

James 2:1 My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. 2 Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. 3 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," 4 have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?...

8 If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. 9 But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. 10 For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. 11 For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

YOU ALWAYS WERE HIS FAVORITE!

Dear Friends in Christ,

I. The Ugliness of Favoritism

It was a family gathering. One of the two times of life when families still find a way to get together. Not a wedding, it was a funeral.

Five women were remembering the life of their mother. These five were sisters. They were close. No family squabbles. As to the deceased, she had reached old age. Her death had not been tragic nor unexpected. All, sisters and mother, were Christians. So while they mourned her passing, they remembered God's blessing through their mother, and their future reunion.

There was, however, one fly in the ointment. One of the daughter's had lived under a cloud of guilt for decades. Since this was one of the few times that they would be together, she knew she had to come clean. So she said, "Dear Sisters, I need to make an apology. I am sorry that I was always Mother's favorite. You were always nice to me, but I am sure it was difficult to put up with me for all those years."

She had a point. A family is an ugly place for favoritism. It leads to resentment and pride growing on opposite sides of the favoritism fence. There is bad mouthing and in-fighting. When favoritism lives in the house, the house is no longer a home. It's just a building where related people live under one roof. The harvest of favoritism endures a lifetime: "I haven't talked to my brother since 1989."

"My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, do not show favoritism." At this point in chapter 2, James kind of reads like the second half of a *Dear Abby* column. James, one of Jesus' brothers, addresses an issue, a big issue, among a group of Christians. But we only hear his apostolic advice; we don't know the juicy details. So we don't really know what this favoritism looked like. Was it personalities that despised each other? Was it different races who accused each other? Was it the poor versus the rich? Perhaps. We really don't know. And maybe that is good. Because favoritism covers all of the above: class warfare, racism, popularity contests, cliques, all of it.

What James does in verse 2, kind of the *Dear Abby* reply to the problem, is to give us a hypothetical situation. We don't know if this happened, but James could well imagine it happening in their church.

Two people come to church on a given Sunday. One is wealthy and influential. Got the Rolex on the wrist, expensive jewelry round the neck, clothing that cost more than the cars some of us drive—the

ushers ask, “Sir, Ma’am, where would you like to sit?” But before the guest can answer, a member listening over his shoulder says, “Please, take this seat, won’t you? From here you don’t get the glare of the windows or a draft from the AC. Beautiful seat. Best in the house, just for you.” While the ushers tend to this VIP, a dejected looking straggler who, from the smell of it, hasn’t had a shower in a while, walks in and is about to squeeze into a pew, shoulder-to-shoulder with a member. Fortunately, the one unoccupied usher notices just in time, catching the straggler by the elbow, says, “It’s pretty crowded this morning. There’s an open folding chair over in the corner. You’ll have plenty of room there.”

“Have you not discriminated... with evil thoughts?” “What evil? We’re just being pragmatic. Some people, well... they... well... some people just fit in better around here. I’m sure you understand.” Yes, God understands exactly. That’s why he said, **“You have become judges with evil thoughts.”** The corrupt judge looking for the backhander – that’s you playing favorites.

“But a wealthy person could really help this church’s financial outlook. Besides they both have a seat. They both have a bulletin. They both can hear the sermon and the organ. This one is used to luxury box seats, that one bleachers. Where’s the problem, what is ‘evil’ here?”

There are places in life where we can favor some people more than others, *and* there are points in life where we owe everyone exactly the same. Perhaps it can be helpful to look at a family. In your extended family there are some people you get on with better than others. And you can pick and choose which of your nieces or nephews, aunts or uncles, you will spend more time with. There is no fault in that. We all get along with some people better than others. But a parent’s relationship to his or her children is different. A good parent does not show favoritism. And there is a reason: every parent has the same responsibility to each child. The same love and discipline, privileges and teaching are due to all equally. Favoritism is treating people differently when we owe all exactly the same thing.

Can people expect to be treated differently in this congregation because of who they are? Can the amount of money you spend on your clothing affect how the ushers greet you? Or does how much money you put in the offering plate affect how quick the pastor comes to visit when you are in the hospital? May it never be so.

To be honest, I have seen little to none of this in this family of believers. But we are not just talking about favoritism in the church. We are talking about all of life. Out there you can call it racism, being bigoted, or having any of a multitude of “phobias”. Those are all different strains of favoritism. Some people like to throw those accusations around freely. But let it never be a justified accusation.

And yet it bears our asking ourselves if we practice favoritism. Any whiff of favoritism among Christians distorts who God is. Like it or not, as a Christian, you are watched. As soon as you act with favoritism, or do something that can be construed as racism, or come across as hateful—fairly or unfairly, people attribute that to our God. Whatever you may think about him, Mahatma Gandhi once said, “I would have become a follower of Christ, except for all the Christians.” Which may or may not have been true, but it points out a fact, that when we act cliquish, play favorites, cop attitudes, display any kind of bigotry, people imagine our God to be that sort of God.

At this moment in time in our culture, it is regarded as the unforgiveable sin. But here is the thing about fashionably unforgiveable sins: it is unthinkable to admit that one has favoritism (or racism or a phobia) in the heart. But the reality is that nearly every single person in this world has these tendencies in one way or another. Anyone who can examine their own hearts knows that the seeds of favoritism are right here, just waiting for the right amount of rain and sunshine to germinate and sprout, and left untended, to overrun the entire garden.

And so James’ warning in verse 9 should be heeded by all: **“If you show favoritism, you sin and**

are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' also said, 'Do not murder.' If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker."

Favoritism might seem only slightly worse than eating your peas with a knife, not much worse than bad manners. But did you hear God's Word? James brings out big sins of adultery and murder, and he says, ***"Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it."*** God's law calls for integrity. You can't tell the police officer: "Was I doing twenty over the limit? But my registration is good. I have insurance. I used my blinkers. I obeyed most of the laws!" Traffic law doesn't work that way. Break one law and you are a law breaker. Favoritism makes you a lawbreaker as surely as murder.

We need to go back into the corners behind the basement steps of our hearts with a flashlight, and look around and sniff out the favoritism and partiality we may have. And we need to kill it, as if it were vermin nibbling at the cereal box in the pantry. It must be shown no mercy. And in sorrow we must confess that which we have already done.

II. Life Beyond Favoritism

But how can we reform ourselves? First we remember who we are. ***"Dear brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ..."*** We remember the glory of Jesus. He showed no favoritism. Though he knew Judas was a traitor, he washed Judas' feet at the Last Supper. Though the soldiers crucified him, he prayed, ***"Father, forgive them."*** Though he was not European or African, he died for us too. Though he was not middle class, he saved all income levels.

Seeing Jesus, I long to love others as indiscriminately as he loved me. How can I follow James' godly command and "Love my neighbor as myself? How do I not show favoritism?" To answer that question, we must ask, "How do I want other people to treat me?"

Well, when I walk into a church, I don't want people to treat me like a potential million-dollar donor. But I do hope people will treat me with respect. At a social gathering, I do hope that even if I am dressed more poorly than the average, that people will take me seriously. And even if I am a nobody compared to important people in the room, I do hope that people will still take the time to say "hi" and have a bit of an interest in my life. And when I walk into a store, I do want the store clerks – I know that they have work they need to get done and they are really busy – but I do hope that the won't be most interested in ringing me up as fast as possible, just to complete another sale. I am a person after all.

You know what I want? I want people to respect me, for who I am, for having come through the life I have lived, for having the hopes and dreams and disappointments and troubles I have had. I don't really like it when people brush me off as meaningless. And I don't like it when people seem super interested in me out of hopes of getting something out of me—and if I have nothing to offer that I get dropped like a hot potato. I don't want salutes and applause, I just want respect.

"Love your neighbor as yourself" comes down to that. Not favoritism, but respect. It is respect for the humanity they share, whether a billionaire or a bum, an American or an Iranian, a Christian or a Hare Krishna. All for whom Christ died, concerned for all equally.

THE REST OF THE STORY

Some of you remember Paul Harvey. He had a very popular 5 minute radio show—it ran for 30 years—called "The Rest of the Story." I can remember if we were ever in the car at 4:00pm, my father would announce that it was time to quiet down and listen.

I have a "Rest of the Story" for you today. Remember those five sisters? Once upon a time we were neighbors to one of them. After the one sister confessed to being Mother's favorite, our neighbor

piped up, “No, you weren’t, I was. I was Mother’s favorite.” And then another, “I always thought I was her favorite!” It turned out that all five daughters, each for all these years, had felt just a little bit guilty because each of them was sure that she had been Mother’s favorite. So who do you think Mom’s favorite was?

If you are going to show favoritism, if you really really want to be really really nice to somebody, to pick favorites in this church, in your family, in the world, do it like Jesus did. He lived his life, he died his death because of his favorite child: you, and you, and you, and you, and you. You always were his favorite. But you knew that, didn’t you? *“Freely you have received, freely give!”* (Mt 10:8). Amen.