

When Favoritism Becomes Discrimination

“But if you show partiality, you commit sin...” James 2:9

*James 2:1-10, 14-17
Rev. Todd B. Freeman
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa
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One of the primary purposes I have for today's sermon is that you *don't* learn anything that you don't already know. I know that sounds strange, and it's certainly a departure from my usual approach to preaching.

But today is different, primarily because the book of James is different. For James is not filled with hard to understand stories or sayings whose meaning lies deep within its historical and theological context. Rather, it's simple truisms are blunt and go directly to the point.

James loves to state the obvious. In fact, if the entire Bible were like the book of James, you really wouldn't need preachers. For who needs a preacher merely to remind you of what you already know? Therein lies the catch. Knowing something and doing something are two very different things, and that's the whole point that James is trying to make.

In other words, **the problem for most of us is not knowing what to do, it's doing what we know.**

In last week's sermon, entitled *Hearers and Doers*, we began reflecting upon what I believe is one of the most important verses in the Bible: "**Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves**" (v. 22). For when we are truly honest with ourselves, we most often face the reality that after all that is said and done, more is often said than done. (I love that old line.)

Our approach to scripture, therefore, must be more than some kind of intellectual problem and puzzle to try and solve. William Willimon, retired Chaplain at Duke University, once stated in a sermon, "We deceive ourselves into thinking that we have done the faith when we have merely listened, reflected, pondered, agreed. What we profess is not as important as what we are able to perform. Beliefs must be embodied, enacted in order to be real."

To frame this using fancy religious terminology: **orthodoxy (which literally means 'right thinking') is not as important as orthopraxis (right doing).**

The book of James does an excellent job of moving us to the "Now what?" part of being a person of faith. Today's Epistle Lesson, from the second

chapter of James, wastes no time in providing an example of how we can be doers and not merely hearers of the word.

The always-blunt James basically asks: **How can you hold faith in Jesus Christ and behave in a way that discriminates against other people?** James uses a simple and concrete illustration of showing favor and giving special attention to a rich person who enters an assembly of some kind, while the opposite treatment is exhibited to a poor person.

This is so straightforward, and so timeless and universal, that it basically needs no explanation at all. The point is crystal clear! **Any practice that favors the rich over the poor is unacceptable and inconsistent with the Christian faith.**

It becomes evident that even 2000 years ago there was a deep concern that discrimination and social snobbery was infiltrating the church. At one level then, when it comes to applying this to ourselves, **we are meant to reflect upon our attitudes and behavior toward people who come to visit this church.**

If we dig a little deeper we will find a layer beyond our comfortable moral outrage at such blatant discrimination. It is important to do so, because otherwise this passage could tend to simply comfort us by talking about 'them', those *other* people who discriminate, and not us. Perhaps you've heard another old line that when we point a finger at others, there are three more fingers pointed back at ourselves. (Try that.)

It is James' intention that we courageously ask ourselves: **Are we ever guilty of showing favoritism – of treating some people better than others?** That includes not only the strangers in our midst, but each other as well.

If we spend a bit more time in reflection, we can probably figure out those whom we are more prone to show favoritism and differential treatment toward. And likewise, those folks for whom we tend not to treat equally well.

While James uses the difference between rich and poor, a **socio-economic distinction**, there are other categories that we might consider as leading to discrimination include, in part:

- educational differences,
- differing theological or political perspectives,
- generational differences,
- differences in marital status,
- different sexual orientations and gender identities,
- those of different ethnic and language backgrounds and races,
- differences in physical appearance,
- and as we discussed a couple of weeks ago, even those with varying degrees of mental illness.

The list of distinctions could go on and on.

Perhaps it's just in our biological makeup as well as our cultural heritage to discriminate. Why is that? **James hints at a likely motivation for showing**

favoritism. We demonstrate partiality toward some in order to be shown favor in return.

Returning to his example, it's obvious how it may be easier, on a surface level, to get more favor shown to us in return by the rich than by the poor. That, ultimately, is a very shallow approach to human interaction, is it not?

Verses 8-13 take the author's analysis one step further; favoritism is also sinful. James 2:9 strongly proclaims, **"If you show partiality, you commit sin."** But why is that? James gives an answer: **To behave with partiality, showing favor to some people and not to others, is to violate Jesus' command to love one's neighbor.** It's so important that James calls it the "royal law". There are no human beings, pastors included, who are completely innocent when it comes to playing favorites.

On the flip side of all of this, however, it may help to reflect upon those times when you have been the victim of someone else showing favoritism toward another and not treating you equally.

So the real problem facing the Christian community of faith, then and now, is not so much showing honor to some people, but rather not honoring *all* people. This is especially where the rubber hits the road when persons, or congregations, fancy themselves as being 'inclusive.' **For in reality, no one, no congregation, is ever as inclusive as they think they are or claim to be.**

For instance, just because we include folks who others exclude doesn't mean we are necessarily all-inclusive in and of itself. **But hey, here at College Hill we at least try hard to be inclusive.** For there are way too many congregations, including within our own denomination, who don't even pretend to be inclusive of all people. That, according to James, is an indictment against the church.

So yes, the Christian faith, in its purest form, is incompatible with favoritism. But that's not all. It is also incompatible with indifference – not caring enough to help those in need. This discussion begins in v. 14 and deserves another reading.

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

In the author's view, the neglect of doing good works for others arises because of our indifference to human need. The principle revealed here is that **faith and works cannot be divorced from each other.** The argument is that our faith beliefs, by themselves, do not secure the well-being of those who are in need. **Concrete acts of kindness are needed, rather than pious benedictions.** Or as one pastor writes, "The person in need does not need evidence of our faith, but of our works."

The straightforward, even abrasive question from today's text is this: **Will you and I, will we, act or not?**

As you encounter people this week, I encourage you to observe your patterns of showing favoritism - especially to those who you're not partial to. And observe your response to people who are in need of love and compassion.

And remember, there's no problem with treating a friend or someone else with respect and honor, we just need to treat the stranger, or those who don't think or act or look or believe the same way we do, with equal respect and honor. Why? Because **we are all children of God, loved equally by God, and we are called to love one another in return.**

Granted, that's not always easy. We won't always accomplish that. But again, **that's the ideal and goal that we, as Christians and followers of Jesus, must strive to meet – with God's help.**

Since we are called to demonstrate our faith in and through our actions, then may they not be ones of discrimination or indifference. And may we always be dedicated (as has been the long tradition of this congregation) to inclusiveness, genuine hospitality, and extending equal respect and treatment to all.

Amen.