

"The Foolishness of Partiality"

Reading: Deuteronomy 10:12-22; James 2:1-17

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Last week we began what we're calling the "Wisdom Challenge," a chance for us to explore the book of James and read through the book of Proverbs to see how we can bring the wisdom that guides our lives into alignment with the wisdom of God. And part of the challenge is that wisdom is not just something we sit and ponder or hang on the wall: the wisdom of God gives us a unique way to engage the issues our world is facing. Rather than hitting people over the head with turn-or-burn sermons about sin and hell, wisdom gives us a much-needed vocabulary for speaking to those who may be far from God. Not everyone accepts the idea of sin; maybe talking to them about wisdom and foolishness instead will give us more to talk about.

One of the advantages of wisdom literature, I suppose, is that it gets right to the point. We saw last week that the book of James is written with the intent of being a book of wisdom, much like the book of Proverbs. It's intended to be a discussion or a guidebook of practical, straightforward suggestions for how to be a person whose life has value. Wise people, biblically speaking, have meaning, while foolish people fritter their lives away in an endless chase after the wind. That's what James is writing about: looking at Jesus as wisdom personified, these are instructions for Christians to live worthwhile lives. And his instructions don't fool around. Wisdom can often be summarized into a few words that are packed with punch and take years to fully understand, and James is no exception. "Don't show favoritism," he says, a very simple statement, as simple as a punch in the stomach.

It's so simple because at first glance it's so easy to accept. It's as though James had said, "Don't be a bad person," and we all think to ourselves, *Whew, I'm glad I don't have to worry about that one*, because of course nobody thinks of themselves as being a bad person. Especially these days it is unfashionable to be perceived as being too divisive or exclusive. Calling someone a racist will do more harm than calling them any number of four-letter words because our society has accepted, up to a point, the importance of not showing favoritism. And so of course no one thinks of himself or herself as being one who shows favoritism; of course I wouldn't show favoritism. But too often we take not showing favoritism as meaning that we should not be judgmental, or at least that we should keep our mouths tactfully shut about our judgments, and we don't go the next step that the Bible goes. Biblically speaking, not showing favoritism is more than passively keeping your mouth shut, it is actively embracing everyone. Favoritism refers to action, not merely feeling, and so the problem is that we can be guilty of partiality in our actions or our social systems even when we don't realize it.

When James wrote this book, favoritism in society was simply a fact of life. Favoritism made the world go round. In the Mediterranean world in those days, your place in society was mostly dependent on who you knew. You would build up a relationship with someone higher up the social ladder than you in the hope that that person might some day become your patron. You would do things for them and show them loyalty and honor and maybe support them if they were running for public office, and in response they would show favoritism toward you, give you little gifts, maybe even pay you something. It's how things got done, with patrons looking out for their clients and clients supporting their patrons. These days we would look at a system like that and call it bribery; in those days it's just how things worked. It was simply expected that you would show favoritism toward those people who were in your group, while those on the outside were practically nonentities, and if

they didn't have a good enough patron to take care of them, well, so much the better for me. Showing favoritism was how things worked, it was expected, and it was practically written into the contract of society.

Favoritism in our day is not necessarily any more arbitrary than it was back then. I'm going to assume that none of us decide we're going to like certain people more than others because we want to be mean, nor do we go out of our way to hurt other people just because we can get away with it. But the reality is that we often show partiality in both subtle and obvious ways to people who are like us. Even when we don't mean to, we can push outsiders further out.

And yet James puts it so simply. In your faith in Christ, don't show favoritism. Maybe we want to try to rephrase that to say something like, "As long as you aren't *mean* to anyone, it's okay to be *nicer* to some people than others." I mean, let's be reasonable. Sometimes there's just that question of practicality. You don't want to be mean to anyone any more than I do, but it's just easier to get along with some people, and you've got more in common with some people. Surely that's not really showing favoritism. But what does James say? According to James, showing favoritism is an outright sin; it makes a person just as much a lawbreaker as committing murder or adultery. Showing favoritism breaks the command given by Jesus -- given all the way back when God was giving commands through Moses -- the command to love your neighbor as yourself. This is not a small issue, as far as James is concerned.

So, what exactly are we talking about here? What does James have in mind when he expects us not to show favoritism as we have faith in Jesus Christ? The example James uses is of a congregation of Christians engaged in worship when two people, one obviously very rich and one obviously very poor, come inside. If that church were to show special attention to the rich person at the expense of the poor person, they would be guilty of this sin James is so concerned about. Of course, the thought that goes through my head is that surely I would never do such a blatantly insulting thing to someone in church. You're probably thinking the same thing, and you're right. We all want to look like good Christians in front of one another, so we would never insult a poor person in church. But when we're not in church, when things aren't so blatant, when the poor people are a little more invisible...while walking down the sidewalk in the city, would we, for example, step aside and make room for the important businessman while we refuse even to acknowledge the existence of the bum?

There's an interesting example taking place in our society right now, I think. I'm about to make some of you upset, so brace yourselves. If you get too upset, we'll just blame it on the fact that I haven't been sleeping much recently and I'm not thinking straight. You've surely heard the phrase "Black Lives Matter" being used recently, and it's become a very politically charged phrase. Some people take it almost as a threat, and they respond by saying "All Lives Matter" or "Police Lives Matter." But that's missing the point. As Judith Butler said in a recent New York Times article, "It is true that all lives matter, but it is equally true that not all lives are understood to matter. ... If we jump too quickly to the universal formulation, 'all lives matter,' then we miss the fact that black people have not yet been included in the idea of 'all lives.'" In other words, our society has never really debated whether all lives matter, or whether police lives matter. The real debate has been over whose lives count as real lives, and if you try to claim that there's never really been a debate over whether black lives matter, you need to go back and read our Constitution again. When the

Constitution was written, almost all black Americans counted as three-fifths of a person. That was the law for nearly a century, and then that mentality was continued in other laws after the Civil War in a variety of ways for another century after that. So to chant “Black Lives Matter” is not to claim that other lives don’t matter, it’s insisting a difficult truth to a nation that has not historically accepted it.

This is an example of the sort of favoritism James is talking about. When we hear one group of people who have been historically marginalized cry out because they feel the burden of injustice, and our first response as people outside of that group is to cry, “But what about the rest of us, too?” that imposition of our own rights and power and position on theirs is an exercise in partiality. Rather than doing them the honor of listening to their story, we reassert our own stories over them, because their stories threaten our comfort. It doesn’t just have to do with race relations; economic disparity and gender issues and age discrimination and any number of other dividing barriers can apply.

In keeping with many other Jewish writers in the Old Testament, James focuses his wisdom against issues related to wealth, not race. The Jewish prophets especially were known for calling the wealthy to account for their treatment of the poor; one of the recurring sins in ancient Israel was the exploitation of the poor by the rich. James seems to hold a similar view. He is apparently dealing with Christians who are trying to curry favor with the rich and powerful with the expectation that the church will benefit from it, when in fact it is exactly those rich and powerful people who are exploiting the Christians of lesser means. It could just be simple pragmatism; make these wealthy people feel important, and they’ll help us out at some point in the future. It all comes down to playing for power, but that doesn’t apply in the kingdom of God, who is all-powerful.

That’s why the kingdom of God has rarely had anything to do with being pragmatic. The kingdom of God has always had everything to do with being obedient to the all-powerful one. What James wants us to see is what we’ve seen so many times in our studies of the Bible: that the wisdom of God is fundamentally different than the wisdom of the world, and it does not always make sense to us, and God does not expect it to immediately. We can say that our wisdom is centered on God, but are we willing to put that wisdom into action when God’s wisdom says that the most wretched person on the planet is just as useful to him as the richest?

God’s refusal to show favoritism is a consistent theme all throughout the Bible. We read some verses from Deuteronomy 10, one of the curious passages where this is mentioned. Moses is speaking to the people of Israel, telling them that yes, God has chosen them and loves them deeply and is going to do incredible things through them, but in spite of all this, he does not show favoritism. He cannot be bribed or impressed or distracted, Moses says, he is not swayed by money or trinkets like we are. He does not judge a person by anything we can see or measure. All those things our world thinks are important that make up a person’s worth, all of them are worthless to God. In fact, if anything he will go out of his way to embrace the foulest scum of the earth. He uses His power most often on behalf of the powerless. If you want to know where God is, a good place to start looking is right in the middle of the marginalized and ignored. Don’t show favoritism because God doesn’t. Don’t show favoritism because shiny cars and nice clothes and respectability mean absolutely nothing to God, and if you claim to follow his wisdom, then you’d better be ready to adopt his methods, and you’d better be ready to get some strange looks along the way.

It's interesting that in the Old Testament, as in this passage from Deuteronomy, the statement that "God does not show favoritism" usually applies in the context of justice. That is, God cannot be bribed to show favor to the wealthy or powerful in a court case, and He expects the same of His people. But James is applying that concept to worship, not justice. Not showing favoritism is not just confined to the courts, it is something that is to be infused into every aspect of the lives of God's people and God's community, and so our worship and our mission as the church should reflect that.

It really only makes sense in light of the savior we proclaim. It is exactly because God does not show favoritism that he came as Jesus Christ, looking for you and me. It is exactly because God does not show favoritism that he was willing to die for us while we were yet sinners, while we had nothing to commend us, while we were utterly lost. Jesus does not show favoritism. His grace is available to all who will come; all are equally fallen apart from Him, and all are equally saved and called into His family only as they respond to His grace. If this is God's standard, who are we to think we can have higher standards? If God does not show favoritism, how dare we? This is the foolishness of the cross: a world that relies on partiality and power deems it foolish that God would save by dying shamefully, and yet this reveals the heart of God and the methods of God. It is the wisdom of God, and so we treat one another as God treats us.

When we're talking about God, not showing favoritism means that he is willing to shower his favor on everyone who finds their worth in him. Not showing favoritism as James intended means going out of your way to show God's favor to those who have never known favor. It means being deliberate about including those whom you would normally ignore. It means making an effort to reach out to those who are outside of what we might consider normal. It means taking a bold step of living out the wisdom of Christ, wisdom that can be hard and strange, reaching out and embracing those who are not favored. This is the wisdom of God. Will you accept it?



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