

My brothers and sisters, do not show favoritism as you hold on to the faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. ² For if someone comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and a poor person dressed in filthy clothes also comes in, ³ if you look with favor on the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Sit here in a good place,” and yet you say to the poor person, “Stand over there,” or “Sit here on the floor by my footstool,” ⁴ haven’t you made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

⁵ Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: 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 have dishonored the poor. Don’t the rich oppress you and drag you into court? ⁷ Don’t they blaspheme the good name that was invoked over you?

⁸ Indeed, if you fulfill the royal law prescribed in the Scripture, Love your neighbor as yourself,^[a] you are doing well. ⁹ If, however, you show favoritism, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰ For whoever keeps the entire law, and yet stumbles at one point, is guilty of breaking it all. ¹¹ For he who said, Do not commit adultery,^[a] also said, Do not murder.^[a] So if you do not commit adultery, but you murder, you are a lawbreaker.

¹² Speak and act as those who are to be judged by the law of freedom. ¹³ For judgment is without mercy to the one who has not shown mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Can such faith save him?

¹⁵ If a brother or sister is without clothes and lacks daily food ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, stay warm, and be well fed,” but you don’t give them what the body needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way faith, if it does not have works, is dead by itself.

¹⁸ But someone will say, “You have faith, and I have works.”^[a] Show me your faith without works, and I will show you faith by my works.

Favorites

I have favorites. You probably do too. I have favorite foods. I even have favorite tools, hammers, wrenches. They aren’t even the newest or the most expensive. They’re the ones that have been with me the longest and I’m drawn toward them. I know what to expect when I use them. They’re comfortable, well worn, favored. I even have favorite toys and that’s not a bad thing. It means, I’m partial to them. They hold sentimental value. They are things that are to be used, gifts from God to be enjoyed.

But there are problems when we begin to treat people like things. When we look at people as just another object to be used, manipulated for our own agenda. James warns us, “Don’t show favoritism! Don’t show partiality! Treat one another fairly.” And maybe “fair” is the wrong word.

If we were treated as we deserve for all the people we’ve mistreated, I think it’s safe to say we’d be in sad shape. James writes a law filled letter in which he won’t allow anyone to leave with their head held high, *God has chosen the poor and lowly to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him.* So rather than treat everyone fairly, let’s treat one another with mercy. Love your neighbor as love yourself because God acts upon us with mercy and not equity.

But at first glance it doesn’t appear that James practices what he preaches. He seems to favor the poor. And it’s not just James even Jesus appears to be showing favoritism to Israel over the Gentile woman. What’s going on here? First let’s take a look at context to clarify. In chapter 6, Mark took us from the external hand washing (not dirty hands that defile it’s a filthy heart), to the internal heart. He got to the heart of the matter. “*It’s not what goes in to man that makes him unclean rather it’s what comes out of man.*”

To illustrate and underscore this teaching, which the disciples didn’t understand, he travels to this Gentile woman. It’s almost as if he wants them to see poor theology play out. You shouldn’t be comfortable with this scene. But Jesus isn’t using her, manipulating her, he is cultivating her faith and healing her daughter. He is giving her an opportunity to demonstrate, “Great faith,” before his doubting disciples. Here he shows them what a changed heart looks like. This isn’t the external, outward washing of hands. This is a matter of the heart. But they’re still caught up in externals.

And so are the people to whom James ministers. *if someone comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and a poor person dressed in filthy clothes also comes in, ³ if you look with favor on the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Sit here in a good place,” and yet you say to the poor person, “Stand over there,” or “Sit here on the floor by my footstool,” ⁴ haven’t you made distinctions among yourselves*

and become judges with evil thoughts? They're caught up in externals, looking at the outside and giving special consideration to those who appear rich in this world but the poor receive standing room only.

He begs the question, "Why?" "*God chose the poor in this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom.*" Why are you suddenly choosing the rich of this world? James doesn't seem to care much for the rich. He has no use for them. He stereotypes them with "*Don't the rich oppress you and drag you into court? Don't they blaspheme the good name that was invoked over you?*" Stereotypes are generally true statements, but not always true. However, this is the reputation the rich have earned. James isn't purporting an "Eat the rich" ideology. He is warning his congregation that seems to fawn over them. His congregation gave them the better seats, looked up to them, and treated them differently than the poor and for what? To be mistreated, sued, and condemned. What he wants is equal treatment. Don't look at the externals. Look to one another as heirs of the kingdom, brothers and sisters in Christ.

But as it is, they were using one another. The early Christian church was largely poor. Lydia was the exception not the standard. They were largely the poor, the used and abused for gain by the rich. The rich were also used and abused by the poor. It was a reciprocal relationship as each tried to get what the other wanted. The poor offered flattery, special treatment, maybe even cheap labor. The rich offered reward.

But this view treats people as objects for use. And God created us in his image. This gives value and worth to the individual. You and all humanity are created with dignity, value, and worth. We may only see others as those to be manipulated to further our own agenda. When people become things they're easy to throw away once used. That's why sex outside of marriage is condemned. Fire is a good thing. It keeps us warm and you can gather around it. But fire outside of the fireplace is dangerous to all involved. Sex outside of marriage turns women into objects, children unwanted surprises. CS Lewis writes of women, "You don't keep the cigar wrapper after you've had the cigar." Mary Magdalene was probably used to being tossed aside by the men who sought her favor.

Many are used, abused, neglected, overlooked, and ignored because they're not favored. But we're instructed not to show partiality. We're warned not to treat people like that. Because at the heart and core of favoritism is a theology of glory. A theology of glory looks down on those who are poor because they don't have enough faith to be rich. They haven't named it or claimed it yet. A theology of glory looks for our own advancement and increase as we become rich in this world. And finally, it looks to our good fortune to find out if God is pleased with us. This is the same garbage that James and Jesus had to correct in their time and day. It leads to doubt.

The first century Christian was a rag tag group of misfits, sinners, tax collectors, and other various professions. They met in houses rather than brick and mortar structures like the synagogues which had been around for ages. And the temptation for us is to look to these things. It exalts money and status at the cost of brothers and sisters who are hurting or suffering. The devil makes the false church prosper. He enjoys making the gospel look like a cheap imitation. The best thing we can do is be faithful. And the book of James shows us we've been anything but faithful. James intends to drive us to despair of self. He won't allow us to stand with our heads held high. He writes, "*Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at one point is guilty of breaking all of the law.*" No Christian should think, "James is my favorite book... I don't know what Luther was thinking about." James condemns us all as

Many search for a solution to favoritism in fairness. But fairness won't work either, especially when we consider what we deserve for our sins from God. What we need is mercy. We need to know that we've made a mess but that we're still loved and favored by God. We are still his beloved children when we sin.

Though we may have looked down on the poor, Jesus became poor so that we might be rich. Not rich in worldly wealth but rich eternally. Jesus is the poor man, the one who gave up everything so that we might have everything. Just look how the religious elite judged him. They judged him unworthy, unfit for life. He was given no place to sit. He was dragged before the courts. His name was blasphemed and for what? For you and me. If you want to know how God feels about you don't look to your good or bad fortune. Look to the cross. If you want to know if God loves you look at what he's done for you.

He spent his time with the poor and despised people of the world both rich and poor. Jesus spent time with both rich and poor. He went out of his way to Gentiles in foreign lands far from his people. He chose the weak, the poor, and the

James 2:1-18

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foolish things of this world to shame the wise (1 Corinthians 1:28-29). He viewed Mary Magdalene not as an object to be used but as a person created in the image of God and that was different. He gave his life so that we might live eternally. So that all of our sins are freely and fully forgiven by faith, not by works.

But James says, ¹⁸ *But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works."^[d] Show me your faith without works, and I will show you faith by my works.* You have to understand he isn't contradicting the apostle Paul. We read Ephesians 2 a few weeks back. *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this not from yourselves it is a gift of God so that no one may boast."* Is it faith alone or faith plus works? Paul is battling against the legalist who thinks it is their good works, their morals that save. James on the other hand is waging war against the apathetic Christian who thinks, "I don't have to do anything. I'm already saved." Your works are an accurate reflection of your faith. What you believe will be reflected in your life.

You won't be boasting about your works, you'll naturally do them out of love for the God who gave himself for you. You won't even know you're doing them. In fact you already have in many ways. We are amply supplied. You've taken care of the members of Christ Lutheran Church and even those outside of our membership. We offer more than prayers we also offer our time and talents in service to others – not so we can manipulate and use but because God loved us and gave himself up for us.

Faith will be seen in love for others, love for neighbor. And your neighbor isn't the one you live next to. It's the one you are close to. When you go to the grocery store your neighbor is the janitor in the aisle or the cashier in front of you. You don't need to beat Jesus into them but you can see them as one for whom Christ died. You can see them as a person created in the image of God, one who has been created, redeemed, and valued by God. You can share with those in need and we aren't asked to do what God has not given us, even a cup of cold water is a gracious act of faith.

I know I've failed. I've had my favorites. Thank God we are forgiven. We are worth more than many sparrows. Where does our worth come from? God. I am a baptized child of God and we are instructed to pray, "our Father." Luther taught us, "With these words God tenderly invites us to believe that he is our Father and that we are his true children, so that with all boldness and confidence we may ask him as dear children ask their dear father."

Because I have favorites. God does too and yet he gave him up for us all who became poor that we might be rich eternally. Amen.