

The Flaws of Favoritism

James 2:1-7

We are discovering that the book of James is all about practical Christian living. He hits us right where we live and consequently when we begin to unwrap what he teaches in his letter there are topics that make us squirm a little bit in our seats because they are close to home. Today's passage is one that after some careful evaluation may leave us somewhat uncomfortable. If it's a problem, will we admit it and if so, will we do anything about it? If we take seriously the command to be doers of the Word, then we have but one choice on the matter. Admission is one thing, application is another.

We can hear the Word or read the Word concluding that it's a nice thought, it has a nice ring to it. We might even conclude it ought to be practiced, but it doesn't apply to us. We begin to search the data base of friends and acquaintances and catalogue a few names believing that our neighbor or coworker could benefit from hearing that message. We can look around and estimate the people who need to change but never get to the point of applying the message to our own heart and life. When we finally get around to digging deeper into the issue at hand, we realize that the truth of the matter requires some change in us because we are guilty as well. If we make an honest go of it as we look into the mirror of God's Word, we must be doers of God's Word and this passage requires some doing.

As we turn to **James 2:1-7**, I am reminded of an incident back in college. To pick up a few extra bucks, I would serve as an usher for the drama club's productions. One night there was a little stir because someone had inadvertently been sold tickets to the seats the college president and his wife always sat in during the event – fifth row, right side, first two seats. If memory serves me, the President got his favored seats. I can only say that I'm glad I wasn't the one to have to settle the matter.

James confronts us with a scenario that begs the question about whether or not we demonstrate favoritism. On many occasions, we may not even be

aware that we do, while at other times there is no question that is our motive. James lays out the illustration with two extremes. As James moves along through his letter, he becomes more specific in what genuine faith looks like in practice. These verses give us pause to consider the flaws of favoritism and the first idea I would like for us to examine. Notice **verses 1-4**.

I. EXAMINING THE FLAWS OF FAVORITISM – vs. 1-4

Once again, James begins with addressing his audience as **“my brothers.”** It serves two purposes. The first is to remind us who he is writing to. We learned back in **1:1** that his audience consists of Jewish believers who had been scattered among the nations. Like him, they were followers of Christ.

The second purpose of the term is to introduce a new thought. He's changing topics and we are introduced with the nature of the issue at hand and it's a command. **“As believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism.”** That means not now and not ever.

Favoritism means to show partiality or bias, inequity, discrimination, and unfairness. Those terms have had a lot of publicity in recent years. You don't have to read very far in a newspaper or listen too long to a news program and these terms will be used multiple times.

Favoritism is giving preference to one person or group over another. Favoritism can be based on any number of conditions such as social class, wealth, clothing, actions, skill, age, education, popularity, ethnicity, religion, political views, and so on.

James is saying in **verse 1** that if you claim to be a follower of Jesus Christ, if you say you have faith in the Lord, then don't show favoritism. If you do, stop. If you don't, don't start. The problem is, if we are really honest with ourselves, to one degree or another, we all do whether we realize it or not. It's easy to do and sometimes we either don't think anything of it or we think that it's no big deal, but God's Word is clear that we are not to show

favoritism. Essentially, James is saying in **verse 1** that faith and favoritism are incompatible.

So what does James say about favoritism in these verses? First, he says our assessments are flawed.

A. Our Assessments Are Flawed – v. 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.”

Two men show up at your church at the same time. James couldn't have contrasted two more different people. He speaks first of the prosperous man.

1. The prosperous man

This guy is dressed to the nines, all decked out in the finest attire money can buy. He pulls up in his stretch limo attended by his chauffeur. His suit just happens to be the world's most expensive. It's a Stuart Hughes Diamond Edition suit costing a mere \$900,000. His dress shoes are made of 14,000 full cut round white diamonds requiring 2,000-man hours to craft. These Jason of Beverly Hills dress shoes will set you back a mere \$2 million. A Rolex adorns his wrist and his fingers dazzle with the brilliance of many bejeweled rings.

In the ancient near east, the wealthy wore jewel studded clothing made of the finest material, often silk. Some even used gold spun into thread to sew the garment together. The type of garment they wore was an announcement to others that here was someone of means and influence. Wearing a gold ring literally means gold fingered. **Roman statesman and philosopher Seneca wrote “we adorn our fingers with gold and we distribute gems over every joint”** meaning they wore rings on each finger joint. The implication is that they made every effort to make everyone aware he was wearing a gold ring. It's like a woman showing off her engagement ring. The word **“wearing”** also suggests a continuous action of wearing this apparel all the time.

Early church father Clement of Alexandria advised Christians to only wear one ring and it should depict a dove, fish, anchor or some other Christian symbol.

Standing in stark contrast to this finely adorned wealthy man is the poor man.

2. The poor man

This man drives up in a car that is better fit for the junk yard. It sputters and backfires as it pulls in, spewing clouds of exhaust as it comes to a screeching halt. There is so much rust you can't tell the original color. The tires are bald and the hinges groan. If his clothes were taken to the Salvation Army, they would be thrown out. His patches have patches. You can't even tell what decade they were made. His hair is disheveled, and he hasn't shaved in weeks. Shoes that were once in style, are laced together with frayed strings. Duct tape is wrapped around the sole and the shoe to hold it together. It's apparent they haven't had a shine this decade.

The image I have in mind is the story Jesus told about the rich man and Lazarus.

I want to make something abundantly clear. James' focus is not on either of the two individuals who have entered this assembly. That there is a stark contrast in their appearance serves to show the reader how they are viewed, how they are assessed. The focus is on the one who greets them. **How does he size them up? If you are the greeter, how would you respond?** As they come walking up to the door, we see that the assessment is flawed. We base our bias, our favoritism on appearance.

The Bible has some examples for us to learn from.

Saul had been rejected by God as king and Samuel was instructed to go to Bethlehem to anoint a new king. He was to visit the home of Jesse. All the sons were brought before Samuel one by one who looked them over. He saw the firstborn and thought to himself that this fine specimen of a man must be the Lord's anointed. He was ready to whip out the bottle of anointing oil and make it so, when God nudged Samuel and said not that one. We know from reading the account that God rejected all of them. He told Samuel that man judges, man shows favoritism based on outward appearance, but God judges based on the heart. David was brought in

from the field. The Bible says he was young and ruddy looking. He was God's chosen to be king.

Another example is found in the book of Jonah. God instructed Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach repentance. Jonah had prejudged them as ruthless savages. Their soldiers sharpened their teeth for hand-to-hand combat. They should be shown no mercy. They deserved to die. And yet when he did finally go and preach repentance that great city repented. **What would have happened to the souls of all those people had Jonah's bias against them kept him from obeying God?**

What about Peter's initial assessment of going to the home of Cornelius or Jesus if He hadn't shared with the woman at the well, or if He hadn't touched the leper, or visited the home of Zacchaeus? What if Phillip had a bias toward the Ethiopian eunuch?

How many people in the book of Acts had a bias against Paul? He wasn't on the 'guy you'd most likely have to dinner' list right after his conversion.

How often do we make an erroneous assessment based on what we see or know about them?

Their house is too big.

They live in a really small house.

Their car is too expensive.

Their car is a clunker.

Look at all those tattoos and piercings.

She gets her hair and nails done every week and yet can't afford to buy groceries.

Why did they wear that to church?

That person didn't graduate from High school.

He was on drugs or was an alcoholic.

She had an abortion.

That person is divorced.

He spent time in jail.

One counselor workshop at camp I well remember a question one of the new guy counselors asked. Remember, this was back in the late '70's when longer hair was the style for guys. Keep in mind this is Fairview we're talking about, so there weren't a lot of options. But here's this guy who had relatively short hair asking if there was a barber in town where he could get a haircut. I'm ashamed to

admit my own bias about him. Man was this guy square or what? Several of us guys joked about it. Turns out he was a really great guy. I have to laugh at the irony and wonder about God's sense of humor, because here I am bald as a billiard ball.

How often do I make a wrong assessment? Because our assessments are flawed our actions are flawed.

B. Our Actions Are Flawed – v. 3

Understand that in those days Christians met in the Jewish synagogues. Before there was widespread persecution of Christians even by the Jews, many still attended the synagogue. The term **"meeting"** in **verse 2** is translated synagogue. While they did have benches for people to sit on, those were generally reserved for certain people. In Matthew 23 Jesus condemned the Pharisees for wanting the seats of honor in the synagogue. The rest either sat on the ground or stood up around the room. As Christians fell out of favor with the Jews, their meetings moved to homes.

We jump to conclusions and act based on erroneous assessments. The person greeting them acted differently to both men. The rich man was shown preferential treatment. Here's a good seat for you right up front. Make yourself comfortable. Do you need anything? We fall over ourselves treating this person with all kinds of favor. He is given special attention solely based on appearance.

In contrast here is the poor man. He is ushered in to place of obscurity, told to stand by some wall out of the way or told to sit down at the feet of the usher. It was an act of humiliation.

Years ago I had a conversation with someone from another church who told me about a homeless man who attended the evening service from time to time. He would come in and sit in the last pew sitting alone. He sat alone. His clothes were soiled and I don't just mean that they were dirty from days on end of wear without laundering. If he couldn't find a restroom he would well, soil his clothes. As soon as he left the church, the janitor would rush to get a bottle of cleaner and sanitize the pew where he sat.

If I were to make an honest assessment of my past I'm sure I could come up many with times where my actions were also flawed.

It could be in avoiding contact with someone by not choosing to talk with them.

It could be in not offering to shake their hand to avoid catching whatever it was they might have, because they had something that was contagious. Unfortunately, I try to justify my actions of favoring one person over another.

If they don't act like us, smell like us, talk like us, look like us, then they are not us and our actions toward them are flawed.

If our assessments are flawed and our actions are flawed, then our attitudes are flawed.

C. Our Attitudes Are Flawed – v. 4

Actions reveal our attitudes, the motivations behind why we do what we do. James says, don't profess faith in Christ and show partiality. They are diametrically opposed. To make an assessment about someone else solely based on appearance demonstrates an air of superiority, that we have in some way made ourselves judges over others and our judgment stems from evil thoughts. The word **“thoughts”** means to form an opinion, to reason or to conclude. James says such thoughts are evil.

The Bible clearly says we are not to judge others. **Matthew 7:1-2**

In recent years we have heard a lot about racial profiling, whether it's a police officer pulling someone over or a TSA agent manning a security point at an airport or a business owner seeing someone come into his establishment. It's solely based on the way they are dressed or the color of their skin or the accent of their voice. We make a prejudicial assessment of externals. We do it all the time and James hits it squarely on the head and says we have discriminated on appearance and our thoughts, our attitude is wicked because we have set ourselves up as judge.

To favor someone on appearance alone shows that our examination of them is flawed in our

assessments, our actions, and our attitudes. Because such motivation is evil, we are commanded not to discriminate in any way because, after all, God does not show favoritism.

James continues by explaining the flaws of favoritism in **verses 5-7**.

II. EXPLAINING THE FLAWS OF FAVORITISM – vs. 5-7

The first thing we see is God's plan.

A. God's Plan – v. 5

I Corinthians 1:26-31

We place a lot of stock in someone based on who they are, what they have, what they've done, or who they know. But it's clear that God's evaluation is much different than ours. He does not discriminate.

Acts 10:34-35 “Then Peter began to speak, ‘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.’”

Romans 2:11 “For God does not show favoritism.”

Ephesians 6:9 “And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that He who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with Him.”

Remembering that God does not show favoritism can help change our flawed assessments, actions and attitudes. Remembering that God loved the world enough to send His only Son to die for us, that He isn't willing any should perish, should change our perspective about showing favoritism. That is something all of us should be grateful for. He does not treat us as we deserve or based on merit. Without favoritism He extends to us His unending love, grace, mercy, and forgiveness.

It's wrong to show favoritism because God doesn't. We can look at a person and make a judgment that God couldn't or wouldn't save that person, that person doesn't deserve heaven for all they have

done. Yet that's what James is saying in this verse, that God chose those who are despised, marginalized and looked down on by society and He saved them and gave them a position in heaven. Their reward is no different than anyone else.

Jesus illustrated it with a story. A farmer needed some work done so he hired some men. Later on he hired more men and near the end of the day he hired still more men. At the close of the day the owner paid their wages starting with those he hired last. Every worker was paid the same wage regardless of how much or little of the day worked. Those who bore the brunt of the day's work were upset that they received the same wage as those who only worked an hour. But the Master said it was his prerogative to give all the same amount. Because God does not show favoritism, He gives the same eternal inheritance to everyone who loves Him regardless of their social status. God's plan is that even those who are poor in man's opinion will become an heir of the eternal kingdom. **So what is man's problem?** We see that in **verses 6-7**.

B. Man's Problem – vs. 6-7

I see four problems that James notes and it's all based around our evaluation of those we want to exalt, those we want to favor because of some social status they have. When it comes right down to it, those we want to show preferential treatment to are the very ones who cause us problems.

1. He mocks

“But you have insulted the poor.”

When we show favoritism to the wealthy, we insult the poor. We treat them with contempt.

We dishonor them.

We treat them shamefully.

We show them no dignity.

We snub them.

Remember Jacob? He showed up at Laban's door one day announcing that he was Rebekah's son. Instantly Laban had a flashback of all the bounty Abraham's servant lavished on the family to take Rebekah as a bride for old Uncle Abraham's son.

So he's thinking that Jacob must be loaded too, that is until Jacob said that all he had was the shirt on his back. At every turn for 20 years Laban treated Jacob shamefully. It was a way of mocking him.

2. He manipulates

“Is it not the rich who are exploiting you?”

The word **“exploit”** means to make an unethical use of someone for one's own advantage or profit, to make a profit from other's labor without giving a just return.

The rich are getting richer off the poor. They're an expendable commodity to be used until there's nothing left and then they're tossed to the curb.

Laban used Jacob for his own purposes.

The Egyptians exploited the Hebrews.

The rich don't care about the poor, they only use them for their own benefit.

The very person we show favor to is the one James says ends up exploiting and manipulating you.

3. He monopolizes

“Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court?”

He doesn't care about you or yours. He only cares about what you have that he wants, so to get it he drags you into court.

I'm reminded of Naboth in **I Kings 21**. He owned a prime piece of real estate with a beautiful vineyard right next to the king's palace. Ahab wanted it but Naboth wouldn't sell it so wicked Queen Jezebel arranged a kangaroo court. She hired rascals to say that Naboth had blasphemed God. Now neither Ahab nor Jezebel cared anything about God. All they cared about was getting property that didn't belong to them so poor Naboth paid the price. They wanted to monopolize the land and seize it by force. That's what the rich do. They want what they want, and they'll do anything to get it including take you to court knowing you can't do much to stop them. The rich took the property and possessions of the poor.

4. He maligns

“Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of Him to whom you belong?”

It’s not enough to mock, manipulate or monopolize you, they also malign the Christ you serve. They said something about the Lord that wasn’t true. James is challenging these believers by asking why they would give honor to someone who cursed the name of Christ.

So if James examines and explains the flaws of favoritism, telling us, commanding us not to judge others based on appearance, especially knowing how the rich treat the poor, what is the response of the Christian? I want to give you just three ways of eradicating the flaws of favoritism.

III. ERADICATING THE FLAWS OF FAVORITISM

A. We Need To Serve Others Willingly

Philippians 2:3-4 “Never act from motives of rivalry or personal vanity, but in humility think more of each other than you do of yourselves. None of you should think only of his own affairs, but should learn to see things from other people’s point of view.” (Phillips translation)

Think for a moment about the ministry of Jesus, He willingly served others. It didn’t matter that many would turn on Him one day, that they would reject Him, that they only followed Him for what He could do for them physically. He willingly served.

The night before His death, He took a towel and water basin and washed the feet of all the disciples, including the feet of Peter who would deny Him and the feet of Judas who would betray Him.

Jesus said that we shouldn’t just serve those who we like or who can do the same in return for us. We should serve those who can’t return the gesture. **Are we willing to serve others who are different from us?** If not, we’re showing favoritism.

B. We Need To Love Others Wholeheartedly

John 13:34-35

Jesus was once asked to give His opinion on what

the greatest commandment was. He took the 10 commandments and condensed them into two. The first four commandments He summed up by saying that we should love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. The last six commandments He summed up by saying we should love our neighbor as ourselves. In **John 13** He commands us to love one another. It’s echoed in other places as well, essentially telling us that we are to love others in the same way He loved us – without hesitation and with all our heart. When we love others in this way, we demonstrate that we are His disciples.

In his epistle John challenged us by saying that if we don’t love others, regardless of who, we don’t really know God because God is love and since God loved us demonstrated unequivocally when He sent Christ, His only Son, to die for us, we are then to love others. When we love others in that same sacrificial way, we demonstrate there is no favoritism in us toward others. God’s love and sacrifice was not just for some, but for all. We need to love others wholeheartedly.

C. We Need To Give To Others Wholly

II Corinthians 9:6-7
Galatians 6:10
Matthew 25:31-40

Last week we considered that a mark of true faith is evidenced by caring for the needs of orphans and widows. It clear from this passage that it extends to those who may be considered the outcasts of society. When we give wholly to others it’s a way of demonstrating that we are not showing favoritism toward any one particular group. If we are being a doer of the Word and not just a hearer, we won’t show partiality. Serving, loving and giving are three ways to eradicate the flaws of favoritism.

Walvoord and Zuck write “One who is properly related to the Bible will be properly related to his brother. James just made it clear that true religion finds an outlet in service, a service which demands that a believer learn to accept others without prejudice and to assist others without presumption.” We should do no less if we have genuine faith.