



James 2:1-13
 FaithWorks: The Book of James
 No Partiality

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This morning we continue our series in the book of James, titled, “FaithWorks.” And today we’re looking at one of the most prevalent problems in our world that causes societal discord, interpersonal conflict, office and family politics, and more. I can pretty much guarantee that all of us have experienced this at some point – both to our detriment and to our benefit. **And that problem is the problem of partiality.** If we’re not quite 100% sure what that means, we could say that this is the problem of unfair bias. Of favoring someone over another...of playing favorites.

The other night our daughter, Brooke, went out with Gwen for a bit. When they came back home, Brooke walked in, looked at me, and said, “Your favorite daughter is home!” And I said, “Hailey has been here the whole time!” ☺ If it were true that either of my daughters is my “favorite,” then that is going to cause problems. So I just tell them that they’re both my *least* favorite daughters, and I find that works pretty well to keep jealousy and egos in check.

Anyway, whether it’s in our families - and by the way, by “families” I don’t just mean a husband and wife with four kids and a bunny rabbit like we have under our roof. I don’t ever mean “family” in just that way. Grown children moved out of the house, your own siblings even if you’re both in your 80’s or whatever, grandkids, great-grandkids, nieces, nephews, aunts, uncles...all of that is family. So anyway, whether it’s our families, our retirement homes, our places of work, the neighborhood leadership groups, school board, church board, diving board (just making sure you’re listening)...it doesn’t matter – in any of these kinds of settings, favoritism and partiality wrecks relationships, ruins credibility, and breeds jealousy.

And today’s passage identifies the problem and then points us to the solution. So let’s turn to James 2:1-13. We’ll read the first seven verses to begin with and then read the last half of the passage a bit later. This is God’s word to you and me today (**James 2:1-7**)...

So this is not the first time that James has addressed the economic differences in the community to whom he's writing. The first Sunday in the series we looked at the first 18 verses of James, and in verse 9-11 he addresses those in humble circumstances and those who are wealthy. And now, just 18 verses later it comes up again. **So apparently, in their church, and probably in their broader community, they struggled with their economic differences.** Can you imagine having a problem like that?

Look, the more things change, the more they stay the same, right? In our society – and yes, sometimes even in the Church (“C”) – we still have challenges between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” And if you're watching this in the comfort of your own home with food in the fridge, or down the hall at the community dining room, and you've got glass in your window frames, and you have a closet with clothes in it – even if you haven't been to the closet yet and you're still in your jammies –...if those things describe you, then you are one of the “haves” of the world.

So most of us are on the positive side of that scale. The point here is that the issues between wealthy and poor are not new, they have not changed, and those problems are not going anywhere any time soon. So this letter, which was written somewhere in the middle third or so of the first century A.D., is incredibly relevant to us today. And so this is the context for favoritism that James uses: economic favoritism.

And James gives the example of two people coming to church – one is wealthy which is evident by his fine clothes and a gold ring on his finger, while the other is poorer, as evidenced by his “filthy old clothes.” And the summary of what he writes is this: If you treat those two people differently because of how they look – specifically, if you give preferential treatment to the wealthy person – then you're showing partiality.

James is saying here that that kind of partiality has no place in the church. And this isn't just James' idea out of the blue. Jesus explicitly says in Luke 4:18 that he came to preach good news to the poor; He reiterates that message in Matthew 11:8; But we also know that Jesus taught to wealthy and influential people as well – people who hosted dinner parties and banquets

and wealthy tax collectors and so forth. So James is just reiterating and emphasizing what Jesus taught – by his words, and by his actions. His actions and words lined up with one another, which is what we talked about last week.

Early on in the church, this message took root. For instance in the book of Acts, which is like the first book on church history, documenting the birth and growth of the church starting just a few weeks after Jesus' resurrection, we read this in 2:44 and 45, **“All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need” (Acts 2:44-45).** Economic status didn't matter.

Maybe the most profoundly transformational moment in the New Testament in regards to this happens when Peter has a dream that completely changes his understanding of who the gospel is for and how a person becomes a Christian. And he realizes that the gospel message is for anyone and everyone. So here's what we read in Acts 10, **“Then Peter began to speak: ‘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’” (Acts 10:34-35).** God doesn't show favoritism. Quite frankly, that was mind-boggling for many of their Jewish friends. They thought God favored them.

And that “we're the favorites” mentality *started* to carry into the birth of the church – that they were God's favored people. But there was this realization that God has no favorites; The gospel message is for anyone. As Jesus says in the well-known John 3:16 verse: “For God so loved the *world*, that he gave his only son, that *whoever* believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.” There *is* a “specialness” to being a disciple of Jesus – but it's not about being God's favorites. It's about the honor and the joy of being in relationship with our Creator God, and living for Him. It's an invitation to relationship, and that invitation is extended to the world – regardless of any labels that people may put on us, we may put on ourselves, or that we might put on others. So saying “yes” to Jesus doesn't make anyone better than anyone else.

And James, in some pretty strong language, is telling them: quit with the

biases. No more favorites. No more partialities toward the wealthy. No biases against those who don't have much material wealth. While that was their context, we need not be confined to financial position in applying the principle. It could be personal wealth...but it could be politics, or sexuality, or race, marital status, age, nationality, or a myriad of other ways we categorize people. God is not partial in regards to any of those things. He sees us all as created in His image. You are created in God's image! And James, just as Jesus did, is urging his readers – and now us – not to let those labels get in the way of how we treat one another. It doesn't mean you have to agree on everything. It doesn't mean you have to bless someone's sin, just as you don't want them blessing your sin...but we can still treat them without bias. How do we do that, you might ask? Let's keep reading to find out, because James doesn't leave us hanging...**(James 2:8-13).**

So, the key to getting rid of our partialities and our biases is to keep the “royal law” as James calls it here. You may know this royal law as the second of the two greatest commandments, and from which all the other commandments – the rest of the law – hang. That's what Jesus says, and the first commandment is “Love God with all you've got.” That version is the BNST: the Brian North Summary Translation. Then the second is: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” James is directly quoting Jesus here. He doesn't need to tell them that Jesus said this. They know it. And if we do this, we will avoid partialities. Why? Because this kind of love doesn't have biases. It doesn't have favorites. It doesn't assume something bad about one person based on how they look or past indiscretions that might be kind of ugly. It gives the benefit of the doubt.

The foundational thing here is that this is how God loves us. God loves without partiality, without bias. If God had partialities, there'd be no hope, because we fall completely short of His standard. James gets at that here: that even just one sin tips the weight of the scales against us. But God loves us anyway, which is the Good News. But before we get to that good news, we need to spend a little more time on the bad news. And there's a VERY important reason when it comes to showing no partiality and loving our neighbor as our selves...there's a very good reason for why we must spend a moment on the bad news.

The bad news is that you have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. It breaks relationship with our God our creator. Even just one sin does you in. Oh! I just made a little poem...set it to music and let's call it rap. 😊 One sin! That's all it takes.

But you and I are guilty of all kinds of stuff: biases like we're talking about today, greed, lust, power abuse, unhealthy anger, bad language, adultery – you only need to commit it in your heart and mind, Jesus says – laziness, hoarding, gluttony, poor stewardship of finances as well as creation. I mean: the list goes on. The bad news could take up the whole front page of the Seattle Times – maybe the whole first section.

And yes, the good news of Jesus trumps the bad news. Mercy triumphs judgment, as James ends this section. **But if we forget our own sinful nature, it is easy to slip into a bias toward ourselves.** It's easy to slip into selfishness, or narcissism...or to use the word usually found in the Bible: Pride. Pride is self-partiality. Self-bias. It assumes that "I" am right, and minimizes the sin in our lives. And from there it is easy to broaden out to biases for and against others. If we only love those who look good on the outside because they have less obvious sin in their lives, and we don't have that same love for those who have more obvious sinful ugliness in their lives, then we are going to have partialities just like in the rich and poor example from the first few verses.

So don't ever forget the bad news of your own sin, first. Keep confessing your sin. Keep acknowledging it to the Lord. Keep acknowledging it to the people in your life. Ask for God's forgiveness and ask for the forgiveness of the people in your life. It keeps you humble. It keeps you from having partiality toward yourself, and it helps you look at others with impartiality as well.

Most importantly, our confession is a reminder of how impartial God's love is for us, and for everyone else on the face of the earth. Imagine if God played favorites? What if Jesus had brought a message of forgiveness and love that was only for certain people – and you weren't one of those

people? But the fact is, God loves you, in spite of your sin, and Jesus lived, died and rose for you just as he has for everyone else on the face of the earth. And the expression of that love through Jesus is made real in your life when you receive it through faith in Jesus. So: God shows no partiality.

When we come to a deep understanding of God's impartiality, and have great appreciation for that: then we are more capable of being impartial toward others. We can live into the "royal law" as James calls it here: we can love our neighbors - the people in our lives – just as we love ourselves, because that's how God loves us – even while in the throes of our own sin. We can love without partiality.

The summary that James ends with here is that mercy triumphs over judgment. Love of neighbor triumphs over partiality and bias. How are you at living into this principle? Are you merciful, or are you judgmental? This isn't to say you can't have opinions or thoughts or standards. God certainly has all of those and we can, too. But in our attitude toward others, in how we interact with people, let's be impartial as God is impartial. Let's interact with people the way we'd like them to interact with us. When we can view all people and treat them the way God does – with love and impartiality – then we will be living into the royal law. Maybe you have a relationship where you've been partial toward them or against them. Perhaps God is calling someone to mind even right now who you realize you have slighted them and not really given them a fair chance, or the chance for forgiveness and reconciliation and a "do-over." That's how God loves them, just as he does with you. So I invite you to love them much the same. Let's pray...Amen.