

Mom Always Liked You Best!

Sunday, September 5, 2021
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

James 2:1-10

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

In our Epistle lesson James rails against the sin of favoritism, a sin of which we all become aware very early in life. Among a child's earliest spoken words are "Mama," "Dad," "dog," "cat" and "Mom always liked you best!" Just a few years later a little one is off to school where they learn to complain that the teachers play favorites and that "life just isn't fair!" A very few, much later in life may even dare to confess that they too show favoritism, or that they themselves may have been Mom's darling child. Favoritism is a pervasive sin, and yet it is also illusive. It is hard to discern real favoritism from imagined, and even having correctly identified it, it can be difficult to correct. This sin of partiality will be with us until the last day, but James gives us wonderful insight into this evil. We can all use additional wisdom, understanding and a few helpful tips in dealing with favoritism, so let us give careful heed to James the wise.

Our lesson's focus is upon favoritism shown to the wealthy and we are presented with a helpful illustration. *For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of*

the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," The story told is presumably of two visitors to a congregation's gathering, and it is easy to imagine how something like this could happen. Poor people may not be very attractive, and who wants to sit by someone in dirty clothes? Some amount of forced kindness may be shown to the poor person while the rich man attracts quite a crowd. We are naturally attracted to people who dress elegantly, and this person's wealth and influence seem obvious. "Perhaps this person could join our fellowship and all our financial problems would be solved!" James would not present such an illustration had he not known that such things were really happening, and this horrified him.

James immediately identifies favoritism for what it is. Take careful note of his words. *My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?* Let us be very aware that James does *not* slam favoritism as an offense against fairness. This is our worldly interpretation of the problem as by nature we hold out great hopes for a world where all is fair. God is certainly not against fairness, but this divine instruction is directing us to a much higher goal. James is horrified by favoritism because it is such a direct offense against Jesus Christ and the Gospel! He speaks so strongly that he openly questions the ability of one to show favoritism and still be a believer in Christ! Such partiality goes directly against all that Jesus did and taught us to do. Jesus showed love to both rich and poor, to lepers and ill as well as to the healthy, and to celebrities and the lowest of outcasts as we see in our Gospel lesson (Mark 7:24-30). Paul picks up on this theme of universal love of God as in his writings he called for love of both Jews and Gentiles, the educated as well as the uneducated, men and women, slave and free. Favoritism simply has no place in a Christian's life.

We are then urged to not judge others, but to love as Jesus did. First, we hear James' condemnation of our making ourselves judges over others. *Have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?* God is to be the judge. It is our job to love and accept. A few verses later a more positively stated instruction is given. *You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* And who is my neighbor? Jesus' answer to this question is made clear in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37). One's neighbor is anyone who is in need, and the best of neighbor is the one who cares for others. Jesus is careful to make the hero of his parable a despised Gentile, to show the universality of God's love. The Bible presents us with a radical egalitarianism, and this is a tough assignment, but this is our calling. Along with this high calling James presents us with two helpful insights into the matter, which are each a bit shocking.

First, James speaks of what might sound like a divine favoritism for the poor. *Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in*

faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. God's attitude toward the poor has been called "the priority of the poor." Is God playing favorites? It may seem so, and God is free to do as God pleases, but a little further consideration gives some needed perspective on the matter. Jesus spoke of the special place of the poor. *Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God,* said our Lord (Luke 6:20), and his heart for the poor was obvious throughout his earthly ministry. While the Bible speaks a special kindness to the poor, it never romanticizes poverty. Poverty breeds despair and all kinds of temptations. Poverty destroys people in body and spirit, but one positive thing which poverty does accomplish is that it forces the poor to look elsewhere than this world to find their hope and life.

As we consider favoritism let us broaden the meaning of wealth and poverty. To be wealthy is a form of power and to be poor is to have little power. There are other kinds of power which people wield in this world. Power is what makes one able to influence others and it gives us an attractiveness that the world follows. Think of the many kinds of very real power which people have. There are the titled and the commoners, the educated and the uneducated, the skilled and unskilled, the witty and the dull, the attractive and the plain. We are naturally attracted to people that have these powers, and easily ignore or avoid those who do not. When we are called to show no favoritism, we are being commanded to love the unlovable as well as the lovable, and to not only be drawn to the attractive, but to seek out the unattractive. Can we do that? I suppose so, but it can be a challenge.

I recently heard a reporter reflecting upon his work in Mexico near the border. He prided himself on loving the poor and promised God that he would freely embrace the poor as an act of faith. This bold and somewhat naïve promise was put to the test one day when during a brief exchange with a poor woman at the Tijuana dump, this woman smiled and embraced him. As she expressed her gladness for his care for her, he found himself praying to God, "Lord, I will gladly embrace the poor, but do I have to embrace those who probably have lice?" A love for all is a harder assignment than may first appear and we all have work to do.

We must love as Jesus loved, and the assignment is not complicated. *You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* Rather than look at it as a difficult assignment, we might do well to see it as an adventure. (No, I'm not kidding!) Have you encountered a young person whose tattoos, piercings and bizarre clothes seem to shout, "I'm trying to offend you!"? Try a gentle smile and greeting and let them know that you see them as an important human being. These kinds of encounters often prove interesting and full of blessing. My wife says that I can talk to anybody. I don't know if that is true, but I have learned over the years that it all comes down to a matter of practice, so give it a try.

We too easily judge others by their appearances. Perhaps we need a new set of eyes. I have quoted before, and quote again the wonderful words of the old Amy Grant song, *Her Father's Eyes*, which is a prayer to be able to see as God the Father sees. Be blessed by these lyrics.

*I may not be every mother's dream for her little girl
And my face may not grace the mind of everyone in the world
But that's all right, as long as I can have one wish, I pray
When people look inside my life, I want to hear them say*

*She's got her Father's Eyes, Her Father's Eyes
Eyes that find the good in things
When good is not around
Eyes that find the source of help
When help just can't be found
Eyes full of compassion, seeing every pain
Knowing what you're going through, and feeling it the same*

Just like my Father's Eyes, my Father's Eyes, just like my Father's Eyes.

James then offers another, complementary teaching about the rich and powerful. *Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?* Having heard of God's special love for the poor we now hear words of condemnation for the rich. Was James a Marxist? Some have tried to use these verses to promote class warfare, but again, the real story is not that simple. In those days the wealthy did have a power and authority which is hard for us to imagine in our day. If you were indebted to a wealthy creditor he could easily come, seize your goods and drag you off to prison, and such events were not uncommon. But we also know from the Bible that there were godly people of wealth and not all who had money were evil.

Just as the poor are more likely to look beyond the harsh realities of this world and to find hope in the Kingdom, the opposite problem plagues the rich. Their great temptation is to *not* look to the Kingdom, but to muster all their own powers to overcome all the troubles of this life. Power makes us feel self-reliant and can cause us to forget, or even deny, the power of God and forces beyond this physical world. I must also state emphatically that this teaching is aimed directly at all of us as we are a wealthy people with many earthly resources in which we greatly trust.

James' warning is a word of wisdom to all of us when we find ourselves admiring and idolizing any person or group. We feel a natural attraction to the powerful and must be careful that we not be blinded by this admiration. Some greatly admire the successful and study carefully the methods of the great achievers. There may be much good to learn from the successful, but be warned, for such a success-mindedness can

cause one to believe more in the right methods than the true God, and to forget or criticize the losers of this world. One may worship the learned of this world and strive to become an intellect. Here again there is the temptation to rely upon one's discoveries and understanding and to forget our call to a simple obedience and faith. Power and the admiration of power can so easily lead us astray. The people of the first century would naturally admire the wealthy and longed to be near them, and James saw the need to offer warning. We too can spend too much time and energy honoring our favorite heroes, and that admiration can turn to idolatry. Again, we are reminded of the crucial importance of regular worship where we can humble ourselves and remember together the one true God who alone is worthy of full praise.

Did Mom always like your sister best? Perhaps she did. Parents are not perfect, and yet it is in parenting that I find the most compelling lesson in combatting favoritism. Most parents are fairer minded than their children will admit. Good parents love *all* their children, and a good parent will also admit that some children are easier to love than others! And though they may love their children equally, they do not love them all the same. For some children success comes easily while for others everything is a struggle, and it is those who struggle who arouse the greater compassion from their parents. But all are dearly loved. May we seek to love all God's children as God loves and see us. Let us join in Amy Grant's prayer that we may someday have our Father's eyes.