

Introduction

I have made much for the last several weeks about religion and the fact that according to James you can't be a Christian without being religious. One of the reasons that it seems a lot of Christians want to separate themselves from the term "religion" is that they associate it with rituals, with outward displays, with reciting liturgies, with standing or sitting at certain intervals, with say attendance at certain events, traveling to a holy location and performing some act of sacrifice or displaying some act of devotion like climbing a steep set of stairs with your feet tied together or something like that. But James does not see religion that way. It does not consist of hollow acts but the overflow of a loving relationship with God the Father. It does consist of godly character. Religion in the life of a Christian is loving God and becoming more like him. Such includes controlling our speech so that it is life-giving. Like the Father, it is being slow to anger and being holy in our conduct and caring for the needy. And this morning we find another way in which religion manifests itself as becoming like God.

[Read Text and Pray]

Pride and worldliness run wild in the sinful human nature. They are stubborn sinful tendencies that need to be mortified in the lives of Christ's followers. One of the ways they manifest their ugliness is in showing partiality. James takes full aim at this problem explaining to us what it is and why it is so abhorrent so that Christ's people will endeavor to keep themselves far from it. So we are going to examine the problem of partiality in this way.

I. Partiality: What is it?

A. James commences the second chapter of his letter with an exhortation. "My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ."

English synonyms for partiality include favoritism and bias. To be partial means to show preference or prejudice toward a person or people or a group. James is speaking of exercising a bias toward a certain kind of person based on matters that are irrelevant to heaven. It is judging the worth of a person and rewarding them on the basis of a worldly point of view. The original Greek word used by James expresses the idea of making judgments about persons on the basis of their outer presentation, their appearance. Partiality is, then, as we might say, judging a book by its cover. Here such judgment renders special favor and respect to persons because of some outward factor. The Bible closely associates partiality with taking a bribe. Bribery happens when a person accepts payment to grant special favor. It is a compromise of justice. Likewise, favoritism grants special favor connected with some benefit received or hoped for. James draws specific attention to the factor of wealth. In other contexts, he could have drawn attention to such other outward factors as a person's ethnicity, intelligence, status, height, family, sex, or neighborhood. The Bible's early pages expose partiality within the family.

B. James helpfully provides an example to illustrate what he is talking about. The setting is the assembly of believers gathered together like we are here this morning. Into the gathering come two individuals. Clearly they are guests, first-time attenders, and presumably not believers. The only noticeable contrast between the two of them is their obvious difference in respect to wealth. One is rich. He wears a gold ring and fine clothes. The other is poor. He is shabbily dressed and probably smells dreadful. The brothers in the assembly sit up and take notice when the rich man arrives and

give him preferred seating, but the poor man they direct to stand or sit on the floor or on a footstool. The one is treated with preference and honor and the other not so much. One is happily greeted, the other is tolerated. One is preferred over the other, and it is all on the basis of worldly status. Because of outward factors one man is told he is highly valuable and important; the other is told that he is not.

James spells out what is going on here in verse 6. When this prejudicial treatment is given to the rich man, the poor man is dishonored.

C. James does not appear to be warning the brothers about something he thought was improbable or unlikely to be the case but rather something he figured was the case all too many times. Perhaps the churches were behaving in this way without giving it much thought. That can be the case. Many of our patterns of sin are so natural and so ingrained in us that we are blind to them. We need someone to point them out to us. When they do, we need to remember what James had just said. That we need to be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger. Perhaps when James had issued those instructions he was already thinking of how his readers would possibly respond to this very issue.

There can be no doubt that each one of us has shown partiality to someone in some way. Perhaps it is even a pattern. When you encounter certain kinds of people with certain outward characteristics, you gravitate toward them with instant interest and affirmation, but others not so much. Are you aware that such actions have been prejudicial? That they communicate honor and worth to one who appears one way and dishonor to the one who appears another way? We should survey the landscape of our relationships because it is not just in the church that we make such distinctions and it is not just due to wealth and poverty. It can take place at work, at home, in the store, on the street, and among neighbors. Ask the Lord as did David in Psalm 139 to "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!"

And the reason that we need to be intent on seeing any favoritism in ourselves is because of how reprehensible it is. Let's turn now from looking at what is partiality to what's wrong with it.

II. Partiality: What's Wrong with It?

As surely as James wants us to understand the nature of favoritism, he also desires that we understand why it is so bad. He cites no less than five aspects of favoritism that display its evil character.

A. First, favoritism is incompatible with the glory of the Lord. There is a strong implication of contrast in James's first statement. "My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory." James is really emphatic in highlighting Christ and His glory. He leaves no uncertainty that the glory of Christ is not tainted with partiality and neither should it be in those who hold faith in him.

The Old Testament bears strong witness that there is no partiality with God. It does not matter to God how much money you possess, your GPA, how strong you are, the color of your skin, the clothes you wear, or what skills you have honed. The issues that matter to the world are of no significance to him. They do not matter in the least when it comes to the value of a human being and the administration of justice. And it is to his glory that it is so. Deuteronomy 10:17 says, "For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not

partial and takes no bribe.” Among those attributes that display how great and awesome is the Lord stands this one—that he is impartial. When we think of the attributes of God, this one does not usually jump to the top of the list. However, it becomes clear that the impartiality of God is an attribute that should not be overlooked. It is God’s glory that the rich and powerful have no hold over him. Outward appearance or advantage does not predispose God to favor. He will not dishonor the poor or disadvantaged.

The judgment of God for blessing or for curse will always and forever perfectly accord with justice. Paul makes it plain in Romans 2. He writes, “There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality” (vv. 9-11).

The glorious attribute of impartiality shone brightly through Jesus. He who is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of the nature of God demonstrated the divine attribute of impartiality in his life. He healed a centurion’s servant but also the son of a widow. He fed the masses. He was not interrupted by children. Two blind beggars were not to be overlooked by Jesus though he was surrounded by a mass of celebrants. A bruised reed he would not break nor a smoldering wick would he put out. Even Jesus’s enemies admitted that he was not swayed by appearances and showed no partiality. Weak or strong, rich or poor, darkest sinner or self-righteous he ministered appropriately to them all with love and patience and kindness and righteousness.

Politicians in Washington and Madison may follow the money. They may follow the special interests. They may well fall at the feet of the rich, powerful, and prestigious. They may sacrifice the interest of the less influential, but not our God and not our Lord Jesus Christ. He rules and judges according to justice and righteousness. His glory is such that he will not compromise what is right for a bribe. And if this is his glory, how could it be that his worshipers do any different? If we hold to the faith of Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, it simply is contradictory that we would not abhor the sin of partiality in our own selves. It is the opposite of his glory; so how could it be that we could be satisfied living in a manner that contradicts the glory of him who is our king? No, we must see that such inclinations come from the flesh and stand opposed to Christ and we must put them to death by the power of His Spirit.

B. Partiality is incompatible with the glory of God, but second, partiality renders us judges with evil thoughts. That is a double whammy! We are not to judge; that is the Lord’s place and prerogative. When we make distinctions among human beings on the basis of outward appeal we are judging. But more than that, partiality takes the evil of judging to a deeper level. It applies evil thoughts to the judgment process. Yes, indeed. Pastor Andrew Davis points out that the reason people show favoritism is that a rich person can do things for you that the poor person cannot. The rich person can buy you things, put you in with the right people, help you better yourself in the world. In contrast, the poor person can do none of these things and will probably cost you time and money and energy and convenience. So you naturally gravitate to the rich and cozy up to them while dismissing the poor, rolling your eyes and tolerating him. Showing partiality is worldly. It is seeking first the kingdom of this world. It is enmity with God and is wicked.

The soul of a poor person is as valuable as the soul of the wealthy. The salvation of a celebrity makes headlines in the world, but heaven rejoices just as loudly and just as boisterously for the conversion of someone who walks in obscurity as it does for a superstar. A soul is a soul, and we should see it that way.

C. Now for a third evil aspect of favoritism: Favoritism is incompatible with the grace of God. James calls for the full attention of his readers. "Listen, my beloved brothers!" he says, "has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?" Partiality dishonors the one God loves! Indeed the one God has chosen.

Here we have a reference to the doctrine of election. Salvation all starts with God. It was his choice from the foundation of the world to save specific individuals. It was from His choice that Christ died for them. It is God's choice that results in the new birth and an effectual calling of those sinners to Christ. And it is an impartial choice. There is nothing that the chosen have to offer God to in any way earn or sway his favor. All they have is repulsion. It is mercy and mercy poured out purely from his gracious intention. And for the most part God has not chosen the rich and powerful and famous. James is certainly not saying that God has not chosen any who are rich, but he is making the point that among those God has chosen are the poor.

He calls them poor only by worldly standards, the standards by which worldly favoritism is shown. Because the fact is these whom God has chosen are rich in what matters most. They are rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom of God. Stop and think for just a moment, you followers of Jesus Christ. The world may not recognize you as rich. Ask the world who are the richest people and it will tell you Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and Bill Gates. But the truth is that everyone who is in the kingdom of God possesses eternal and unfathomable riches in a currency that transcends the wealth of this world. Rich in faith is what you want to be rich in. And the richer you grow in faith, the more like Jesus you will be and the more impartiality will shine from your heart and from your life because you are not swayed by the faux riches of this world.

And the truly rich are not rich by their achievements. They are not rich by their attractiveness or their investments. They are rich by GRACE. They were without hope and without merit. But God by his grace made them rich. God informed the children of Israel of the reason he chose them. He did not want them to be puffed up or think that they were special or think that God had showed them favor because of them. So he spoke to them these words from Deuteronomy 7 (7-8): "It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all the peoples, but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath he swore to your fathers." In the New Testament Paul makes the same point to the Corinthians. "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; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even the things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God." Favoritism grants a boast to be made in human achievement, human attractiveness, human wisdom, human power, in what humans value without God. It runs counter to the principle of grace and ends up dishonoring ones God loves and who love God.

Why did God save you? Why did God choose you? Did you have anything to offer God? Were you attractive to him? If he has saved you, it is because of an oath, a covenant he made with Christ his son before the foundation of the world. He determined then to save not those who deserved it or who had something to offer him, but he determined to save some from among all those who do not deserve it. It is by grace. And if you have been saved by this amazing grace, how could you then live in this world judging on the basis of human merit that certain ones are worthy while others are not? No! Those who have received grace should extend it, or else have we really received it? Favoritism is incompatible with the grace of God.

D. James points to yet another evil feature of partiality. He writes, "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 is not suggesting that Christians show reverse-favoritism to the rich and be unkind to them. He is pointing out a reason not to be partial toward them. In being respecters of persons, we show preference to people not only on the basis of unrighteous appeal but also in spite of their hostility. They are hostile to fellow-believers and they blaspheme the name of Jesus. But those who show partiality seem to be blind to this. They are so attracted by the thought that they can get some worldly good from the advantaged that they overlook the harm they are doing to Christians and the disrespect they have for Christ himself. Do not be mesmerized by the world to show it favoritism. The world as the world will never welcome Christ. Worldliness is at odds with the Lord.

E. Finally James declares a fifth evil feature of showing favoritism. It breaks God's royal law. He says so down in verses 8 and 9. I am not going into greater depth here other than to say that favoritism refuses to love your neighbor as yourself. Those who show partiality are therefore transgressors. Breaking the law of God, they are sinners. WE are sinners. We have all transgressed the law of God in this way. It is an evil thing to break the law of God. But we do it all the time and we hardly take thought of it. We are so used to sinning against God that we downplay the wickedness of it. But no. To break God's law is to incur his judgment. It is to excite the righteous wrath of God. This is what sin does within the perfect, pure, and holy God.

And as all have sinned and fall short of his glory, all deserve the righteous judgment of God. I deserve it. You deserve it. The world deserves it. And judgment will fall. The Lord is angry with the unrighteous every day.

But the fact is there is one who bears the fair name Jesus. Jesus means "Yahweh the eternal covenant-making God saves." Jesus came to earth as the God man to save sinners from the righteous wrath of God. He did so by living without sin. Not merely was he generally impartial, He never showed partiality. He did not love people on the basis of their worldly acclaim. As the sinless lamb, then, he suffered the penalty earned not by him but by the sinners for whom he died. He payed our fine, took our blame, our guilt, our transgressions. He satisfied God's righteous demand. He paid our debt. Those who trust in him are debt-free. Those who do not repent of their and trust in Jesus are not partakers in his payment. They still owe the debt. And it will be paid for all eternity without ever being paid up.

We are all law-breakers. We are either forgiven or we still owe the debt. What about you? If you have not bowed yourself to Jesus, he is calling you today to bring all your sins to him now and turn from living for yourself and seeking the world and your place in this world and trust in his fine-payment on the cross that you might be forgiven.

And for all of us, let us turn away from the transgression of favoritism. Let us rather seek to emulate the impartiality of the glorious God we worship. Let us seek first his kingdom and his righteousness by loving not the world and by not valuing people on the basis of worldly standards.

Conclusion

We serve an incredible and awesome God. It is life to our souls to worship him and stand in awe of his beauty. It is also a great blessing as his children that we get to become like him. This morning as we praise God for his impartiality, let us also in view of the beauty of it and strive with all diligence by the power of the Spirit to show our glorious God to those all around us by cultivating hearts and lives which show no partiality as we hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.