

## James - The Folly of Favoritism

Sign Title: The Folly of Favoritism

June 26, 2011

Good morning Faith Church! My name is Kurt and I am one of the pastors. This summer, we are studying the book of James. This morning we continue that study. Before we begin, I need to warn you. There are parts of the Bible that are encouraging, other parts are challenging. They step on our toes and leave us feeling uncomfortable. This is one of the *step on your toe* passages.

Since we are taking a larger portion of the text, we won't read the text before we begin but I am asking everyone to open their Bibles and keep their fingers in the text as we study it together. If you are using the pew Bible, this text is found on page 1011. Follow along as I read the first verse so we get a flavor of what we are talking about this morning.

My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. James 2:1 (ESV)

That doesn't sound like a big deal. Our mothers warned us about the dangers of playing favorites in kindergarden. We know its not good manners to play favorites; but what's so dangerous about it? After all, doesn't everybody do it? Playing favorites is as American as apple pie and Chevrolet. Some people we like, others we tolerate but don't expect me to hang out with them. If we go to verse 9, we see how God views favoritism in the church.

But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. James 2:9 (ESV)

Playing favorites is not just bad manners, it is sin in the eyes of God!

Last week, we learned what James called *real religion*. He gave three evidences on the outside of our life that God had transformed the inside. The first evidence was using our tongue to build others up not cut others down. The second was an overflowing compassion towards those in need, in particular looking after orphans and widows in their distress, those who can never give back to us. The evidence James gave us for real religion was being unstained by the world. That means not necessarily adopting the values and habits of everyone around us. In our text the sin of partiality is James' example of what being stained by the world looks like.

This week, as I did my lexical study I was fascinated by what I discovered. The Greek word for *partiality* in our text is *only found in Christian writings*. Why is that? Playing favorites, being partial to certain people and ignoring others was considered normal. Discrimination because of race, looks or skills was standard practice in ancient society. It wasn't considered sin. Kissing up to people who were rich and blowing off people who were poor, that was just the way life worked. Christians were the only people in the ancient world who considered partiality, favoritism, a sin.

So if you are looking for the main topic today, here it is. As Christians, there is no room in our life for favoritism or discrimination of any kind. It is sin. Why is it sinful? This section is very difficult in the Greek and it is difficult to translate but this much we know. What makes favoritism incompatible with the Christian faith is that it insults the glory of Christ.

The amount of space James gives to the sin of partiality, suggests it was a real problem in the churches to whom he wrote. It was not just a first century problem where the slaves and the wealthy land owners mingled in the same church, it is also a 21st century problem when those who are young and those who are old brush shoulders in the same church but never bother to meet.

The word for partiality in the Greek is a very descriptive word. It literally means *to receive the face* or *to look at the face*. It means to evaluate another person based on their outward appearance only.

It is hard to imagine a passage of Scripture that runs more contrary to our culture. In America, we define people by how they look like. Men evaluate women by how they look like. One girl is called *a real looker* while another isn't given the time of day. We evaluate people by their education. If you graduated from the right school or have the right initials before your name, you command respect. We evaluate people by what we see on the athletic field. The good football player rises to the top in popularity while the guy who warmed the bench goes unnoticed. Probably the most common way we evaluate people is by their money. You can hear it in the common question, "How much do you think he is worth?" It's right in the question. We associate wealth with worth. While this passage is talking about the sin of partiality in general, James will focus on one example in particular, financial favoritism.

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? James 2:2-4 (ESV)

The context is a public meeting or church worship service. In the first century, they did not have auditoriums like we enjoy today. They usually met in homes. Many homes had a courtyard that accommodated a small crowd. We are introduced to two men who were both visitors that Sunday. The ushers in the church didn't know them, but they evaluated them based on outward appearances.

### **The rich man gets the best seat in the house.**

We are told the rich man is wearing a gold ring and fine clothes. James' audience is Jewish, but it was the Roman and Greek culture that was ruling. The Romans loved their jewelry. Seneca, a Roman writer, wrote about the Roman desire to have a ring on every knuckle of every finger. This reminds me of Mr. T. Rings and jewelry were the status symbols of the day. The more bling you wore, the more status you held. This guy has a gold ring. To have anything gold meant you were someone of status.



The other notable thing was his fine clothes. In the Greek, it literally says he was wearing bright clothes. This word is used to describe the clothing of angels in Acts 10:30. It is grab-your-attention kind of clothing. We are talking about designer label clothing. Definitely some fancy threads designed to grab the ladies eyes. He probably looked like a guy from



GQ magazine who wore an Armani suit. We are not told what kind of donkey he parked in the driveway but I am sure it was a stretch. Most likely he had a rolex and alligator skin boots. You can just imagine this guy, can't you? He looked like money. He smelled like money. He was a ladies man who walked and talked money.

The greeter at the door is blown away. Look who came to church! Nobody wants to miss the opportunity to shake his hand. So church is about to begin. Mr. Big Money is in the foyer. Unfortunately, the room is packed so the ushers are trying to figure out what to do. While they are working on a new seating plan a poor man in shabby clothing walks through the door.

### **The poor man gets standing room only.**

This guy is the exact opposite of Mr. Money. No gold ring. No eye-grabbing clothing. All the text says is that he was in shabby clothing. The KJV calls his clothing "vile raiment." That paints a picture. This guy is poor. His clothes are dirty. It doesn't say it in the text but I think it is safe to assume his hair is a mess. His clothing is stained in the most embarrassing places and he had an unpleasant odor that followed him wherever he went.



Both the rich man and the poor man are in the foyer. The church is packed. There are seating issues. What should the ushers do?

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? James 2:3–4 (ESV)

Can you see this happening? It happens everywhere. It happens in restaurants every day where rich customers are given the best seat in the house in hopes that they will tell their rich friends to return. If the meal is good enough, maybe they will schedule the Christmas party there. It even happens in Bible Conferences and Christian camps. At colleges, Mr. Money always gets free season tickets and they name dorms after them if they give enough.

What does the poor man with the sweaty cuffs and body odor have to offer? Absolutely nothing. In fact, his presence sort of bring down the respectability of the whole establishment. The well-to-do will not want to frequent the place if his type are around. In the restaurant business, his smell could ruin the food. The rich man is seen as all benefits and the poor man is seen as all detriments. In James' church, what did the ushers decide? They kick some people out of the front row and give the rich man the best seat in the house while the poor man is told it is standing room only or he can sit on the floor under someones feet. Nobody is giving up their seat.

You might think this is a purely hypothetical scenario but church history tells us this kind of favored treatment has transpired again and again in the church history. In 1739 John Wesley was preaching in graveyards and fields. History tells us of him preaching in the fields to 30,000 coal miners at once. Why did Wesley preach to coal miners in the fields? These poor people were not allowed in the established church. Reluctantly, Wesley founded the Methodist denomination as a church for common people. Ironically, one hundred years later the same thing happened in the Methodist denomination. When William

Booth began bringing the poorest and most degraded people to church, he sat them in the front row. In that day, the poor were allowed to come to church but they were segregated off from the main church body and kept behind a curtain so the rich would not have to see them. William Booth didn't hide them behind a curtain. This didn't go well. As a result, he was pushed out of the United Methodist church and began the Salvation Army. Why did this happen? The sin of partiality.

Sometimes this happens in the opposite direction. Instead of ignoring the poor, we cuddle up to the rich. I remember a time I was guilty of that. I was visiting Saddleback church in California and the buzz around the congregation was that Hulk Hogan and Lucy Lawless, who plays Xena Princess Warrior, were in church the week before. I sat in the back where I could see the entire congregation and I spent a good part of the sermon scanning the congregation to see if they were in the crowd. I was playing favorites to the celebrities.



### **What's wrong with playing favorites?**

have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? James 2:4 (ESV)

First, when we evaluate a person by their net worth or their social worth or their looks, we are assuming a position reserved only for God. We are acting as judges with evil thoughts. Is God impressed with an Armani Suit? Is God impressed by looks? Is God impressed by celebrity status? Of course not. The

one thing that really matters is something we are not in a position to evaluate by appearances only.

Remember the story of the widow and her two mites? The rich were putting their money in the offering plate and garnering a lot of attention but this widow put in two small coins. While nobody was impressed, Jesus was impressed. He was in a position to judge her heart. That is what mattered.

The second problem with playing favorites is that it shows we are impressed with the wrong thing on Sunday morning. We should be impressed with Jesus. He is the one who fashioned the universe yet humbled himself to fuse humanity and divinity together forever and die in our place for our sins. It doesn't get any more impressive than that. When we are impressed by somebodies finances rather than Jesus on Sunday, it shows us we are impressed by the wrong thing.

**This isn't about a rich man and a poor man, it is about me.**

Lest you get the wrong idea, there is nothing wrong with being rich. There is nothing more spiritual about being poor and shopping at *Thee Garage Sale*. This is not about men with rings on their fingers compared to men with missing teeth and body odor. It is about our reaction to them and what it reveals about our own heart. We think a gold ring says something about a person, in reality, it says something about us. It shows what we think is impressive.

If you love money, you will give special attention to the people in the church who have it. If you are dazzled by Christ, all the bling and the zing of the



rich man won't blind you to the one with true worth, Jesus,... the one who loves them both.

So what are we to do? Make the rich man sit on the floor and give the poor man the best seat in the house? That is wrong too. It is called reverse favoritism.

### **Favoritism is Foolish**

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 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? James 2:5–7 (ESV)

James shows us the foolishness of favoritism by asking questions. First, he points out that, for the most part, it is not the rich God has chosen for eternal life. We are not going to dig into this but just realize that James is not saying anything different than Christ did in his famous analogy of the camel going through the eye of a needle. It is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. The humility of salvation that realizes there is nothing we can do; there is nothing we deserve; there is nothing we can buy; we can only receive salvation as a free gift is difficult for those who are rich. The rich are often insulated from times of desperation. The poor live in time of desperation. That is why the materially poor have often dominated the ranks of the church. Paul says the same thing.

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 1 Corinthians 1:26–27 (ESV)

Second, James points out the cultural situation of their day. It was the rich who were exploiting them, suing them and blaspheming the name of God. James says, it is the rich who are totally messing with your life, and you are playing up to them. You are blinded by the almighty dollar. Favoritism towards the rich is foolish.

### **So what are we to do?**

If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. James 2:8 (ESV)

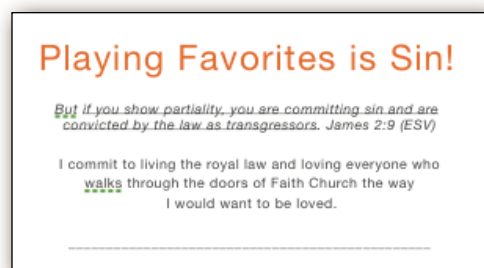
What is the royal law? It is simply loving your neighbor as yourself. Treat others like you want to be treated. No matter who walks through the doors of the church, love them with the same kind of love and care you would want to be loved with if today was your first day.

It is an amazing vision James is casting. The church is to be a place blind to race, education, age, status, looks, popularity, celebrity status and everything else. We are to be a place that sees people the way God does, he looks at us from the inside out. The most amazing thing in church is not the status of the people but the status of Jesus.

How have you been partial? Are you partial to those who are rich over those who are poor? Repent. Are you partial over skin color? Are you racist? Do you treat a black man differently? An Asian man? If you have a few gray hairs, are you partial to the older crowd? Do you conveniently ignore the younger folks? Younger folks, have you taken the time to get to know someone who walks with a cane? Are you partial toward the good-looking and attractive and shy away from those who struggle to make a good impression?

Let me mention one area of partiality we all struggle with. From 9:30 to 10:30 is a fellowship time. It is a time for us to connect and encourage one another. Most of us are partial towards our old friends and we can leave the new or summer visitors standing idly by. The royal law says treat others the way you want to be treated as if today was your first day walking through the doors.

Since this is so important, I am going to push us on this a bit. In your bulletins I put a card. It is called the “Playing Favorites is Sin!” card. During the last song, I want you to consider having the courage to sign it. I don’t want it back. It is for you to keep and remind yourself of what we learned



this morning and what to do about it. What does that mean? Nobody new will be left alone. Some of us will invite new folks over to lunch. Others will take the time to give those who are new a brief call to say, “Hello.” The possibilities are endless. The vision is grand. It is living the royal law. Treating everyone the way we would like to be treated. Anything less, is sin.

Let’s pray.



Dr. Kurt Trucksess is ordained in the EFCA. He enjoys reading, writing, time with his family and wrestling with his sons. His favorite topics of study are ancient rhetoric and preaching. Feel free to contact him at [ktruck@gmail.com](mailto:ktruck@gmail.com) or visit his web at [www.christ2Rculture.com](http://www.christ2Rculture.com)

© Dr. Kurt Trucksess. You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that: (1) you credit the author, (2) any modifications are clearly marked, (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, (4) you include the web site address (<http://www.christ2Rculture.com>) on the copied resource.

