:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

“All men are created equal.” That’s a true statement. The Bible teaches us four crucial facts we must never forget:

1. All people are equally created in God’s image (Genesis 1:26–27).
2. All are loved by God (John 3:16).
3. All are stained and tainted by sin (Romans 3:23).
4. All are able to be redeemed (Revelation 22:17).

Those four facts form the basis of the doctrine of Christian equality. All people regardless of their background are significant, loved, fallen, and redeemable! That’s what Acts 10:34 means when it says

God is no respecter of persons. He doesn't play favorites. As far as God is concerned, there are only two races: the saved race and the lost race.

ALL MEN ARE NOT CREATED EQUAL

But there is a sense in which "all men are not created equal." That's an equally true statement. We don't all have . . .

The same background. The same culture. The same language. The same IQ. The same economic conditions. The same abilities. The same opportunities.

There are vast differences across the whole spectrum of humanity. So which is it? Are all men created equal or are they not created equal? Before God, we are all created equal. On earth, we are not all created equal. In the church, we are all "one in Christ," but there are many differences among us.

The early church wrestled mightily with these differences. The New Testament bears witness to many divisions among the first generation of believers in Christ:

We all make snap judgments—Jews and Gentiles. Greeks and non-Greeks. Rich and poor. Slave and free. Circumcised and uncircumcised. Male and female. Young and old. Vegetarians and meat-eaters. Sabbath-keepers and non-Sabbath-keepers. Wine drinkers and total abstainers.

The church has wrestled with these issues for 2000 years. ***James shines a light on the problem of partiality by focusing on an issue most of us never think about.*** He uses the example of the "man with the gold ring" to force us to face our hidden tendency to discriminate inside the church of Jesus Christ. Let's see what he has to say.¹

Open it

1. What type of clothing do you enjoy wearing the most? Which is your least favorite? Why?

Read it

JAMES 2:1-13

¹Sermon by Ray Pritchard entitled **The Problem of Partiality** found @ <http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/the-problem-of-partiality/>

Explore it

2. What sin is James concerned about at the beginning of the second chapter of his letter?
3. What would people do when a rich person came to worship?
4. Who does James say will be “rich in faith” and “heirs of the kingdom”?
5. What happens when we fall short in one area of God’s commands?

Apply it

A CLEAR COMMAND

“My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don’t show favoritism” (v. 1).

What would qualify as favoritism? The word means to judge on the basis of outward appearance. You can get an idea of how this works by perusing an issue of *People* magazine. You’ll see pictures of the current “beautiful people,” such as Natalie Portman, Taylor Swift, George Clooney, Brad Pitt, Julianne Moore, Mindy Kaling, Zoe Saldana, and of course, “The Royals,” Prince William, Kate Middleton, Prince Harry, and the rest of the crew from the other side of the pond. If you read *People* (and similar magazines), you’ll find out who the world considers beautiful. You’ll know who’s in, who’s out, who’s up, and who’s down. You’ll discover whose marriage is on the rocks, which couple is no longer a couple, and so on. There must be a market for this because you find these magazines in every supermarket checkout line.

The world is impressed by outward beauty, money, and all the trappings of earthly power. But 1 Samuel 16:7 reminds us “**man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.**” It’s important for us to meditate on the first part of that verse. We all tend to make snap judgments based on appearance. It’s all too easy inside the church to conclude having money means we deserve special treatment and the lack of money means something is wrong with us. So what might qualify as favoritism in the church? Here are a few examples:

Favoring “our” group over some other group. Ethnic jokes and racial slurs. Looking down on others who don’t dress like us, talk like us, look like us. Assuming all people are like some people. Telling someone, “You might not feel comfortable here.” Encouraging our children not to mingle with other groups. Refusing to be friends with people outside our social status. Assuming the superiority of your own ethnic

group. Complaining that too many (fill in the blank) have started attending the church. Refusing to vote for a qualified elder candidate because he happens to be (fill in the blank).

Telling a friend you don't mind "those people" coming to church, but you hope they will leave "their music" at the door. Why is this so wrong? Because in the church we are all "**believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.**" If we truly believe in Jesus, then we ought to welcome anyone who shares our common faith in Christ. Said another way, faith in Christ rises above the things that divide us. It matters more than money or social class or language or culture or skin color. We have no right to reject a fellow believer on the basis of those secondary matters.²

6. Where have you seen favoritism or prejudice in the church? Were such examples confronted or tolerated?
7. What causes us to define a person solely on the external? Why do such assessments of people fall short of telling us the whole story?

J. B. Phillips's paraphrase of James 2: 2–4 makes this problem sound like it could have occurred last Sunday: Suppose one man comes into your meeting well-dressed and with a gold ring on his finger, and another man, obviously poor, arrives in shabby clothes. If you pay special attention to the well-dressed man by saying, "Please sit here, it's an excellent seat," and say to the poor man, "You stand over there, please, or if you must sit, sit on the floor," doesn't that prove that you are making class-distinctions in your mind, and setting yourselves up to assess a man's quality?³

8. Why is it difficult to associate with people who are different from you? What benefits come from interacting with people who are different or think or live differently from you?
9. Why is favoritism and prejudice unbecoming of someone who is a Christ follower?

² ibid

³ Jeremiah, David. What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do (pp. 91–92). David C. Cook. Kindle Edition

James' word picture, church history, and our own experiences chronicle the inconsistent tendency of vibrant Christianity to become discriminatory and given to favoritism.... **The problem in James' time was that God's Word did not triumph over culture**...Likewise, in today's church when the poor/ uneducated and the rich are not welcomed with equal enthusiasm, it is precisely because the Bible has not triumphed over culture.⁴

10. Reread the above quote. What does it mean that God's Word "did not triumph over culture"? How does culture impact how we view others?

In James 2:1 we are told that one of the reasons partiality is unbecoming of a Christ follower is Christ Himself. Pastor Steve Cole remarks that...

This is one of only two references to Jesus Christ by name in this entire epistle (see 1:1), and so it should capture our attention. By focusing our attention on Jesus Christ in His glory, James addresses the problem of favoritism in two ways.

First, he gets us to see how petty our distinctions between the rich and poor (or any other distinctions) really are. Even the most powerfully rich men on earth are nothing compared to the glory of Jesus Christ, the King of kings.

Second, when James ascribes glory to the Lord Jesus Christ, it probably points to His coming in power and glory to judge the earth (Matthew 26:64; Peter Davids, Commentary on James [Eerdmans], p. 107). James will mention judgment at the end of his argument (2:12–13). In 2:4, he says that when we make distinctions among people based on outward factors, we set ourselves up as judges with evil motives (or, thoughts). We don't see the hearts of men, as God does (1 Samuel 16:7). To judge a man based on his outward appearance is to usurp the place of Jesus Christ in His glory as judge of all the earth.⁵

11. James had been an eyewitness of Jesus' life and interaction with others and knew that favoritism contradicted His heart and mission. What are some examples from Scriptures that show us how Jesus treated people while He was here on earth?

⁴ Hughes, R. Kent. James (ESV Edition): Faith That Works (Preaching the Word) (pp. 81-82). Crossway. Kindle Edition.
⁵ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-8-why-partiality-wrong-part-1-james-21-7>

Neither James nor the Old Testament writers are saying that God saves only the poor, nor are they saying that the poor are automatically to be understood as righteous and the rich as unrighteous. But they are consistent with the words of Paul written to the Corinthian believers:

For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence.... As it is written, “He who glories, let him glory in the LORD” (1 Corinthians 1: 26–31).⁶

12. In James 2:5, James reminds us of our initial calling into a relationship with Jesus. How does favoritism contradict God's unconditional love for His children?

13. James cautions us against premature or shallow judgments of people around us. Should we ever judge people, and if so, how do we go about it in a God-honoring way?

FAVORITISM DISHONORS THE POOR.

“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?” (vv. 6–7).

Remember what the rich do. They have the money to attack you. They hire the big-time lawyers who drag you into court. Why give favorable treatment to people like that? I heard about a man who had been dismissed from leadership because of immorality. So what did he do? He threatened to sue his own church. The poor don't have that option. But the rich think the rules don't apply to them. They live as if God doesn't exist. Their money gives them false security. Why favor them?⁷

14. In what ways today can the rich exploit the poor? What can be done to alleviate some of these injustices?

⁶ Jeremiah, David. What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do (pp. 96–97). David C. Cook. Kindle Edition.

⁷ Sermon by Ray Pritchard entitled **The Problem of Partiality** found @ <http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/the-problem-of-partiality/>

15. What would cause the poor people of James' day to betray their fellow lower-classmates and seek to favor the rich who were opposing them in life?

16. Sometimes there are reasons people find themselves rich or poor. Some have been wise and disciplined with their finances, allowing for wealth to be accumulated, and there are some who have been foolish and undisciplined with money, bringing about peril. How does this fit with the teaching of James?

A POINTED CHALLENGE

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, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker (vv. 8–11).

Partiality violates the royal law given by Jesus. What is the greatest commandment? Love the Lord with all your heart. What is the second greatest commandment? “Love your neighbor as yourself.” (See Matthew 22:38–40.)

Partiality is a really bad sin precisely because we don't think it's all that bad. We don't class it with adultery or murder, but that's exactly what James is doing in these verses. You can't substitute good for evil. Any sin breaks the whole law (v. 10). You can't say, “I didn't commit murder so it's okay if I favor the rich over the poor.” Favoritism is wrong because you have “murdered” that poor man in your heart when you unfairly judged him.⁸

17. Take some time as a group and discuss what similarities murder and adultery have with showing partiality towards/against others?

18. Why do we see partiality or favoritism as something that is benign instead of the malicious cancer James describes?

⁸ Sermon by Ray Pritchard entitled **The Problem of Partiality** found @ <http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/the-problem-of-partiality/>

A CHRISTIAN ALTERNATIVE

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

There is good news and bad news in these verses. The good news is, those who show mercy will receive mercy. The bad news is, those who judge without mercy will be judged without mercy. Favoritism exposes us to God’s judgment.

We discover the whole gospel in the final phrase: “**Mercy triumphs over judgment.**” If I get what I deserve, I will end up in hell, and so will you. I don’t want justice. I am such a sinner that if I ask for justice, that’s like asking for a one-way ticket to the lake of fire.

What I deserve, I don’t want. What I need, I don’t deserve. As I wrote those words, I thought of a verse from the hymn “Rock of Ages”:

Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to the cross I cling; Naked, come to Thee for dress; Helpless look to Thee for grace; Foul, I to the fountain fly; Wash me, Savior, or I die.

Until we see the depth of our sin, we will never rightly appreciate God’s mercy. As long as we see ourselves as “moderate” sinners, we’ll seek a “moderate” Christ to give us a “moderate” salvation. And we will certainly stand in judgment over those whose sins we judge as worse than our own. But when God gives us a glimpse of our own depravity so we see how bad we really are, then we will say, “Wash me, Savior, or I die.” Then and only then will we be free to love our brothers and sisters in Christ without judging them by their outward appearance...

In Christ, mercy triumphs over judgment. Why isn’t it that way in the church?⁹

19. In what areas of your life can you begin to demonstrate the grace of God toward all people? How can you be an instigator for greater faithfulness to Christ in these areas?

20. This passage of James ends with the statement, “Mercy triumphs over judgment.” Name some ways that God has shown you mercy. What are some practical ways that you can allow this awareness of God’s mercy to shape the way you treat others?

⁹ Sermon by Ray Pritchard entitled **The Problem of Partiality** found @ <http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/the-problem-of-partiality/>