

FAVORITISM IS FAITHLESS

James 2:1-9

My brothers, do not show favoritism as you hold on to the faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. ² For example, a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and a poor man dressed in dirty clothes also comes in. ³ If you look with favor on the man wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Sit here in a good place,' and yet you say to the poor man, 'Stand over there,' or, 'Sit here on the floor by my footstool,' ⁴ haven't you discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? ⁵ Listen, my dear brothers: Didn't God choose the poor in this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that He has promised to those who love Him? ⁶ Yet you dishonored that poor man. Don't the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts? ⁷ Don't they blaspheme the noble name that was pronounced over you at your baptism? ⁸ Indeed, if you keep the royal law prescribed in the Scripture, Love your neighbor as yourself, you are doing well. ⁹ But if you show favoritism, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

INTRODUCTION

When a young Bostonian was being considered by a Chicago bank for employment, the bank contacted a top Boston investment firm for a letter of recommendation. This firm cited the young man's glowing pedigree. He had numerous relations among the Boston Brahmin, the families who formed Boston's traditional upper-class and were mostly descended from the early settlers of the Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay colonies. Therefore, the Boston firm gave its recommendation for the young man without hesitation. Several days later, the Chicago bank sent a note saying the information supplied was altogether inadequate. It read: "We are not contemplating using the young man for breeding purposes. Just for work."

In the non-Christian world, worth is often based on appearance, education, fame, job status, influential friends or relatives, and, of course, money and possessions. The Living Bible paraphrase of **I Corinthians 12:13, 27** defines our worth as Christians: "Each of us is a part of the one body of Christ. Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But the Holy Spirit has fitted us all together into one body. We have been baptized into Christ's body by the one Spirit, and have all been given that same Holy Spirit. ²⁷ Now here is what I am trying to say: All of you together are the one body of Christ, and each one of you is a separate and necessary part of it." Today's sermon explores the value system that must prevail among Christians. Outline points: Man's Favoritism Is Faithless and God Favors the Faithful.

I. MAN'S FAVORITISM IS FAITHLESS

James' illustration seems easy to understand. Two men visit a church apparently for the first time, for both are directed where they can sit. One man is treated royally; one is treated rudely. We may be quick to condemn this church for using worldly standards to assess the worth of these visitors. But without some understanding of life in the 1st-century Roman Empire, our 21st-century perspective can prejudice our opinions and mislead us by surface appearances. A monk joined a monastery and took a vow of silence. After the first 10 years, his superior, who'd spent nearly his entire life in this extremely silent monastery, called him in and asked, "Do you have anything to say?" The monk replied, "Food bad." After another 10 years the monk again was allowed to voice his thoughts. He said, "Bed hard." Another 10 years went by and again he was called before his superior. When asked if he had anything to say, he responded, "I quit." "It doesn't surprise me a bit," said the superior, "You've done nothing but complain ever since you got here."

The Greek word translated "favoritism" in **James 2:1 & 9** is a combination of two words. The first word means "countenance"; "one's facial expression and appearance." The second word means "to take" or "to receive." "Favoritism" literally means, "to receive the countenance"; a Hebrew idiom for, "favoring someone for superficial, external reasons." In **I Samuel 16:1-8** (NIV), God sent Samuel to anoint one of Jesse's sons to succeed Saul as Israel's King. When "Samuel saw Eliab," he immediately "thought, 'Surely

the LORD's anointed stands here before the LORD.' But the LORD said to Samuel, 'Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.'" **I Samuel 13:14** (NIV) reveals why God chose David, Jesse's youngest son, as Israel's next king. David was "a man after His own heart."

James wrote his letter to give encouragement and guidance to believers in Christianity's early years. His words are as blunt and practical as Solomon's insights of **Proverbs**. Both men were concerned with the same key question: *How should my faith in the Lord influence my actions in the concerns of everyday life?*

No English translation does justice to **James 2:1**: "My brothers, do not show favoritism as you hold on to the faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ." The Greek text more literally says, "do not show favoritism as you practice (live out) the faith that the Lord Jesus Christ *is* God's Glory." As Christians, we believe that in **Jesus Christ** we encounter the personal presence of God in all His glorious goodness, who demonstrates to us the standards by which His blood-purchased family members of God's Kingdom are to live. Thus, **James 2:1** is giving us this command: "Do not claim to believe Jesus Christ reveals the glorious standards of how to value God and others if you still practice favoritism based upon superficial standards of value."

"For example," James continues in **vss. 2-4**, "a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and a poor man dressed in dirty clothes also comes in.³ If you look with favor on the man wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Sit here in a good place,' and yet you say to the poor man, 'Stand over there,' or, 'Sit here on the floor by my footstool,'⁴ haven't you discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" James warns us if our eyes are not guided by faith, which evaluates people by how God views them, we may allow our judgment to be blinded by appearances, by our own bias, or by what we think this person might do for us. A nine-year old girl could not dust the furniture to suit her grandmother. She was told to do it again. Her grandmother still was not satisfied. She scolded the girl for not being able to clean as well as she could, at her age. Finally, after carefully dusting a third time, the child looked up and said, "Grandmother, that dust is not on the furniture; it must be on your glasses!"

Something more sinister may be at work than shortsightedness when we evaluate others. If you unfairly favor or disfavor someone on superficial reasons alone, James asks in **vs. 4**, "haven't you discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" "Discriminated" ("shown partiality," NKJV) here means, "to separate people or things by preference." "Evil thoughts" may be understood as "opinions controlled by the Evil One" (Satan). The Greek word meaning "malignant, active evil," when used with the article, is translated as in **Matthew 6:13**: "And do not bring us into temptation, but deliver us from *the evil one*" (emphasis added). James' point is this. If we "show favoritism" we conspire against God by embracing Satan's standards for evaluating human beings "created . . . in the image of God" (**Genesis 1:17**). We also offend God by claiming His right to judge others. **James 4:12** (NASB) makes this point emphatically; twice using the Greek root word for "judge" of **vs. 4**: "There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?" James seeks to convict us that no one has the right or authority to sit in judgment upon the value or worth of another but the Lord Himself.

After we commit ourselves to **Christ** as our Savior and Lord, if we continue to base our value or the value of others on superficial factors, like influential relatives, job status, appearance, or wealth, then James has some blunt words for us in **vss. 8-9**: "[I]f you keep the royal law prescribed in the Scripture, Love your neighbor as yourself, you are doing well.⁹ But if you show favoritism, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors." "Favoritism," judging, evaluating, or determining the worth of others by external, superficial factors alone, is one of the evils that being "baptized" into Christ's Body by the Holy Spirit at the moment we are reborn (**I Corinthians 12:13, 27**) is supposed to end. We cannot ask God to save us by faith in Christ's merits alone, after admitting we are condemned to Hell by our offenses against a holy God, and still claim the right to judge the guilt of others or their worth in the eyes of God.

How true is "favoritism" in the world around us? In 1973, Danny McCoy of Ft. Worth, TX, founded Uglies Unlimited to fight institutionalized bias against ugly people. He estimated 10% of the American public are widely considered ugly and are discriminated against by employers' ads that specifically recruit "attractive" people. Research supports McCoy's bias claims. A study of burglary cases conducted by the University of Maryland found when jurors were shown photos of physically attractive women, these defendants received an average sentence of 2.8 years in jail. Yet, based upon the same evidence, if jurors were shown photos of plain looking women, these defendants received sentences nearly twice as long.

The "favoritism" in the case James described is not as cut and dried to understand as why less attractive people often receive less preferential treatment than more attractive people. Let's reread **vss. 2-4**: "For example, a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and a poor man dressed in dirty clothes also comes in.³ If you look with favor on the man wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Sit here in a good place,' and yet you say to the poor man, 'Stand over there,' or, 'Sit here on the floor by my footstool,'⁴ haven't you discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" The local church in New Testament times seemed a strange phenomenon. Three-fourths of the Roman Empire may have been slaves. In Roman law, slaves were nothing more than a living tool to be used, discarded, or abused like any other tool. They had no rights except what their masters allowed them. God sent a shock wave reverberating throughout Roman society by declaring to slave-owning believers in **Ephesians 6:8-9** (NIV), "[Y]ou know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free. 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 [same word of **James 2:1**] with Him."

Try to imagine the awkwardness and pride-swallowing for a master newly converted to Christ who finds his slave serving as a deacon in the local church; giving his slave a higher standing in this church than him, even though he owns the slave! Furthermore, many *free* citizens of that day barely managed to scrape by on life's necessities and were financially enslaved to the wealthy class and to loan sharks. The Roman world of New Testament times enforced the custom of *summary arrest* that allowed a creditor who met a debtor on the street to seize him by the neck of his robe (nearly throttling him), and then drag him to the law-courts for payment or imprisonment. Think of the confusion among creditors and fear among debtors who happened to meet in church! Such creditors had wealth, tradition, and the law on their sides.

Now we can appreciate how startling James' words were to believers of his day as they tried to adjust to their new relationships within the Body of Christ. Regardless of the status of the rich or poor in the non-Christian world, and regardless of what their rights (or lack of rights) were as masters or slaves in Roman law, God commanded that within a Christian church, "the royal law prescribed in Scripture, Love your neighbor as yourself," must trump every other social distinction and every human law! A church composed of living members of the Body of Christ must be the one place where all distinctions of rank and prestige are leveled by our common submission to "our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ" (**Jude 4**, NASB).

II. GOD FAVORS THE FAITHFUL

I Timothy 6:1-2 (CEB) provides a counterbalance to **James 2:1-9**; to prevent us from claiming *everyone's* equal worth in God's eyes means we can dispense with honoring *anyone's* authority over us: "Those who are under the bondage of slavery should consider their own masters as worthy of full respect so that God's name and our teaching won't get a bad reputation.² And those who have masters who are believers shouldn't look down on them because they are brothers. Instead, they should serve them more faithfully, because the people who benefit from your good service are believers who are loved. Teach and encourage these things." We may not be guilty of *displaying* "favoritism" by unfairly judging others on external considerations alone. But are we ever guilty of *demanding* such "favoritism" from others? Chuck Swindoll, as a pastor in Fullerton, CA, was told by business owners in his church that Christian employees often gave them more problems than nonbelievers. They would count upon a Christian boss to be more lenient if they

were late, absent, or slack in their work. God puts Christian "slaves" ("employees" today) on notice in **I Timothy 6:1-2**. They should not assume God takes their side against their bosses and excuses their shoddy work or slack obedience; especially if their bosses are fellow-Christians!

Taking this a step further, God warns us in **Leviticus 19:15** (NIV) it's as wrong to be biased in favor of the *poor*, especially in legal rulings, as it is to show "favoritism" to the powerful: "Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly." Our "one Lawgiver and Judge" disapproves of all *displays of "favoritism"* and denies all *demands for "favoritism."*

CONCLUSION

White journalist John Howard Griffin, a native of Dallas, TX, spent all his life in the South. In 1959, he conducted a drastic experiment to help him better understand the struggles of black Americans under racial segregation. With the aid of a dermatologist in New Orleans, Griffin convincingly changed his appearance with drugs and sun lamps so he could pass for a black man. For six weeks, he recorded his experiences travelling on Greyhound buses (and occasionally hitchhiking) throughout Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia. Many who knew John Howard Griffin as a white man did not recognize him. To most of the whites he encountered, he was just another black man. There were vehicles he could not ride, restaurants where he could not eat, churches where he could not worship, hotels where he could not sleep, and rest-rooms he could not use. He was slighted, cheated, and at times persecuted just for being black.

Griffin published his experiences in the book, *Black Like Me*. It appeared in 1961 and became a movie in 1964. As a result, in the South of his day where 90% attended church and people overwhelmingly called themselves "Christians," shame convulsed many over their mistreatment of a white man just because he'd passed among them as a black man. This placed the nation's glaring searchlight on the unjust racial "favoritism" of many white "Christian" Southerners. Griffin became a national celebrity for a time. But in a 1975 essay found in later editions of his book, Griffin described the hostility and threats to him and his family that plagued them in Dallas. This led them to flee to safety in Mexico for a number of years. In the early centuries of the Christian era, Church leaders throughout the Roman Empire experienced a similar backlash for placing slaves of every race on equal standing with fellow-Christians of rank and privilege in the Church. Sadly, even among people who agree with God's command, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (**Leviticus 19:18**), often it is only as long as we can define who is our "neighbor."