

Scripture Reading: James 2:1-13 (NASB - New American Standard Bible)

¹My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. ²For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, ³and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, "You sit here in a good place," and you say to the poor man, "You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool," ⁴have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives?

⁵Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? ⁶But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? ⁷Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called?

⁸If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. ⁹But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all. ¹¹For He who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not commit murder." Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.

¹²So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. ¹³For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

Good morning, everyone. It is good to see you all again. Last month, I began a series of sermons going through my favorite book of the New Testament – the Epistle of James. I covered chapter 1 of the book in two sermons. James introduced several different topics in that first chapter, topics which he will expand upon in further chapters of the book. In my sermon today, I will cover the first half of chapter 2, and in this portion of the book, James addresses just one major topic. This is the problem of showing favoritism at church ... and James exhorts us not to show favoritism towards the people who attend church, such as favoring rich people over poor people. This is not proper, and James will explain why. The title of today's message is "Show No Favoritism."

Let's read verses 1-4 of James chapter 2 – ¹"My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. ²For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, ³and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, "You sit here in a good place," and you say to the poor man, "You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool," ⁴have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives?"

Notice how James calls Jesus Christ "our glorious Lord." Our Lord is glorious, He is wonderful, and we as Christians ought to follow Him wholeheartedly and reflect His character. We should reflect the character of Jesus in everything that we do. He did not show favoritism – He did not favor the rich over the poor or the holy over the unholy or the talented over the less talented. He treated people equally, though He did have some harsh words at times for religious hypocrites and the ungodly religious leaders of His day.

Here is one example. At a gathering in a home one evening, Jesus was criticized by the scribes and Pharisees because He was eating and drinking with sinners – sinners and tax collectors. On the day that Matthew, the tax collector, was converted and began following Christ, Matthew invited many friends to meet Jesus at his home.

Let's read Mark 2:15-17 – ¹⁵"And it happened that He [Jesus] was reclining at the table in his [Matthew's] house, and many tax collectors and sinners were dining with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many of them, and they were following Him. ¹⁶When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that He was eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they said to His disciples, 'Why is He eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners?' ¹⁷And hearing this, Jesus said to them, 'It is not those

who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

It is not the self-righteous religious people who are open to the way of salvation, but those who recognize their need, those who recognize that they are sinners in need of rescue. Various types of sinners were dining with Jesus and He welcomed them and shared His gospel with them. Many became His followers. We, His followers, ought to reflect His openness and welcome all needy persons to church.

This issue of discriminating against those persons who we might deem to be undeserving of social acceptance reminds me of a story I heard in a sermon once. This story took place during the 1970s in America at a time when social norms were changing. A young man from a Christian family went off to college and when he came home during school break, the way he dressed had changed: he wore casual clothes and walked around barefoot. When Sunday came, his parents told him that the family was going to church and the boy said he would join them. The parents were surprised that he did not dress in the normal conservative style for attending church but wore his casual clothes and no shoes or socks. According to the preacher that I heard this story from, the parents “had the good sense to bring him to church despite the way he was dressed.” After the church service, the parents observed their son talking to a variety of people and generally enjoying his time there. When it was time to go home, the boy got into the car and said this to his parents: “Wow. You can really tell who the real Christians are when you come to church barefoot!” Apparently, the boy had received some criticism from some church members who disapproved of the way he dressed when he attended church. That was an era when many middle-class American Christians believed that you should wear your best clothes when you attend church – an idea that is not actually taught in the Bible, but was seen to be proper church behavior. That young man was criticized by some people in the church, but there were other people there who warmly welcomed him despite his unorthodox manner of dress. We ought not judge people by their outward appearance. As Jesus said during that dinner in Matthew’s house, it is not the self-righteous who need a physician, but those who recognize that we all are imperfect and need a Savior. We are all imperfect and we ought to embrace all of our imperfect brothers and sisters.

In my previous sermons, I have sometimes quoted a key verse we Christians should live by. In John 13:34-35, Jesus says this to His disciples: “³⁴A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. ³⁵By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” And Ephesians 4:32 – “Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.”

Let’s read James 2:1-4 again – “¹My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. ²For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, ³and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, “You sit here in a good place,” and you say to the poor man, “You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool,” ⁴have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and *become judges with evil motives?*”
And become judges with evil motives?

What is your motivation when you judge somebody attending church whose appearance doesn’t match your own personal preference (whether its their social status, clothing choice, grooming, educational level, ethnic background, or some other difference)? Do you prefer your own kind? Do you hope to gain something by associating with a rich person or a talented person? What is your motivation in who you choose to associate with or not associate with? Do some self-examination

and evaluate why you might want to favor one type of person over another or avoid certain other types of people. Are you a judge with selfish motives?

Romans 2:11 – “For there is no partiality with God.”

Job 34:12 – “Surely, God will not act wickedly, And the Almighty will not pervert justice.”

And Job 34:19 – God “...shows no partiality to princes, nor regards the rich above the poor, for they all are the work of His hands.”

Deuteronomy 10:17-18 – “¹⁷For the Lord your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality nor take a bribe. ¹⁸He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing.”

Our great God does not show partiality and He does not take a bribe, which is something we often see being done by sinful human beings. God cares for the orphans and the widows and even foreigners.

In our 9:00 am Christian Education Hour on Sunday mornings, we are looking at stories in the Old Testament and I have often pointed out that although God called Abraham in Genesis 12 to be the father of a special nation, it was not because God loved that one nation more than others. On the contrary, in the last sentence of Genesis 12:3, God says to Abraham, “... And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.” It has always been God’s plan to reach all nations, not just Israelites, and in our 9:00 am class I have shared many examples of that.

And in the New Testament, we see that God has opened up the gospel message to all peoples everywhere.

Galatians 3:27-29 – “²⁷For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to promise.”

In the church during this current age, there should be no racial distinctions, no distinctions based on social class, and no distinctions based on whether you are male or female.

Peter learned this lesson in Acts 10:34-35, where we read this: “³⁴Opening his mouth, Peter said: “I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, ³⁵but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him.”

Let’s return to James, chapter 2 and read verses 5-7 – “⁵Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? ⁶But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? ⁷Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called?”

We dishonor the poor when we favor associating with rich people or when we show other types of favoritism to the rich. You know: a lot of rich people are not nice. Many of them will use their power to gain advantages for themselves, even by means of using the law courts against people who displease them.

Verse 5 here is interesting: “Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?” Despite the social and economic disadvantages that the poor have – or perhaps because of the disadvantages that the poor have – God has actually chosen to give these people a special blessing to be “rich in faith” and “heirs of the kingdom.”

This reminds me of something Jesus said in the Beatitudes. Matthew 5:3 – “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” For me, when I read the Beatitudes, the fundamental lesson I draw is that to be in Christ’s kingdom here on earth, in spite of the short-term disadvantages that we may experience in this life on earth (such as being poor or mournful or meek or persecuted), over the long-term we receive blessings when we are followers of Jesus.

This reminds me of another story I heard. This story comes from a situation that occurred during a big evangelistic campaign in a major city in South America. Before the series of evangelistic meetings, there was some training for volunteers who wanted to be counselors to those people who would come forward during the invitation that was given at the close of each evening’s evangelistic message. There was one man who was obviously very poor by economic standards, given the manner of his clothing, but he was eager to receive the training and to volunteer as a counselor. On the first night of the evangelistic campaign, many people came forward in the invitation, but the coordinators who assigned counselors to these people discriminated against that one counselor who was such an obviously poor man. In the end, one rich man arrived late to the counseling room and the only counselor available was that poor man, so he eagerly stepped up to counsel the rich man. On the second night of the evangelistic campaign, that rich man again came to the counseling room. The coordinators of the counselors tried to assign him a more respectable-looking counselor, but the rich man said No – he desired to have the same counselor that he had the night before because he was fully satisfied with the counseling he had received the night before.

James 2:5 – “Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?”
That economically poor counselor was rich in faith and wise in counseling. He led the rich man to salvation in Christ.

When I recall this story, I am saddened that even among the coordinators of counseling at a major evangelistic event, they discriminated against a man whose appearance showed that he was from an economically poor background. But in the end, he showed that he was rich in faith and wisdom. This story had obviously impacted people, because I later was told the story while volunteering as an usher in an evangelistic campaign in the United States. We should never underestimate those people who look underprivileged, since God has a special heart for them and has given them a special measure of faith.

Let’s read James 2:8-11 – “⁸If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well. ⁹But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all. ¹¹For He who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not commit murder.” Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.”

In verse 9, James plainly says that showing partiality is committing sin. A few minutes ago, I quoted for you some verses in the Old Testament showing you that God does not show partiality. Let’s look again at Deuteronomy 10:17 – “For the Lord your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality nor take a bribe.”

God does not show partiality, nor take bribes like corrupt human beings often do. Elsewhere, God exhorts His people to follow His example. Let’s read Deuteronomy 16:18-20 (ESV) – “¹⁸You shall appoint judges and officers in all your towns that the Lord your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment. ¹⁹You shall not pervert

justice. You shall not show partiality, and you shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous. ²⁰Justice, and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land that the Lord your God is giving you.”

God wants His people to judge with righteous judgment, to not pervert justice, to show no partiality. Yes, indeed: showing partiality is committing sin, as James tells us.

I notice in James 2:8 that he makes mention of what he calls “the royal law”: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” That sounds familiar to us – we have heard this before. This is a quote from Leviticus 19:18, one of the books of Moses. But we are most familiar with it as something Jesus said.

In Matthew chapter 22, Jesus quoted this verse after He was asked what is the greatest commandment. He told his audience what the greatest commandment is and then He told them a second, related commandment as well, a crucially important command.

Let’s read Matthew 22:35-40 (NASB) – “³⁵One of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, ³⁶“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” ³⁷And He said to him, “ ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ [That’s a quote from Deuteronomy 6:5] ³⁸This is the great and foremost commandment. ³⁹The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ [That’s from Leviticus 19:18] ⁴⁰On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.”

The greatest commandment is to love God with your whole being. A second commandment is like it: you should love your neighbor as yourself. James calls this second command “the royal law.”

All God’s moral laws are important and we must follow them. Let’s look again at James 2:9-10 – “⁹But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all.” If you fail to follow even one of God’s laws, you are a transgressor of the law – you are a lawbreaker. You might think that showing partiality is a small issue, but if you show favoritism toward certain people in the church then that is a sin and you are a lawbreaker. That is the message which James wants to teach us in this paragraph.

Let us move on to the last part of today’s passage, James 2:12-13 (NASB) – “¹²So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. ¹³For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.”

The law that Christians follow is the “law of liberty.” Many years ago, I heard a Christian pastor describe the law of liberty this way: it is not the freedom to do anything you want but the freedom to be all that you can be now that you have been set free from the bondage of sin – you have the Holy Spirit within you now to lead you to right paths of behavior and to empower you to do the right thing. When we let the Holy Spirit lead us, we can successfully live lives that please God and benefit our brothers and sisters and neighbors.

But if we lead loose, undisciplined lives and commit sins such as the sin of showing partiality, we will be judged by our failure to live up to the law of liberty. We ought to be loving one another and forgiving one another and not favoring one person over another. If we show partiality at church, favoring the rich over the poor or the talented over the untalented, we sin – we are making self-centered judgments toward our brothers and sisters. Such judgments will bounce back to you and you will find yourself judged. Instead, we should show mercy toward our brothers and sisters,

completely loving and accepting one another. This kind of mercy triumphs over judgment, James tells us. This is the way to live.

A few minutes ago, I told you about “the royal law”: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” This reminds me of another significant verse which church tradition has called “the Golden Rule.” I am going to close today’s sermon with this verse.

The verse that we have called “the Golden Rule” is found in the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Let’s read Matthew 7:12 (ESV) – “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”

If you love your neighbor as yourself and if you treat other people the way that you would like to be treated, then you are fulfilling the royal law, you are fulfilling the golden rule, you are fulfilling the heart of the teaching of the Law and the Prophets – the heart of the Hebrew scriptures. This is the basic way we should be conducting our relationships with one another. If you were to be following the royal law and the golden rule and the law of liberty, you would not be showing favoritism towards people, you would be loving one another and forgiving one another and showing compassion and mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment. That’s the better way to live.