

The Folly of Favoritism

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[0 : 00] What's... You're very close. Oh, should I back up a little?! My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, you sit here in a good place, while you say to the poor man, you stand over there or sit down at my feet, have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

Listen, my beloved brothers. Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor man.

Are not the rich ones who oppress you and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called? If you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

You are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.

[1 : 34] For he who said, do not commit adultery, also said, do not murder. If you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.

For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment. Father, we're grateful for your word.

Would you please help us to be hearers and doers of it? Would you please continue to guide us in our time of worship?

Would you help me as I now worship by preaching? And would you help your people as we continue to worship by sitting under the preaching of your word?

We do want to see our Savior Jesus lifted high. We do want to see ourselves clearly in the mirror of the word. And by your power and by your grace, we do want to be changed.

[2 : 38] So would you please help those things to be true this morning as we continue in our time of worship? We ask all of this for your glory and our good, giving thanks in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Have you ever said, you're a hypocrite? How did that go for you?

Why does the accusation of hypocrisy arouse defensiveness? Well, because either the person knows that their words are inconsistent with their actions, in which case you are exposing their sinful intentions.

Or the person is unaware of the inconsistency between their words and their actions, in which case you're pointing out a sin that they didn't know was there.

No one takes being accused of hypocrisy lightly. And yet, I think we're all occasionally guilty of it.

[4 : 00] As he continues teaching following Jesus 101, James is compelled to address a specific example of hypocrisy within the community of believers.

He doesn't just say to them, you're all a bunch of hypocrites. That will only make them defensive. Instead, James takes a wiser approach.

But an approach, which I think you will agree at the end, ends up being even more direct and unavoidably convicting.

James' wisdom is apparent in the way he begins this section. His story that he tells sounds a lot like the parables of Jesus that we looked at together this summer.

Our English translations hide some key words here. But this is the parable of the gold-fingered man and the dirty-clothes man.

[5 : 04] Are you ready? Verse number one. My brothers and sisters, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and you say, you sit here in a good place, while you say to the poor man, you stand over there, or sit down at my feet.

Have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? James calls their behavior partiality.

We may be more familiar with a word like favoritism. Here's what it looks like. A man enters the sanctuary for worship. He is a gold-fingered man, obviously wealthy, socially powerful, culturally honored.

This man is greeted. He is welcomed. Perhaps he's offered a cup of hot coffee. He is directed to a seat that demonstrates that he is someone important.

[6 : 39] For us, that would mean near the front, but not too near the front. A second man enters the sanctuary.

His clothing is dirty. It looks like he has just finished working a 12-hour shift in the vineyard.

He may even be frustrated that he got the same amount of pay as the other guy who only worked one hour. Initially, this second man is ignored, but eventually, one of the followers of Jesus goes up to him and says in his ear quietly, you smell like you worked in the hot sun all day.

You're kind of a distraction to our worship. Why don't you go stand in the back? Or maybe sit on the floor.

We don't want to ruin our chairs. Favoritism and faith are incompatible.

[8 : 01] If you say that you love Jesus, the one, the one who left the glory of heaven and became poor himself, if you say you love Jesus, then you must love like Jesus.

We noticed this at the end of chapter one, didn't we? Pure and undefiled religion, true religion, shows compassion and practical care to those in need.

But isn't it true, James says? Isn't it true? Aren't your actions being divisive? Aren't you taking God's place as judge?

And by treating the rich with honor and the poor with contempt, you do see that you're using a worldly standard, right?

Right? This is not a godly standard. Right? Verse five.

[9 : 19] Listen. Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?

But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you and the ones who drag you into court?

Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called? Favoritism and faith are incompatible because favoritism contradicts God's values.

God chooses those who are poor in the eyes of the world. He chooses those who are humble and lowly.

Chapter one, verse nine. There are not many powerful, not many with status, as Paul will later write in first Corinthians one. God chooses the poor and then he makes them rich in faith.

[10 : 46] They can even boast about their poverty because they are heirs of the kingdom. A kingdom that God promises to those who persevere in loving him despite their trials.

chapter one, verse 12. Listen in verse five means don't be a hearer who forgets.

Don't look in the mirror of the word and walk away unchanged. Listen, pay attention, accept what I am saying and adjust your behavior accordingly.

God chooses the poor but you, you have dishonored the poor.

James is not having it. Have you forgotten, he says, that it's the rich who are oppressing you.

Physical persecution, economic persecution, social persecution, legal persecution.

[11 : 59] Do I need to remind you, James says, that it's the rich who slander you, who discredit you, who destroy your reputation in the public sphere, who tempt you to deconstruct your faith because you wonder, is following Jesus really worth it?

If this is the cost, is it worth it to go through with this? Isn't it the rich who try to control you by using words as weapons?

Don't you see? The wealthy, the powerful, the socially elite, they're taking advantage of you, bringing shame on the honorable name of Jesus.

The one that you say you believe in. Favoritism contradicts God's values.

And favoritism breaks God's law. Look at verse 8. If you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

[13:20] You are doing well. But if, if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

Now, this might be a hard one for us to wrap our hands around, but it's important to remember James is writing to a primarily Jewish community of followers of Jesus.

They are committed to God's law. They have grown up learning, memorizing, reciting, and obeying God's law. They're very familiar with it.

In order for us to enter into how James uses the law to prove their guilt, come with me back to a moment in the book of Mark. Gospel of Mark chapter 12.

12. Gospel of Mark chapter 12. And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another.

[14:34] And seeing that he, Jesus, answered them well, asked him, which commandment is the most important of all?

How many commandments is he expecting to hear back? Exactly one, right? Which commandment is the most important of all?

Every Jew knew the answer to this question. Even the children would know the answer to this question. They quote this command morning and evening.

Some of them quote it when they go into their home. Some of them quote it again whenever they leave their home. They are well aware of this command. Jesus. Verse 29.

Jesus answered, the most important is hear, O Israel, by the by. Hear is the same word, listen.

[15:34] Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.

And every Jew listening to Jesus say this is giving their amen. Yes, that's right. He answered correctly, but Jesus is not done talking.

How many commands did this scribe expect to get back? Just one. what's the most important command? Jesus. Verse 31.

The second is this. This is like those memes that have the WUT under it.

I use this all this. What? What? The second? What are you talking about? There is only one greatest command.

[16:43] The second is this. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

There is no other commandment singular greater than these. Plural. Jesus elevates love your neighbor as yourself and puts it on the same level as love the Lord your God with all that you are. And the scribe, this is so fascinating to me. Verse 32. The scribe said to him, you are right, teacher. You have truly said that he is one and there is no other beside him and to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding with all the strength and to love one's neighbor as oneself is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.

Somehow this scribe gets it. He gets what Jesus is doing. That you don't get to separate loving God with all that you are and have from loving your neighbor as yourself.

If you claim to love God, then you must also love your neighbor. The commands go together. Jesus says so.

[18:13] Nobody else except for Jesus could take a second command and elevate it and say, these go together. they go together. Jesus gets this second great command from Leviticus chapter 19.

It's in verse 18. It's the second half of the verse. It says this, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.

Leviticus 19, 18. I bother to point this out because three verses earlier, notice what's here in verse 15.

You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness you shall judge your neighbor.

Showing favoritism breaks God's law. If you really live out the royal law of Jesus, James said, if you're really going to live out that royal law to love your neighbor as yourself, and if you understand that that is a compliment to loving God with everything you have, then you will love the poor.

[19 : 54] But you're playing favorites, respecting the gold-fingered man, and dishonoring the dirty clothing man, and as a result, James says, you're sinning.

and the very law that you claim to observe convicts you as transgressors, lawbreakers.

Now, I can see some in the community that James is writing to saying, now you just hold on just a minute. that's a little harsh to call us transgressors, don't you think?

Verse 10. For whoever keeps the whole law, but fails in one point, has become guilty of all of it.

For he who said, do not commit murder, sorry, he who said, do not commit adultery, also said, do not murder. If you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.

[21 : 23] favoritism is not an insignificant sin.

James offers two responses to the question, how can you call us transgressors? First, if you keep every part of the law, but you fail to love the poor, then you're breaking the whole law.

There is one law and you don't get to pick and choose which parts you want to obey, like at a big buffet line. There is one law and you don't get to pick and choose and you're picking and choosing. You're claiming to love God, but refusing to love your neighbor as yourself. Second, the commands, James says, do not commit adultery and do not murder.

They come from the same source. Not only is there one law, there is only one lawgiver. And even if you don't commit adultery, but you do murder, then you have broken God's law.

[22 : 42] Would you agree, in James' rhetoric? Would you agree that you are a transgressor? Now, I think it is just possible that James selects these two commands.

Do not commit adultery, do not murder. I think it's just possible that he selects these two commands at random. And if so, then maybe there is nothing else to see here.

Some also reason that James selects these two commands because the community is adulterous in the sense of being unfaithful to God, and similarly murderous in the sense of Jesus' sermon on the mount.

In other words, they are at enmity with one another. I'm not convinced that that works because it breaks down James' logic.

He's not arguing that they're unfaithful to God. He's telling them, you're trying to be faithful to God. You say that you love God. It's the poor that I have a problem with.

[24 : 06] Now, let me just ask you this question. if James randomly selects the first two commands that happen to pop into his mind, would you agree that these are odd commands to choose?

Wouldn't it be at least as likely that he would select one or maybe both of these commands mindful of what he is trying to communicate to this community because they are relevant to this portion of the letter.

Here's what I mean. When James says this first command, he who said, do not commit adultery, James gets the community's agreement.

He gets their buy-in on that. They're keeping that command. They are not committing adultery. And so I think they lower their defenses just a little bit.

And then James drops a hammer, bringing up a sin that they're actually guilty of, murder.

[25 : 25] The logic of this section, follow me now, the logic of this section only makes sense if they're keeping one command, do not commit adultery, but breaking another command, do not murder.

And I suspect, as one author writes, there is something breathtakingly real about murder in this community.

Think about what James has already written to them. He's already told them that we all have sinful desires within us.

He's already described the desperation that arises from poverty and oppression and persecution. He's talked with them about the anger that fuels dangerous, divisive speech, and the temptation that we all feel to get justice by any means necessary.

Given what James has already written and given the logic of this text, I wouldn't be surprised that James really has in mind murder here.

[26 : 48] perhaps, perhaps, some in the community have played favorites, and they have aligned themselves with the wealthy, they have aligned themselves with the powerful, with the influential, and as a result, they are complicit in the oppression and the murder of the poor.

What would you call someone who doesn't commit adultery but murders, James says? What would you call someone who claims to love God with their whole heart, soul, mind, and strength, but then ignores the desperate cries of the poor?

There is one law, and there is one lawgiver, you are transgressors, and though it's implied, James is saying, you're being hypocrites.

I'm so grateful that James tells them and us how to respond to this teaching. It's in verse 12. so speak and so act.

In other words, talk and behave like those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.

[28 : 45] For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

a day is coming when God will judge without mercy those who don't show mercy to the poor.

And conversely, by your kindness and your compassion and your deeds of mercy to the poor, you demonstrate that your faith in the Lord Jesus, verse number one, the Lord of glory, you demonstrate that your faith is true faith.

So speak and so act. It is by that faith that you won't just escape the judgment, you will triumph over it.

Don't miss the beautiful irony here. Loving your neighbor, honoring and caring practically for the poor. The mercy that that mercy puts you into a posture of victor.

[30 : 00] Do you see that in the text? Don't miss this. When you love your neighbor, honoring and caring practically for the poor, that mercy puts you into a posture of victor.

Like a gladiator standing over a defeated foe on the battlefield. and who or what is the enemy? It's future judgment.

Do you want to have confidence before God on that judgment day? James says, so speak and so act as those who are going to be judged by this law of liberty, by the law that Jesus interpreted and practiced and gave the people.

Love the Lord your God with everything you have. Love your neighbor as yourself and you don't get to divide these two. That kind of faith gives confidence that you will stand one day in victory, triumphant over judgment.

James' words here in verse number 12 should not be fresh and new to us. Jesus said something very similar in a parable that we looked at not that long ago.

[31 : 40] Matthew 25 and verse 34. Then the king, I love this, the king, the Lord of glory as James says in 2.1, then the king will say to those on his right, come, you who are blessed by my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

Why? Why should we inherit that kingdom? For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me, and then the righteous, the righteous standing triumphant over this future judgment, the righteous will answer him and they will say, Lord, when?

When did we see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you or naked and clothe you?

And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you? And the king, the Lord of glory will answer them, truly I say to you, as you did it, to one of the least of these, my brothers, you did it to me.

Our king's authority is broad in scope. there is no area of your life where Jesus says, you know what, that's not really my business.

[33 : 31] You just go ahead and do whatever you want. Every choice you make, every relationship, every habit, every moment is under his glorious rule.

So let me ask you, who is your dirty clothing man? And it doesn't actually need to be someone who wears dirty clothing.

Who do you instinctively overlook or avoid or silently judge? Maybe it's someone who makes you uncomfortable.

Maybe it's a co-worker who can't or refuses to help you climb the ladder. Maybe it's a neighbor who drains your energy.

Maybe it's someone whose story feels just a little too messy. Favoritism can look like gravitating towards people like yourself and it can look like avoiding those who aren't really my type.

[34 : 51] It can show up in who you greet on Sunday, who you sit with, who you're willing to pray for and what you're willing to pray for them for. It might show up in who never crosses your mind.

God to see people the way that Jesus sees them, to show mercy the way that we have been shown mercy.

Our Savior, the Lord Jesus, never showed favoritism, did he? He welcomed the forgotten. He touched the untouchable.

He made room at his table for sinners like you and me. You know his grace, Paul says. You know his grace, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you, by his poverty, might become rich in faith and an heir of the kingdom.

If our King, the Lord of glory, stepped stooped so low to love us, how could we ever withhold mercy from anyone else?

[36 : 15] We all bristle, I suspect, a bit at the word hypocrite because deep down we know that the charge sometimes fits.

We say that we love Jesus but we don't always love like Jesus. So where you have withheld mercy, the scripture and the spirit invite you to repent.

Where you've avoided someone that Jesus loves, let me invite you, urge you, ask you to move towards them in love. love. When you see a need that you can meet and yet you realize there is no return here on this investment, I am not going to get my money back, my time back, my emotional energy back, I'm not going to get those things back, there's no return benefit to me, meet that need anyway.

if you say that you love Jesus, then love like Jesus. True faith is tested and steadfastness through suffering results in this delightful gift of becoming wiser with Jesus and this wisdom is shaping us, isn't it?

I hope it is. It's shaping us in humble holiness and gentle reasonableness and merciful goodness. Every word we speak, every choice we make, every trial that we endure, this is an opportunity to make our faith visible, to testify to our Father's goodness, to offer hope and healing through the word of truth, the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[38 : 18] And so, my beloved brothers and sisters, don't be a hypocrite. Don't claim to follow Jesus while dishonoring those he delights to honor as heirs of the kingdom.

Let's speak and let's act as those who will be judged by the law of liberty. If you say that you love Jesus, then love like Jesus.

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