

The Problem of Partiality

James 2:1-4
ABC 5/12/19

Four score & 7 years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, & dedicated to the proposition that all men are equal. With those words, Abraham Lincoln changed the course of history. Fast-forward to a sweltering August day in 1963, a quarter-million people gathered in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC. Here they heard 34-year-old, Martin Luther King, Jr. His words struck home. Something inside the nation stirred when he said, *I have a dream that my 4 children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.* The words of King & Lincoln hearken back to this statement from the Declaration of Independence: *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, & the pursuit of Happiness... All men are created equal.*

That's a true statement. The Bible teaches us 4 crucial facts we must never forget:

1. All people are equally created in God's image (Gen 1:26-27).
2. All are loved by God (Jn 3:16).
3. All are stained by sin & are thus sinners (Rom 3:23).
4. All are able to be redeemed (Rev 22:17).

Those 4 facts form the basis of the doctrine of Christian equality. All people, regardless of their background, are significant, loved, fallen, & redeemable! That's what Acts 10:34 means when it says God is **no respecter of persons**. He doesn't play favorites. Yet there's a sense in which all men are not created equal. That's an equally true statement. We don't all have the same background, culture, language, IQ, economic conditions, abilities, & opportunities. There are vast differences across the spectrum of humanity & within Christ's church. So which is it? Are all men created equal or are they not created equal? Before God, we're all created equal. On earth, we aren't all created equal. In the church, we are all one in Christ, but there are many differences among us. The early church wrestled with these differences. The NT bears witness to many divisions among believers. Jews & Gentiles. Greeks & non-Greeks. Rich & poor. Slave & free. Male & female. Young & old. Vegetarians & meat-eaters. Holiday-keepers & non-keepers. Wine drinkers & abstainers. James

shines a light on the problem of partiality by focusing on this & forcing us to face our hidden tendency to discriminate inside the church of Jesus Christ. **Js 1:26-2:7** PRAY

We often judge people by externals. Not just financially, but spiritually, emotionally, & practically. To apply in context (1:27), do you pay attention to & want to talk to a widow or single mom or lonely elderly person or a teenager wearing clothing you don't approve of? When James wrote this letter, he didn't give numbers for vss & chpts. They were added more recently for convenience. I mention this because this section isn't a new topic for James. It's clearly tied to what he said at the end of chpt 1, **Pure & undefiled religion in the sight of our God & Father is this: to visit orphans & widows in their distress, & to keep oneself unstained by the world** (27). As we saw last week, keeping **unstained by the world** includes keeping ourselves from thinking like the world. So without missing a beat, James says we mustn't think like the world does in regards to what people look like & talk like & dress like. Don't judge others sinfully & choose whether or not we talk, give attention, & care for them based on externals. For some people, the word *worldliness* is limited mostly to how some people dress & how many tattoos & body piercings are allowable. But James is concerned with our attitude towards all people because of his warning about the world's stain. Nothing is more worldly than judging by outward appearances. Are you guilty of that? It's what we do according to 1 Sam 16:7 where we're told we look at outward appearances, but God looks at the heart. From cover to cover, this Book doesn't want us to *judge a book by its cover*, or to judge people by outward appearance like the Pharisees did. In Lk 18 Jesus said the Pharisees **trusted in themselves that they were righteous, & viewed others with contempt** (9). A Pharisee walks into the place of worship at the same time as an undesirable tax collector. *What's he doing here?* many wonder, not knowing his heart but making a judgment about him in their hearts. Thankfully, the tax collector is off in the corner, out of sight & out of mind, not taking the Pharisee's seat. With every eye on him, the Pharisee begins his prayer:

'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, **'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'** I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other (Lk 18:11-14).

The one who is declared righteous in God's eyes, the one who had true religion is the one written off by those who think themselves to be religious but are deceiving themselves (Js 1:26). James now says even if a guy who doesn't fit in wanders in to our church, & even if he isn't a Christian yet, he's still in need of grace just like us. Js 1:27 is saying don't let the world corrupt your thinking & distort your sight in the way you view or judge others positively or negatively based on outward appearance. God isn't impressed with or pleased by the religionists that tithe mint & herbs (1:27, Lk 11:42), while neglecting the massive concerns of God's law for love & mercy. God isn't impressed with or pleased by those who fast twice a week while devouring widows financially, making some feel they must give all they had, with nothing left to live on (Lk 21:1-5). That wasn't a command of God to give 100%, but she bankrupted herself on their rules. Jesus said she, in her poverty, gave all she had to live on. Many interpret this as the point of this story. But in the text Jesus doesn't say, *go & do likewise*, as He does in other places. What He does say is, **beware of those who ... devour widows** (20:47). Then He talks about the temple that takes all their money & says it will be torn down (21:6). Jesus wasn't angry at the widow. He was angry at religious men who took advantage of the poor & took all they had & turned God's temple into a den of robbers. Jesus had compassion & love for this widow doing what she thought was right in a corrupt system. But a religious place or people that mistreats needy people rather than being merciful to them is something our Lord hates. So James says, **My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism, partiality, or prejudice.** How you treat others based on their appearance is a big deal to Jesus, who shed His blood to wash away our partiality & prejudice.

1. The Principle 1

The grammar of vs 1 assumes prejudice, partiality, & favoritism is taking place & must be stopped. & it's important we start here as well, lest we become those who pray, *God, I thank You I'm not like the Pharisee over there.* James confronts this sin that we tolerate & often don't think is sin. We all have this tendency. When we look in the mirror of the Word, as James 1 says, we shouldn't see only the Pharisees & legalists, we should see us. In vs 1, James is addressing fellow Christians. We

know that because He calls them **brethren** & says they have faith in the **Lord Jesus Christ**. I think the term **brothers** was chosen because he writes to those who are all equally children of the same Father. James wrote to a very *partial* age, filled with prejudice & hatred based on class, ethnicity, nationality, & religious background. In the ancient world, people were routinely & permanently categorized because they were Jew or Gentile, slave or free, rich or poor, Greek or barbarian, man or woman, married or widowed, democrat or republican. A significant aspect of the work of Jesus was to break down these walls that divided people & bring forth a new race of mankind in Him (Eph 2:14-15). The unity & openness of the early church was astonishing to the ancient world. But this unity didn't come automatically. As this command from James shows, the early church had to be taught to never hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ with partiality.¹ **Personal favoritism** is simply treating people better or worse than they deserve based on sinful biases or superficial judgments or selfish reasons. It's judging by appearances, giving preferential honor to some while dishonoring others. It goes by many names: favoritism, discrimination, dishonor, partiality, pride, & prejudice. Remind you of a book? Jane Austen, author of *Pride & Prejudice*, is one of the most widely read & loved writers in English literature (at least among females). Several of her books deal with social standing & economic stability in relation to men & women & classes of people in a British culture marked by elitism. To this day, many still size each other up by what family you're from, or what area you're from, what education or accent you have, or what title you've inherited. What James is talking about isn't limited to fictional literature or to the Pharisees. It's a problem the church has had through its history.

Because the 18th-century Church of England had become so elitist & inhospitable to the common man, John Wesley had to take to preach in fields. There was no room in the established church for common people, he reluctantly founded the Methodist Church. Tragically, 100 years later Methodist William Booth noticed that the poorest & most degraded of society were never in church.

Those who were part of Broad Street congregation never forgot an electric Sunday in 1846. The Minister, the Rev Samuel Dunn, sat comfortably on his red plush throne as voices sang the evening's 4th hymn, *Rock of Ages*.²

The chapel's outer door suddenly flew open, letting in wisps of fog. In its wake came a shuffling, shabby group of men & women, wilting nervously under the stony stares of professional men &

¹ David Guzik, *Enduring Word Commentary*

² #209 in our hymnal

their well-dressed wives. Following this rag-tag group, marched “Wilful Will” Booth. To his dismay the Rev Dunn saw that Booth was actually ushering these people into the very best seats; pewholders’ seats, facing the pulpit, whose occupants gave generously to have them.

This was unprecedented! The poor, if they came to church at all, entered by another door, to be segregated on benches without backs or cushions, behind a partition which screened off the pulpit. Here they couldn’t see nor be seen.

Methodism had become respectable. This experience, followed by many more similar catastrophes, led to William & Catherine Booth’s expulsion by the Methodists & 14 years of poverty before founding the Salvation Army.³

Here are 4 common categories of partiality still very much alive & well today, even in some of us: Economics, Education, Ethnicity, & Externals. I wonder how many of us would turn away John the Baptist at the door for his ragged looks & clothes & hair that had never been cut & his breath smelled like he’s been eating nothing but locusts & honey. I wonder what type of treatment we’d give his cousin Jesus if He came in & we didn’t recognize Him because He doesn’t look like *surfer Jesus* we’re used to. Vs 1 says not to hold our faith in Jesus with personal favoritism or partiality.

Think of Jesus & these 4 areas of favoritism:

His economics – He had no place to lay His head. He had no home. He’s poor & home-less.

His education – Somewhat limited, humanly speaking. Beware that partiality goes both ways with education. Some people look down on education while others look down on a lack of education.

His ethnicity – Can anything good come from Nazareth (Jn 1:43-46)? We know His mother is Jewish but there were rumors His father wasn’t (Jn 8:48) & that He was born of fornication (41) since Joseph wasn’t His dad.

His externals – There was nothing attractive about Him physically (Is 53). His buddies are fishermen & riff-raff. He spent time with the poor, lowly, & distressed.

But if you look at vs 1 again, we’re reminded that though Jesus was lowly by choice while here on earth He is also **the Lord of glory** or **the glorious Lord**. Those who saw Him come into their synagogues may not have seen it, but Jesus as Lord was rich beyond measure as God Himself. In education, He exceeded all the rabbis, even as a boy &, as God, He is the source of all wisdom & knowledge. In ethnicity He’s the descendent of King David through His mom & through His heavenly Father He was the King of Kings. In externals, when His true nature was transfigured or unveiled, His glory & splendor was blinding. I ran across these words this week:

³J. Kent Hughes, *James*, pp 88-89

Jesus Christ is a wonderful, glorious person. To His people He is altogether lovely. He is their Advocate, the angel of the covenant, the author & finisher of faith. He is the alpha & the omega, the Beloved, the shepherd & bishop of souls, the bread of life, the bridegroom, the bright & morning star, the brightness of the Father's glory, & the express image of His person.

He is their Creator, captain, counselor, covenant, cornerstone, & chiefest among ten thousand. He is to them as the Dew, the door into the fold, a diadem, a day-star, a deliverer, & the desire of all nations, ranks & generations of pious men. (S)

In their eyes he is the Elect Emmanuel, the everlasting Father, & eternal life. He is a Fountain of living waters to thirsty souls, of joy to troubled ones, of life to dying ones. He is the foundation on which his people, with safety, build their hopes of heaven. He is the father of eternity, the first & the last, the first fruits, the first-born among many brothers, & the first begotten from the dead. (S)

To His chosen he is as the most fine Gold, a guide, a governor, a glorious Lord, God, the true God over all, God blessed forever. He is Head of the church, the help, the hope, the husband, the heritage, the habitation of his people. He is the horn of their salvation & rides upon the heavens. He is the Jehovah of armies, the Inheritance, Judge & King of His people. He is their Light, their life, their leader, their law-giver, their atoning lamb, the lily of the valley, the lion of the tribe of Judah. (S)

He is the Man Christ Jesus, the master, the mediator, the minister of the true sanctuary which the Lord pitched, & not man. He is the mighty God of Isaiah, the morning-star of John, the Michael of Daniel, the Melchizedek of David & Paul, & the Messiah of all the prophets. He is the Only-begotten of the Father – full of grace & truth. He is both the root & the off-spring of David. He is the Peace, the prince, the priest, the prophet, the purified, the potentate, the propitiation, the physician, the power of God, the passover of all saints. (S)

He is the Rock, the refuge, the ruler, the ransom, the refiner, the redeemer, the righteousness & the resurrection of all humble souls. He is the rose of Sharon. He is the Seed of the woman, the seed of Abraham, the seed of David, the Son of God, the son of man, the strength, the shield, the surety, the shepherd, the Shiloh, the sacrifice, the sanctuary, the salvation, the sanctification, & the sun of righteousness of all believers.

He is that holy thing that was born of Mary. He is the Truth, the treasure, the teacher, the temple, & the tree of life. He is the Way, the well of salvation, the word of God, the wisdom of God, the faithful witness, the wonderful. (S)

His person is one, but His natures are two. He is both human & divine, finite & infinite, created & uncreated. He was before Abraham, though not born until long after Abraham. He was dead, & is alive forevermore. He has the arm of a God, & the heart of a brother. None loves like Him, none pities like Him, none saves like Him. It is no marvel the children love Him, the saints praise Him, the martyrs die for Him, the sorrowing long for Him, the humble trust in Him, the penitent pour out their tears before Him, & the believing lay fast hold of Him. His frown shakes the heavens, His smile gives life, His presence converts dungeons into palaces, His blood cleanses from all sin, His righteousness is the white robe of the redeemed. (S)

If you would be safe, or wise, or holy, or happy, or useful, or strong, or victorious, look to Him! Look to no one else! Walk in Him, abide in Him, glory in Him, & count as loss all things besides Him. Look to that wonderful, glorious Jesus Christ!⁴

⁴ William Plumer, *The Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol 5, pp 22-23

Jesus was & is the Lord of glory. But if He'd acted on the basis of who was important, either Himself or others, He certainly wouldn't have come to earth to die for us. What He did do was lay His glorious prerogatives aside so He might identify with & save people like you & me, sinners with no innate importance whatever.⁵ Dt 10:17-18 says, **For the LORD your God is the God of gods & the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, & the awesome God who does not show partiality nor take a bribe. He executes justice for the orphan & the widow.** Our God isn't only great, mighty, & awesome, but He stoops down to visit orphans & widows impartially in their distress. How can we think we should do differently from Him? JB Phillips paraphrases vs 1 with these words: *Don't ever attempt, my brothers, to combine snobbery with faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ!* The principle is clear but James now gives us...

2. The Illustration 2-3

Instead of looking at the incomparable glory of the Lord, they're Christians staring at the splendor of gold rings & fine clothes. Instead of honoring Jesus, they're paying respect to a rich man & despising a poor one. They're showing favoritism based on appearance & status. Justice is portrayed as a blindfolded lady who holds scales in her hand. The blindfold prevents her from seeing anyone so she's able to serve the cause of justice impartially. Within the context of the Christian faith, practicing discrimination is the exact opposite. The language of vs 4 has terms for judging & the courtroom. It seems James is pulling this in because even the secular courts don't do this, so why should the church? No just & decent judge would let you get away with that in a court of law, why do you think God will let you get away with it? He won't (8-10). The spiritual judging taking place, isn't a fair trial. Jewish law demanded that both parties either sit at the same level or stand. It also demanded that if one were rich he either dress the poorer man as he dressed, or dress himself in shabby clothes like the poorer man. If the church responded differently to the economic differences between these 2 guys, they are guilty of favoritism. The church that claims the glorious Jesus Christ as its Lord would have become an unjust, partial judge!⁶ This is the scene

⁵ *Exposition of James*, p 47

⁶ *New Bible Commentary*

here: A visitor enters the **assembly** (literally, **synagogue**). Synagogues had rows of benches or seats around the interior walls, & then a seating area in the middle on the floor. The gospels mention the Pharisees loved the most important seats, probably either closest seats or maybe even those on the platform where the Torah was read. Their pride produced prejudice of externals.

Our Daily Bread tells the story about a plainly dressed man who entered a church in the Netherlands & took a seat near the front. A few minutes later a woman walked down the aisle, saw the stranger in the place she always sat, & curtly asked him to leave. He quietly got up & moved. When the meeting was over, a friend of the woman asked her if she knew the man she had ordered out of her seat. *No*, she replied. Her friend then informed her, *The man you ordered out of your seat was King Oscar of Sweden! He is here visiting the Queen.*⁷

Many Churches not all that long ago had people who would pay large amounts of money to secure themselves seats. They bought a pew or box that was theirs, some that had a key & lock only they could open to make sure no one sat in their seat. Visitors or people who couldn't pay for their own pew or who wouldn't, had to sit in the free area. Some of you are secretly thinking that might not be such a bad idea! You wouldn't mind having your name on a pew & some of you wouldn't mind being able to close the door off to your aisle! Our partiality today may be more subtle & inward, but it's there. As vs 2 begins, the text says shiny-clothes man comes in with gold rings. It's literally *gold-finger*, meaning multiple gold rings on multiple fingers. In that society, your rings on your left hand were what impressed people. There were places in the Roman empire where you could rent gold rings for special occasions to impress others. It's like the celebrity award shows where the rich & famous are decked out in borrowed jewelry & designer clothes & people fawn over them & roll out the red carpet for them. Sadly, James says Christian churches can do much the same. The 1st guy who just walked in looks like he's come directly from the Academy Awards. The 2nd guy who comes in looks the exact opposite in every way. He's poor & wearing **dirty clothes** (same word as 1:21 for **filthiness**) probably because they're the only clothes he has. Which guy would you be inclined to pay attention to & talk to after the service? Some of you don't talk to any visitors, but don't think you're off the hook! If you don't talk to anyone that's not right either & can be pride &

⁷ *Our Daily Bread*, 12/3/93

partiality in a different way. This example isn't really about ushering or what seat someone else gives others & it's not just about rich vs poor.

3. The Indictment That's just one example James gives to get to the point of vs 4: **have you not made distinctions among yourselves, & become judges with evil motives/thoughts?** & the implied answer is, *Yes, you have!* Whether the segregation is physical or mental, it's not right. That's the problem. Vs 3 doesn't say it's wrong to show attention to & make someone feel welcome & special, but the problem is the preferential treatment based on what's valuable in the world's eyes while prejudicially ignoring others who have equal, if not greater, value in God's eyes (5). They've allowed themselves to be led by the standards of the world as to what is worthy & worthwhile rather than putting the Lord's glory 1st. It shouldn't matter in the church whether you're *ordinary Joe* or *Senator Joe* or *sloppy Joe*, *Joe Millionaire*, or *Joe the Plumber*. If we're giving VIP treatment, let's remember that all who Christ shed His blood for are very important people. Let's remember that every unbeliever who isn't yet redeemed by faith in Christ's death & resurrection is a very important person to show Christ's love to. Nothing wrong with smiling & welcoming & being friendly to visitors (in fact some of you should do that instead of just rushing to make sure no one's taken your seat). But we should equally, if not especially, be looking out to those who may not fit in or who we don't really see talk with others, or who may be lonely, or who may be in need of a kind word, or smile, or an encouragement. The church is not a club or a clique. It's a collection of people who are different on the outside, but who have the same faith in the same Lord on the inside (1). A church is a group that can be close but not so close that it doesn't extend outward to include others who are different, who aren't in the inner circle. Diversity with unity can be one of the most special things about a church. Republicans & Democrats can worship & fellowship together. I don't want to be in a church where everyone looks the same, has the same thoughts, talks & walks the same, has the same Bible version, or all have the same convictions about public school, homeschool, charter school, & all the subcultures within those. I don't want to ever hear that this church is being segregated in any way. We don't want the old guard looking down on the younger group, or young people dishonoring the older generation, or judging others who have different

convictions. It's good to have personal convictions about things. But don't be a crusader & don't judge others who differ from you. Many church splits aren't over doctrinal statements, but simple disobedience to J's 2:4. May Christ keep us in unity in Him.

I know our community isn't the most ethnically diverse, but I hope our church would be equally welcoming to African Americans, Central Americans, Asians, Middle Easterners, or even the various Caucasian subcultures & economic spectrums. Probably none of us in this room have ever verbally turned someone away from church, but have we done so non-verbally? AW Tozer said:

It is in the realm of religion that contempt finds its most fruitful soil & flourishes most luxuriantly. It is seen in the cold disdain with which the respectable church woman regards the worldly sister & in the scorn heaped upon the fallen woman by the legally married wife. The sober deacon may find it hard to conceal his contempt for the neighbor who drinks. The evangelical may castigate the liberal in a manner that leaves slight doubt that he feels himself above him in every way. Religion that is not purified by penitence, humility, & love will lead to a feeling of contempt for the irreligious & the morally degraded. & since contempt implies a judgment of no worth made against a human brother, the contemptuous man comes under the displeasure of God ... We should hate sin in ourselves & in all men, but we should never undervalue the man in whom the sin is found.⁸

He also wrote, *We are to be a church of the living God, & not a gathering of the influential & the big shots. The big shots can come if they get on their knees—a big shot on his knees isn't any taller than anyone.*⁹ Rom 12:9-16 tells us,

Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor (there's nothing wrong with preference, as long as it's not just to one above the others but is instead to one another, to all) ... **contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality ... Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly.**

This is the Word of our **glorious Lord Jesus Christ**. How are we doing? The Greek word for **favoritism** or **partiality** literally means to lift up the face of another with the idea of judging by appearance & on that basis giving special favor & respect. It has to do with judging or evaluating on a superficial level, without consideration of a person's true merits. In other words, you check out another person, & then form an opinion based on what you see. We all do this & we live in a society that routinely judges people according to their age, size, race, gender, physical attractiveness, clothing, education, status, intelligence, bank account, & politics, just to name a few. Like it or not,

⁸ *Of God & Men*, pp 96-97

⁹ *The Counselor*, p 11

everybody is not equally intelligent, good looking, & wealthy. Almost without thinking, we size people up & judge them accordingly. But we ought not, dare not, assign lower & higher values to people based on what we see. In the church of Jesus Christ, it is Jesus, seated at the right hand of the Father, who occupies the best seat in the house. & the rest of us sit shoulder-to-shoulder, side-by-side on that perfectly level ground at the foot of the cross.

A pastor tells the story of the old, dignified deacon who served in a large, downtown church in the 1960's. One Sunday, when the church was packed, a long-haired, bell-bottomed, barefoot hippie walked into the service. Finding nowhere to sit, the hippie sauntered down the center aisle before an usher could stop him. In fact, he walked to the front of the sanctuary & sat cross-legged on the floor before the pulpit as the pastor preached. Then, the dignified, senior deacon serving as Head Usher that day sprang into action & strode to the front of the church. The entire congregation tensed as they awaited the inevitable confrontation between this impeccably dressed pillar of the church & the flower child hippie. Folks were confident the kid would be shown the back door in a hurry. You can imagine their surprise when the deacon came alongside the hippie & sat down, cross-legged, in his three-piece suit, next to the unexpected visitor for the rest of the service. There was not a dry eye in the house. & the pastor of the church smiled because he realized that day that Jesus, & Jesus alone, had the best seat in that house.¹⁰

There's no sin in being rich. There's no sin in being poor. But there is sin when people begin to make distinctions between people from evil motives based upon superficial, worldly criteria that has no biblical basis. What does Mk 10:45 say? **The Son of man did not come to be served but to serve & give his life a ransom for many.** Let me ask you a question. When Christ met people during His time here on earth, was He more concerned for them or Him? For them. When He met people did He say, *How can they serve Me?* Or did he say, *How can I serve them?* If we'd look on people as Jesus looked on people we won't be guilty of showing favoritism. Let us not lose sight of what it is to be a follower of Jesus. It means we're committed to walking in the footsteps of Jesus & becoming more like Him. That means we'll want to do what's in the best interest of those God brings across our path, no matter how it might impact our lives. & if we respond as He'd respond, it testifies that our faith is genuine.

¹⁰ David Hughes, *RevExp Journal* 97:2, pp 225-27