

11. Favoritism Forbidden

My brother, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

(James 2:1-4)

Scriptural Warnings Against Favoritism

The basic command in our text is found in James 2:1: "Don't show favoritism." Showing favoritism does not give evidence of the required maturity of faith. Faith must reach beyond favoritism, if we are to minister to everyone as church or as believers. In the first chapter of his letter, James has already touched upon the distinction between the poor and the rich (1:9-11), and he comes back to it now in connection with perceived favoritism. What is favoritism? Literally, the text reads, "looking at someone's face." Favoritism therefore means giving special treatment to someone because of his (outward) status, in this case, wealth.

It is striking how often the Word of God warns us against favoritism or partiality, both in the Old and New Testament. Tremendous problems arose in the family of Isaac and Rebecca, when the former favored Esau and the latter favored Jacob. In Leviticus 19:15, we read, "Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly." In almost every society, the poor have few or no rights, but the LORD did not want to see this occurring among Israel. In Proverbs 28:21, we read, "To show partiality is not good - yet a man will do wrong for a piece of bread."

Bribery is also a form of partiality. The one hand washes the other. A hungry man will do almost anything for a piece of bread.

Those from whom we might least expect to see it often show partiality or favoritism as well. The LORD complains via Malachi about the priests of Israel: “So I have caused you to be despised and humiliated before all the people, because you have not followed my ways but have shown partiality in matters of the law” (Mal 2:9).

In the New Testament, we can see how it was very hard for the Christian Jews to accept the Christian Gentiles. Remember the vision Peter saw about a large sheet with unclean animals from which he was told to take and eat. Peter did not understand until later and then said, “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right” (Acts 10:34). An age-old tradition of non-association with Gentiles had to be broken, and that was very difficult.

When we read the apostolic letters we find the warning against favoritism time and again: “For God does not show favoritism” (Rom 2:11); “[There] is no favoritism with [the Lord]” (Eph 6:9); “Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favoritism” (Col 3:25). Even in the last Bible book, God insists, “I will give to everyone according to what he has done” (Rev 22). God shows no favoritism.

Why do we find this consistent and strong emphasis in Scripture against favoritism? It is because favoritism is a flagrant perversion of justice, an evil that is found everywhere and enslaves all people. And the worst is when this type of thinking and acting comes into the church of Christ.

From James 1: 2-4, then, we learn that we must not show favoritism. There are three elements: the address, the example, and the conclusion.

The Address

James does not just write, “Don’t show favoritism.” The strong wording of the exhortation is prefaced, or placed in a certain context. He writes, “My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don’t show favoritism.” How are we to understand this address?

Note first how James uses the very pastoral expression, “my brothers”. This is the fifth time he has used the address of “brother”, always in connection with a serious exhortation. As soon as someone says, “Brother,” or “Sister,” we know that we are in for a strong reprimand. But the reprimand is

one of love. It is a brotherly admonition, not meant to hurt but to heal; not to break down but to build up.

We are brothers and sisters. There is a common bond in the faith. We can therefore address one another in clear terms. James, however, does more than just speak of the brotherly bond. He qualifies it as follows: “as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.” He does not just write “as believers in our Lord”, but he writes, “as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.” I am fascinated with and compelled by that word “glorious”, followed by the full titles, “Lord Jesus Christ”. What does this mean in the current context?

James chooses each word carefully. By mentioning the Lord Jesus in this way, he draws a certain line or parallel, but how? Some explainers suggest that we must understand this expression to mean that only the Lord Jesus Christ, who is seated at God’s right hand, deserves and merits honor in his church. No one should be elevated to such a high position in the church that he becomes more glorious than the Head of the Church, who alone deserves the seat of honor. James is indeed speaking of seating arrangements here, and no one should have a more prominent place than the Lord Jesus, the King of glory.

The Humbleness of Christ

I think we can accept this explanation, but I am also convinced that it goes deeper. Was there ever anyone in the history of the church who had more of a right to a place of glory, but did not take it or accept it? Our Lord was humble and meek. He never made any personal demands. He did not come into this world with a dazzling display of riches and wealth, but instead he came as a servant, as a slave.

In his ministry, Christ did not claim a place of honor in accordance with his real status. He was Israel’s Messiah, the great Son of David, but never did he say, “Give me a seat of honor, move aside, because this is my special seat.” Think of Philippians 2, where Paul warns the church against selfish ambition and vain conceit. He tells them that they must “in humility consider others better than [themselves]” (Phil 2:3), and then follows, “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5).

We know how Christ conducted himself while on this earth. He said that he came not to be served, but to serve. He washed the feet of each disciple, telling them that he had given them an example so that they would do likewise. Paul writes of Jesus, “...who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped” (Phil 2:6). The word “grasped” means to reach out and take, or to hold firmly in one’s grasp, refusing to let

go. The latter is probably the best explanation. Our Lord Jesus Christ did not say, “Sorry, but I am God. I will not relinquish the position of glory that I have here, but I will insist on having complete equality with God. Even on earth I want a place of honor.” Instead, he let go of the glory which showed forth equality with God. He did not come to this earth as an important man, which might have been a proper demand, “but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant” (Phil 2:7). He humbled himself unto death, even the death on a cross.

Christ Showed No Favoritism

Christ was cast out of the synagogue, led out of the city of God, and executed as a despised criminal. But now he is vindicated and seated in glory. The humble servant who made himself nothing was exalted by God and given the highest place, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow. Believing in him, we must not show favoritism. He did not allow favoritism in his own life, and he will not allow it in his church. The mature faith abhors any favoritism, especially when it discriminates against the poor and needy, for Jesus Christ, who was rich, became poor for our sakes, that we might become rich in him.

The Lord Jesus did not show favoritism. The readers of James’ letter are reminded of this in no uncertain terms. The style of the time was to submit to the leaders of Israel, but the Lord Jesus Christ, while always showing proper respect, dared to say, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!” (Matt 23:13). The Jewish leaders themselves tried to flatter the Lord with this admission, “Teacher...we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are” (Matt 22:16). Using this tactic, they tried to make him bold and arrogant, thereby incriminating himself. Yet he did not succumb because he was humble and mild, showing no favoritism either way, to rich or poor.

This is how James introduces the matter of favoritism. Christ is now glorified, but this went in the way of a complete emptying of himself. Mature believers know this, and are also cleansed of the worldly evil of favoritism and partiality.

The Example of the Rich and Poor Men

In 2:2, James follows his address with a precise example. He writes, “Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes,

and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in.” Special attention is shown to the well-dressed man, and he is offered a seat of honor. The poor man, however, is told to stand somewhere else or sit on the floor. Both men seem to be non-members, or potential converts, which makes the example even more compelling. Potential members are to be treated with care.

James writes in the setting of his time. The way the example is worded, with a very accurate description and a lively style, indicates that it probably was a real scenario. The church service has already started or is about to start, when a man enters, wearing a gold ring and fine clothes. It may seem from our text that he has only one ring, but the original text indicates that he actually has many. It was customary for the wealthy to wear many rings, one or more on each finger except the middle finger. It was even possible to rent rings for special occasions. These rings, gold encrusted with special stones and gems, served as a status symbol. The rich man is also wearing fine clothes, we read. Not only is the quality of the cloth superior, but the style is superb. The text literally says something like “shining clothes”, for the cloth seems to sparkle when the man moves. One can immediately see that this man is important and rich.

Behind him comes another man. He is described as being poor with shabby clothes. The word “shabby” means not only worn out, but also filthy. The grime has become a part of the fabric. It is obvious that the man owns only one set of clothes, and he eats, sleeps, and works in the same attire every day.

The entrance of these two men cannot go unnoticed. The man with the fine clothes is given special attention. He is told, “Here’s a good seat for you.” Perhaps it is a seat in the area where the wealthy sit, with a good view of the pulpit, in the front of the building so that he can see and be seen. I can just picture how he comes in, takes this seat imperiously, and sits down with gracious and fluid movements, pretending not to notice that all eyes are on him. Such a man is used to commanding respect.

The other fellow is not so fortunate. He is told, “You stand there,” probably at the back, in a corner against a wall. There is no special seat for him. Or, if there is still a spot to sit, it is on the floor. “Sit on the floor by my feet.” This is, in fact, the position of a slave. A slave sat at his master’s feet, beside the footstool for which he was responsible. He had to take the footstool along when his master left the building, or move it when his master shifted his position.

From the clarity and forcefulness of the example, I conclude that this type of a situation sometimes occurred in real life. James probably witnessed some-

thing like it, and that makes it all the more serious. This is not a hypothetical illustration, but a very real situation.

Favoritism in the History of the Church

Today we do not have the same type of seating arrangements. Often, however, in the history of the church there was a strong segregation. One explainer uses the term “the peril of snobbery”. What is snobbery? It means to rebuff or ignore those considered inferior in any way. Snobbery also means that we arrange ourselves into certain groups or cliques, based on social status, wealth, or even like-mindedness. A snob feels comfortable only in his own circle, and ignores the rest of the crowd.

James does not make things sound worse than they are. There must have been many social problems in the early church, for the distinctions of the secular society no longer existed in the same way in the church. Would it be easy for a master to sit beside his slave in church, and perhaps recognize his slave as an office bearer? Would the slave feel comfortable under such circumstances to admonish his master?

Besides, we know that the early church was largely made up of poor people. Paul wrote to the Corinthians that not many members were influential or of noble birth. The danger was then even greater that, when a man of means and aristocracy was converted and joined the church, he received a place of honor and was given special treatment. It happened in Corinth, where the wealthy formed a special group and ate their meals together, while the poor associated only with their own kind. The celebration of the Holy Supper therefore became a sham.

When the church deformed in the Middle Ages, it was precisely in matters of social and class distinction. The clergy were like aristocracy. The bishops sat on chairs that were like thrones. There was a section for the nobility and there was an area for the commoners and the poor, clearly marked off from other areas, sometimes behind a wall or curtains so that the rich did not have to look at the poor or vice-versa.

Favoritism in the Church Today?

This kind of public discrimination does not take place anymore. It is not politically correct, so to speak. Thankfully, the time when seats were for rent in the Reformed Churches is behind us, although not so long ago. Discrimination has become more subtle, but it exists nonetheless. It is not

without reason that the Bible warns against favoritism so often. The church constantly runs the risk of conforming to the social standards of the times. Sometimes a church can become elitist: only those who have a certain level of income, meet certain standards, and display a certain behavior are welcome. We sometimes hear members say that the last thing we need is more non-payers, because we have enough of those already. It is true that we must all do our share financially for the church and the schools, but membership of the church does not depend on the amount a person can give. What matters is whether we give what we can with a sincere heart.

There are those who give their share and are also ready and willing to help others. That is a great blessing. There are those who have financial problems and simply assume that the rich owe them. That is a wrong mentality. The rich are obligated by the Lord to help where they can, but the poor are called to fulfill their duty and not be an unnecessary burden. So we work together in the church of Christ, otherwise we get snobbery among the rich and the poor.

Actually, we do not have any poor in our congregations in the sense of our text. From time to time, there are those with financial problems, and some members always seem to have these. This situation is not necessarily a matter of poverty, but can be a result of sudden illness or disability, bad money management, poor judgment, or honest mistakes.

The real poor are those walking the streets, living in cardboard boxes, and caught in a vicious circle. They do not come to church; they do not even know it exists or how to get there. And if they do come, what will we do with them? James' conclusion here is in the form of a question: "...have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" In the church, if all who come are not treated equally, with the same respect, do we then not judge? The word "discriminate" is a rather mild translation, for a *judgment* of sorts has been passed.

Making Judgments

We often look at the rich man and conclude that he is an excellent candidate for membership. We can always use people like him. He appears to be a solid man with a good bank account, so we should definitely make some room for him. We simply assume that this man truly loves the Lord. We go by outward appearances, and then we look at the poor man and think, "Another

failure, someone who's going to abuse the system. Keep your hands on your pockets, here comes trouble."

The Lord Jesus came with his disciples. He was a Nazarene, a carpenter's son with a bunch of grubby Galileans. Here was trouble. And look at the kind of people around him: publicans, prostitutes, the sick, and the poor. This church of his was really a mess! The Jews did not say to him, "Sit up here." They did not even say, "Here, sit at my feet." They said, "Out! Crucify him!"

James writes about "judges with evil thoughts." He means those who, because of outward appearances, immediately come to a conclusion about someone. It is impossible to get rid of evil thoughts by cosmetic changes, such as revamping the church's hospitality committee or having more ushers or greeters. There must be a deeper change. We have to learn to get over self-erected barriers and not pre-judge persons on an outward basis. Rather, we must speak with others in love and lead them gently with wisdom. Many people from the world around us are damaged goods and must be treated with care.

In most of our local congregations, we do not see anyone from the general neighborhood in attendance on Sunday. We can say, "That is their own fault, for we are here and the door is open." True, the door is open. But do we truly realize how hard it is for an outsider to step into an existing community that he does not know? Have we ever tried it? There are so many barriers: cultural, social, economic, and racial.

A Church That Does Not Show Favoritism

We have to make ourselves known as a church that does not show favoritism. Favoritism is something that is all around us, but should never be amongst us. One is our Master and we are all brothers and sisters. That is the bottom line in the church. One is our Master and we are all equal in Christ.

There are many people in our society who have been judged and pre-judged so often that they hesitate to take new steps or to show commitment. It takes a long time for them to overcome fear, suspicion, ignorance, and inferiority. Favoritism, as described in James 2:1-4, implies that the rich man is considered morally superior, smarter, more disciplined, and a harder worker, and thus more of a prize than the poor man who is judged to be inferior, dumber, undisciplined, lazy, and a liability rather than an asset. Unfortunately, social

stereotyping and class distinction do not stop at the doors of the church — but they should.

When we understand what James writes, we realize that it is not so easy to be a church of the Lord Jesus Christ in this world filled with caste systems. I am sure that this chapter of my book will not be appreciated equally by everyone. Our comfort zone is threatened. My comfort zone is threatened as well. But with this text, the Lord Jesus puts us to work. We can be a salting salt, a city on a hill, a light on a candlestick. Or we can be anonymous and invisible. We reject the theory of the invisible church, but how visible are we?

I know that whoever works in this regard will be disappointed, sometimes deeply. Evangelism and mission are difficult tasks. Many do not come, or come for a while and then disappear. But is it not true that it is better to have loved and lost, than not to have loved at all? After all, we are believers in our glorious Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He works wonders through people and in people, by his Word and Spirit. Yes, he works wonders and makes people new.